



Downtown Los Angeles was transformed into a set for political theater over the weekend, with protesters pitching tents in front of City Hall and performance artists dancing on floats meandering through the streets.

After years of criticism, "Tracing the Fore," a \$135,000 stainless-steel sculpture installed by the city of Portland, Maine, in 2006, has been removed.

3.1 / Shotgun!

Share

From Los Angeles: Yoshua Okón

YOSHUA OKÓN
AUG 13 - NOV 06

by Elyse Mallouk

In Yoshua Okón's *Octopus*, a four-channel video installation on view at the Hammer Museum, dueling factions of day laborers engage in pantomimed warfare outside of a Los Angeles Home Depot. Equipped with wheeled palettes and orange shopping carts, they spy using gloved hands as binoculars and guard themselves with pistols simulated with single fingers. They duck under trucks and tumble over sedans. Passing shoppers ignore casualties sprawled next to prefabricated tool sheds; a white pickup rolls over a speed bump.

Okón, a Mexico City-based artist-in-residence at the Hammer, recruited the actors at the Home Depot where the video is shot. Each had fought in the Guatemalan civil war for the military, for the insurgency, or for both over the course of the thirty-six year struggle. Though the staged, abstract action forgoes the depiction of actual clashes, the piece points to a hushed history deeply tied to American commerce. In 1954, the U.S. State Department and the CIA engineered a coup d'état ousting the president Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán, whose progressive politics were perceived as a Soviet-socialist threat, and whose agrarian reform seized and distributed large plots of unused land to be farmed by families. The U.S.-based United Fruit Company (nicknamed "the octopus" for its reach) lobbied for the overthrow, seeking to maintain its grip on the country's ports and infrastructure and to retain hundreds of thousands of hectares. As a result, Guatemala's people were embroiled in four decades of war.

By relocating the hostilities from Guatemala to a Los Angeles Home Depot parking lot, Okón's video repeats the



Yoshua Okón, *Octopus*, 2011 (still); four-channel video installation, color, sound; TRT: 18:30 min. Courtesy of the Artist and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

displacement the men themselves have undergone. It also makes evident the excision of their specific, lived histories from the dominant narratives circulated in the United States, which often assume that immigrant populations travel across the border in search of economic opportunity. It makes visible the workers' removal from visibility—and from the legitimate workforce—as day laborers. As a site where men who fought on opposite sides occupy the same space, the Home Depot setting testifies to the arbitrariness of the artificially initiated conflict. But the big box store also serves as a stand-in for multinational corporations, tying the messy legacy of U.S. foreign policy to its mercenary alliance with big business. Though these subjects are ripe for melancholic response, *Octopus* institutes one more displacement: humor supplants cynicism, calling for an emotional response other than resignation. With its lack of solemnity, the video does not tell silent histories; instead, it puts them in play, implicating viewers without accusation in the skirmish over what stories are told and made valid.

YOSHUA OKÓN'S WORK IS ON VIEW AT THE HAMMER MUSEUM, IN LOS ANGELES, THROUGH NOVEMBER 6, 2011.