

Oswaldo Macia

Surrounded in Tears

With Jasper Morrison and Michael Nyman. Tate Liverpool, UK (cat.)

'Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts.' Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 1860

The English Language has developed an extensive vocabulary to classify and understand the act of crying: weeping (associated with deep emotion) is very different to blubbering (colloquial, derogatory) or bawling (associated with children). Bypassing this mass of carefully nuanced and culturally specific linguistic signifiers, Columbian-Caribbean artist Oswaldo Macia has turned to the semiotics of the raw material of crying itself. In collaboration with renowned composer Michael Nyman and designer Jasper Morrison, Macia has created a sound installation compiled of one hundred individual cries.

For the last decade, Macia has made work that mobilises the senses. *Memory Skip*, for example, is an industrial skip filled with five tons of pine scented soap. The pungent odour of the thick detergent forces the viewer to psychologically link the senses of sight and smell into one conceptual whole. Smell is associative, it triggers the memory and the work links personal subjective histories with art's grand narrative. In *Algae Garden*, 150 varieties of floral aroma (natural and artificial) were infused into mini tampons hung on a rotating circular hanger; botanical categories were deliberately mixed. Similarly, *Provokes/Evokes* is a scent trace of Noah's Arc made from animal faeces, the essences of which are contained in rotating vessels designed by Jasper Morrison. This work humorously critiques the inventory of animals catalogued by 17th century natural philosopher John Wilkins. Comic and ironic, Macia's work deliberately confuses associations and undermines taxonomies and epistemologies. He stresses that his work 'is composed of things we miss or omit through orthodox classification and factual knowledge.'

Crying is an elemental human expression, beyond words. Marking moments of extreme emotional and physical pain as well as intense pleasure, it is a universal language. Psychoanalytic theories suggest that the sound of the voice is related to the formation of the 'self' and 'other'. Macia's sources come from ethnographic and anthropological studies to informal sound-bites from everyday life - he asked mid-wives to record the screams of new-born babies. The work includes the oldest known wax cylinder recordings of crying stored in the British Library of Australian Aborigine death wails from the Torres Strait collected in 1898. A four-part composition, *Surrounded in Tears* is sited in Liverpool, Lime Street Station, the Town Hall, the Community College and Tate Liverpool. Associated with regression and vulnerability, crying is usually a private activity making its location in the public domain uncomfortable. A counterpart to another symphonic piece *Vespers*, made of one hundred women's testimonies of joy in nine different languages, the work does not aim to rationalise crying but draws together personal and universal experience.

Laura Britton.

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