



PERTH INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

Poetic reflections of life's transience

VISUAL ARTS

Oscar Munoz: *Mirror Image*

Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts.
 Until April 5. Admission free.
 Inquiries: (08) 9228 6300.

I BECOME nervous when I read words such as magician, poetic, poignant, other-worldly and haunting in a press release. I've written enough myself through the years to be wary of such hubris, so it is surprising to encounter an exhibition where such words seem entirely appropriate. With his work also showing at the Art Gallery of NSW, Colombian artist Oscar Munoz is about to catapult on to every art lover's list of most memorable exhibitions in the coming months.

His works are indeed poetic and he conjures from the simplest materials works that activate a deep and lasting response to his themes of death, loss and memory.

From a country where people disappear, from a continent in constant political and social turmoil, in a world where horrors such as Abu Ghraib expose the potential for cruelty, Munoz's poetic interventions in our lives speak profoundly of the human condition.

Stand in front of the round polished discs of *Aliento* and the warmth of your breath on the cold metal fleetingly brings the image of a human face into view. Embedded in your reflection and held in the fog of your breath is the face of a man, long dead, selected from the artist's vast archive of obituary photographs. As you proceed down the line of discs you bring to life other men and women through the essential act of living, and the experience is overwhelming.

In all of Munoz's works there is a tipping point when the physical reality of engaging with a video projection, metal discs or perforated paper slips into overdrive and you freewheel in an intense spiral of thoughts, memories and conjecture about mortality, loss, disappearance, intimacy and so much more. In

one of the publicist's other favourite words, it is a form of alchemy, when base material is converted into intellectual and emotional gold.

Munoz's work is so distilled and refined, it quickly becomes fixed in your brain and cannot easily be eradicated. *Line of Destiny* is a video of the artist's hand cupped to hold water. As the liquid slowly seeps through his fingers, we see a reflection of the artist's face in the gradually disappearing mirror until there is nothing but a silvery line filling the creases in his palm. Transience, memory and mortality are evoked with such economy and finesse that it is possible to view this short video many times while pondering the expansive field of ideas and inferences it triggers.

In the multi-panelled video projection *Project for a Memorial*, the artist's hand draws a face from his obituary photographs on to a hot pavement using a brush loaded with water. As the concrete absorbs the water and the heat dries what remains, he quickly applies more liquid to fix the image, then moves on to another screen where he draws another, until all five screens are filled with faces or their faint trace.

Although not blatantly political, Munoz's disappearing people cannot be disengaged from the continuous political and social upheaval that has plagued countries throughout South America since colonial times. During the period known as La Violencia, from 1948 to 1958, there were more than 200,000 violent deaths in Colombia; drug cartels and urban criminals are still responsible for tens of thousands of deaths each year.

In this environment the works of an artist drawing with water on a hot pavement may seem inconsequential, but Munoz's embracing themes of mortality and the transience of human life have resonance for us all and the poetry of his work and its ability to stick has re-sensitised audiences across the world.

Ted Snell



Life after breath: A gallery visitor experiences Oscar Munoz's *Aliento*