

Uncertainty, Creativity and Art

Presented by Angel Calderon, RMIT University
at the Institute of Postcolonial Studies,
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Untitled (2009). Bringing us together:

Oral history and legends are important in preserving our ancestors' identity.

Exegesis

A life of certainty brings complacency whereas uncertainty boosts creativity.

Through painting I found a way to express what has been a lifelong response to dealing with uncertainty and adaptation. Certainty has not been the norm in my life; it has instead been an ephemeral passage that I idealise by the shape and form of the strokes which are latent in these paintings. The ability to adapt has been critical for survival.

Uncertainty

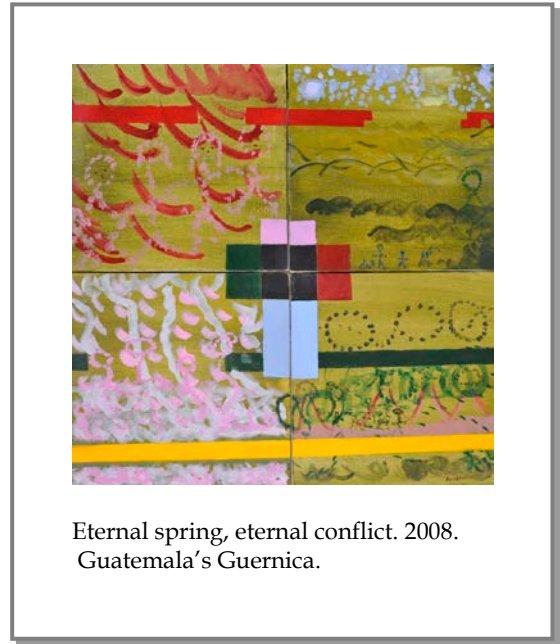
Childhood memories are multiple, disperse and perplexingly naïve. I have happy memories growing up in San Marcos (250 kilometres west of Guatemala City); day to day life seemed to be full of discoveries and the experience of something new. Recalling such memories, bringing them into sequence and finding their meaning is challenging as I have realised the ambiguity of conflict.

Guatemala is known as the country of the eternal spring but it is also known as a country where violence has been a constant. During the years of conflict, repression was strong for those disagreeing with the governing regime and also for indigenous people. The Guatemalan conflict lasted 36 years from 1960 to 1996, when a peace accord was signed between the government and the guerrilla umbrella organization. As a result of the conflict, it is said that 440 villages were destroyed, half a million peasants were uprooted from their land, and up to 200,000 people died or disappeared, while hundreds of thousands fled the country. Guatemala's diaspora population now exceeds more than one million people.

One of my early childhood memories relates to one occasion when I was travelling with my father. We were aboard a bus that departed Guatemala City towards San Marcos. The bus had to stop overnight on the highway because of the night curfew that prevailed at that time. We had to sleep in - our seats and then continued the journey in the morning.

Over the years, time and again I travelled through the same highway in the highlands, witnessing a decaying transformation – from forests to wheat and corn fields in the hills, followed by destruction caused by conflict. Every so often vehicles would stop because there were army or guerrilla checkpoints. Vehicles were searched and sometimes luggage or people were left behind.

I grew up accustomed to seeing violence in the streets, used to hearing gun shots, felt the rumblings of the occasional bomb explosion and lived in fear as the number of people who disappeared was on the rise. In Guatemala, disappearances happened so frequently we invented a verb for it, *estar desaparecido* – to be disappeared.



Eternal spring, eternal conflict. 2008.
Guatemala's Guernica.



After the bloodletting (2009). More than half a million people were uprooted from their villages.

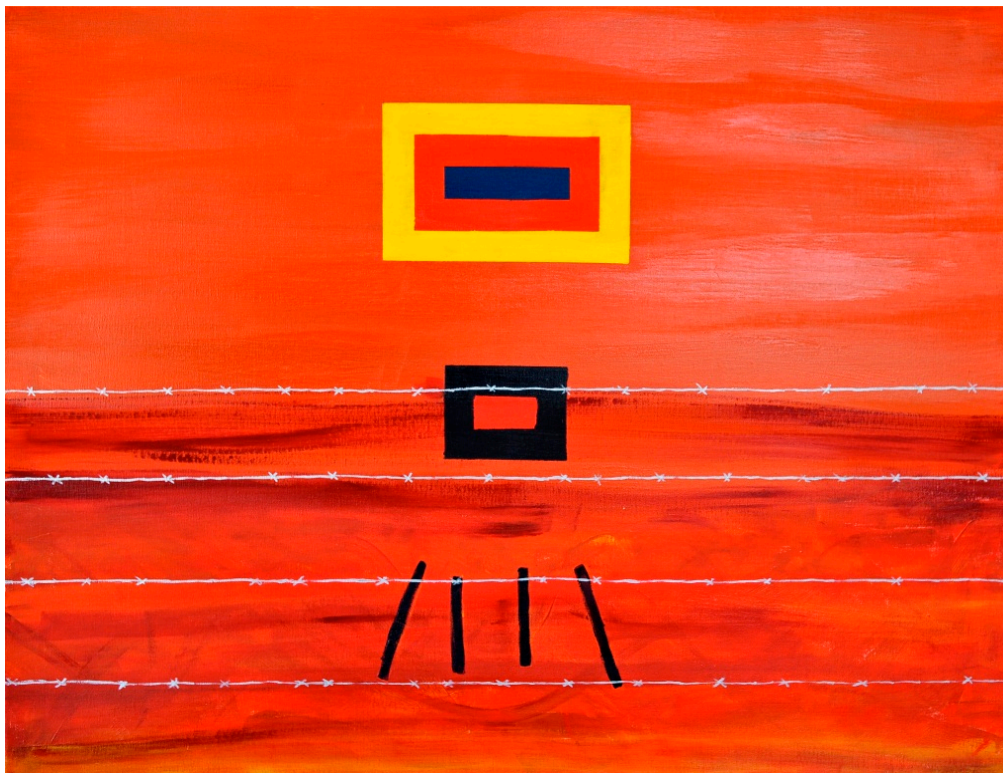
Creativity

I have always derived enjoyment in writing poetry but it has been more a matter of expressing raw emotion of a particular experience, sentiment and nostalgia. In finding ways to manifest conflict, the nature of conflict and its state on our well-being, painting has become a medium through which I am able to establish a dialogue between those unfamiliar with the reality of conflict and those who have experienced it. It has also become a vehicle to keep alive the spirit and the presence of those who are no longer able to express their experience.



Untitled (Azul series). 2013. Turbulence boosts creativity.

The theme of disappearance is manifested in my paintings in remembrance of the life of my 21-year old brother, Vinicio. He disappeared on the evening of the 20th of July 1982, when he was walking home after refereeing a game of basketball. In my paintings I seek to draw common ground in the spirit and living experiences of the indigenous people (both in Australia and in Guatemala), their culture, colour, traditions, and their long lasting memories of their ancestors. I also seek to express through my paintings the memories of my formative years in Guatemala, particularly the years of student activism and the armed struggle. Painting has become a happy medium to live with; a great way to share experiences and feel connected with people.



Exile. Me dejo atras companero (You left me behind, comrade). 2008. Inspired by Nolan - a blend of Australian and Guatemalan indigenous cultures.

Art

Through painting I found a way to express what has been a lifelong response to dealing with uncertainty and adaptation. Certainty has not been the norm in my life; it has instead been an ephemeral passage. The ability to adapt has been critical for survival.

The art of exile - for me is a way to find an explanation around conflict, understand its meaning and implications for everyone who has experienced it. It also enables me to survive, and to strive for a broader explanation about its consequences for society in general.

Invariably, as individuals we evolve, age and follow our path in life surrounded by people who mostly only know the life journey that we reveal to them. There are also many others with whom we share similar experiences, from whom we draw comfort and share life paths. For many years, I sought to repress the nature and the complexity of the conflict which prompted my departure from Guatemala. Vinicio's disappearance and the events that followed were simply too painful to speak about. Silence is one way to strive for harmony but that can only be sustained for so long.

My sense of identity is broadly defined by these experiences as well as my Australian journey. It was fortuitous that I arrived in Australia at the time I did. I was presented with many invaluable opportunities to grow, develop and to become who I am now. It provided me with the space and time to deal with my sense of exile and uprooting; and to reflect how best to blend the past and present. Exile became self-imposed exile and it has been an enlightening experience blending cultures, languages and traditions. But at times there is a sense of *ni chicha ni limonada* (belonging neither here nor there). That is how life is and it is that experience that I seek to manifest through my paintings.

As Australians, we are now considerably closer and more connected to every other part of the world than ever was possible. We are able to share experiences, have a refined response to the challenges of the present, and in an idealised form we seek to address the vagaries of life with a view to everyone having a safer and better future.

Through painting I seek to engage in a dialogue with people from all walks of life about common life experiences; to enable a sense of connection with others and to forge a path for making a difference in the spheres where we can make a difference.



The journey of one, the journey of many.

List of works / references

Untitled. (Bringing us together). 2009. Acrylic on canvas. Two panels -

Eternal spring, eternal conflict. 2008. Acrylic on canvas. Four panels – 25.5 x 25.5 cms.

After the bloodletting. 2008. Acrylic on canvas. 114 x 38 cms.

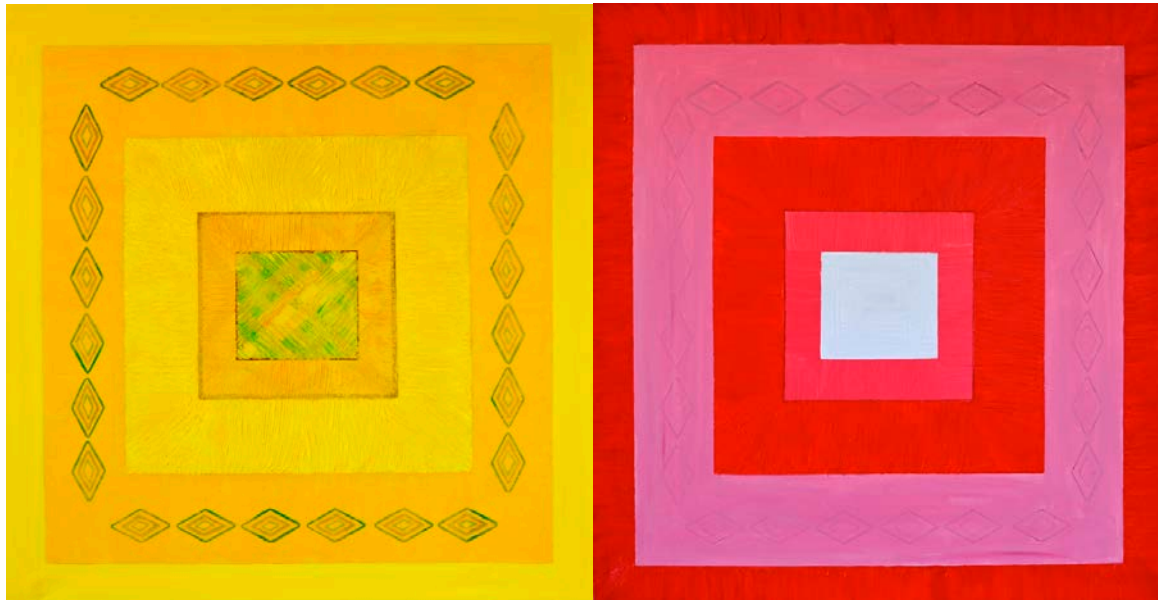
Exile. Me dejo atras compañero! (You left me behind, comrade), 2008, Acrylic on canvas. 101.5 x 101.5 cms.

Untitled. 2013. Acrylic on canvas. 76 x 38 cms. (Blue).

The journey of one, the journey of many. 2010. Acrylic on canvas. 114 x 38 cms.

Altiplano (highlands) – Yellow. 2009. Acrylic on canvas. 101 x 101 cms (40 x 40 in).

Altiplano (highlands) – Red. 2009. Acrylic on canvas. 101 x 101 cms (40 x 40 in).



Altiplano (highlands). 2009. Left: Mam people; right: Quiche people.

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