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INTERNATIONAL CONTEMPORARY ART | FALL 2011
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REVIEWS

YOSHUA OKÓN: OCTOPUS

Hammer Museum – Los Angeles

By Tucker Neel

To make *Octopus*, Yoshua Okón hired Guatemalan day laborers who once fought against each other, some as paid mercenaries, in that country's thirty-six-year civil war. He then filmed these men performing pantomimed battle scenes in a Los Angeles Home Depot parking lot. The resulting videos speak to issues of war, labor, and the histories of violence that inform our everyday experiences.

The exhibition provides a necessary history lesson in the form of a brief introductory essay by John C. Welchman, informing visitors that Guatemala's 1960-1996 civil war was instigated by the United States CIA as a way to remove a popular leftist president, and installed a string of puppet dictators more favorable to the United Fruit Company. The title of Okón's work, *Octopus*, is an unaffectionate moniker Guatemalans have assigned to the United Fruit Company, a massive multi-national corporation with a violent and sorted history in Latin America. A sign bearing the name "Octopus," painted in a font akin to that of a Home Depot logo, with signature orange tinting, welcomes viewers to the installation. In this way the artist works to implicate Home Depot as a particular inheritor of legacy of American capitalist imperialism, a new manifestation like United Fruit.

Octopus consists of four video projections at different heights and sizes, one on each wall of the gallery. Viewers are provided bean-bag chairs to sit in as they watch the synced videos switch in and out. The looping video installation follows Okón's day laborers clothed in opposing black and white t-shirts as they enact a series of short scenes: a group of four men aim their invisible weapons from atop a flatbed cart as they are pushed slowly through the parking lot; men crawl on their stomachs over grass and hot asphalt; one man scans his surroundings with imaginary binoculars while pushed inside a shopping cart. The absurdity of this scenario is highlighted when the camera captures Home Depot employees and customers laughing and pointing their cell-phone cameras at the performers.

Later we see bits of body parts: arms, a head, legs, cut off by the frame, as if they came from fallen victims in this staged battle. As the sporadic narrative progresses we see two figures outside of a Home Depot shed. One is sprawled motionless on the ground as if dead, and another crawls to him as if with a wounded leg. During all this no one, Home Depot workers nor shoppers, does more than give them a passing glance.

We are familiar with people "playing war," from childhood games to full-scale American Civil War re-enactments, but when the action is overlaid on a big-box store parking lot, the actions unfolding speak volumes to the strangeness of the site. Filmed against these actions, images of the American flag, Home Depot signs, prefab tool sheds, and bumper stickers reading "Vote For a New Foreign Policy," resonate with meanings that stretch across time, implicating the present and the past as part of a long legacy of nefarious actions designed to benefit the few at the expense of the many.

It could be said that Okón's work exploits the histories and economic situations of his actors for his own artistic gain. After



Yoshua Okón, *Stills from Octopus*, 2011. Four-channel video installation, color, sound, 18:30 min. Courtesy Kaufmann Repetto, Milan.

piecing together the puzzle of his work, one cannot help but wonder what his actors get from their participation, how much they are paid, and whether the artist will stay in touch with them after the show has concluded. I would like to hope the artist's work does more than simply "raise consciousnesses" about the legacies of war, but such a response would no doubt be difficult, if not impossible to judge. ■

(August 13 - November 6, 2011)