

Patricia Fernández: Looking Below the Soil
by Anuradha Vikram

If the history of a place is embedded in its soil, as archaeologists and proponents of *terroir* alike will argue, then its horrors can also be found just underneath the Earth's surface. This is true in Los Angeles, whose European-derived architectures and broad boulevards are challenged by the resistance of the city's original Tongva people, bursting forth in spirit from the ground beneath our streets as uncontrollable secretions of water and oil. In Spain, where LA-based artist Patricia Fernández was born, the soil contains the remains of as many as half a million Spanish citizens killed in the Civil War that ended in 1939, and its aftermath. As Fernández reveals, the history of the Spanish imperial project does not conclude here in the New World, but rather doubles back to Europe, where the impact of Franco's four-decade Fascist regime is still being felt and understood. As a descendant of Spanish Republicans from the region near Burgos, Fernández is driven to represent not only their histories but their losses as well, bringing outsider perspectives of the expatriate and of the post-*franquismo* generation to the task.

Most recently, Fernández has been working from her experiences visiting the sites of Estepar and La Pedraja, near Burgos, where the remains of as many as 400 Republican prisoners may be interred. The burials were discovered in 2010 and made public in 2014, but have yet to be fully excavated. Their discovery once promised to bring closure to families whose loved ones were never found or identified; however lack of funding has derailed the project of identifying remains by DNA testing. The abandoned, unearthed dead and their survivors are again casualties, this time of economic and political crises that have repeatedly crippled post-Fascist Spain's attempts to reckon with its past.

Motifs that appear in the paintings related to the history of the Civil War include the black and red flag of the Anarchist government that briefly held Barcelona and collectivized government agencies in 1936. The Anarchists in Catalonia held firm against the Fascists for over a year. They also understood the political power of raising the dead. With the Catholic Church aligned with Franco, anti-fascists set upon the graves of saints in Barcelona and dug a number of them out of vaults in the city's churches. The bodies put on display were meant to challenge the Church's promises of the afterlife and its hold on the Spanish imagination. This act represented a violent assertion of new ways of thought, soon to be repressed with even greater violence by the ways of old.

Fernández is interested in how the recent exhumations have made religion's ongoing hold on the public imagination newly visible. A Virgin Mary medallion found with the corpse of a Spanish Republican prisoner contradicts the narrative that the resistance was formed exclusively of atheists and anarchists. The "Forget-me-not" flower is a potent symbol of the Civil War disappeared and their survivors, who initiated exhumation of mass burial sites -- at first illegally, and later with state permission -- and expend substantial effort on DNA testing of remains to confirm that it is their own lost relatives they will quickly re-inter (with religious rites in many cases). Brightly colored glass bottles were found buried amidst the dead. An image from the first exhumations that took place after Franco's death shows how, in the absence of technology that could identify remains, each family was given unidentified remains in the appropriate quantity to symbolize the number of kin they had lost. Three skulls, for three sons, to be sanctified and buried once more.

Why do the survivors of those whom the Church helped to kill with its support of Fascism, still require the blessings of that Church to be conferred on the dead whose blood is on its hands? Fernández' great-uncle Sotero is among the disappeared Republicans whose remains have been found at La Pedraja, if his sister, the artist's grandmother, is to be believed. This assertion, deeply felt, has yet to be proven by scientific analysis. The revelation of the mass burial site at La Pedraja garnered international attention due to its proximity to the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage route culminating at the shrine of the apostle St. James the Great in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia. Believers from as far afield as the UK and China have signed the guest book at the site. What bitter irony, this discovery and the Church's hand in it, so close to a route identified with spiritual quest. Having lost homes and family members to the Fascist regime, even Fernández' grandmother has retained her faith in Christ and the Church. Meanwhile, longing for the certitude of old has arrested efforts to bring Spain out of its dark past.

The artist's parents left Spain with her as a child, having survived the Franco regime despite their leftist political sympathies, but feeling unsure of their daughter's welfare during the economic collapse that followed the dictator's death in 1975. Though her circumstances are her own, Fernández is a member of a generation of displaced Spanish youth. In addition to as many as 500,000 Spanish killed in the war and the ensuing regime, 200,000 children or more are also thought to have disappeared during *franquismo*. Many survivors are still searching for children and siblings believed to have been trafficked out of the country by Fascist-aligned nuns between 1939-1980. Those who have been identified discover a whole new aspect of their identities as adults, one that comes with significant questioning and doubt. A comparable number of young Spanish professionals have been displaced out of Spain since the economic crisis of 2008, forced into economic migration by plummeting local investment alongside porous borders across Europe. The ensuing years of uncertainty came to a head in 2016 when Spain spent ten months without a President due to political impasse.

Patricia Fernández considers the role of history in connecting this lost generation of Spanish young people to culture and identity. Frustrated by the tendencies of government and private historical efforts alike to aggrandize the living and appropriate the dead, she proposes a more inquisitive approach. By mining specific histories and narratives, she articulates the necessity and the impossibility of reconstructing histories of loss and displacement.