

## Karen Michelsen *De lacrimae rerum*

JRCarpenter

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Karen Michelsen

# De lacrimae rerum

JRCARPENTER

From January 11 to February 9, 1997 Karen Michelsen exhibited a show at Montreal's Articule gallery called *De lacrimae rerum*. Originally referring to "the material that tears are made of", the term "de lacrimae rerum" came to mean, "the necessity of tears". It is in this capacity that Michelsen uses the term, alluding to the religious culture of South American Catholicism, with its traditions of collective guilt and martyrdom. Born in Peru to parents of European ancestry, Michelsen now lives and works in Montreal. She has made a conscious decision to use cloth and sewing techniques to express her experiences of Catholicism, post-Colonialism and the general displacement of the émigré.

In North America, work in cloth has come to bear the connotations of feminism and the decorative. But cloth has its own language in a culture where cloth has been used traditionally as a means of communication: the religion and history of Latin America was "written" on cloth long before the arrival of the Spaniards, and cloth continues as an integral means of visual communication there. Christian iconography has undergone a great transformation in response to elements found in Andean rituals existing before the conquest. Paradigmatically, much has been taken from the occidental culture of the colonizers to recreate a Latin-American identity. Catholicism is now a mixed religion.

Michelsen works with the properties of cloth: the elusiveness of organza, the fragmented nature of appliqué, the excessiveness of the stitch. She externalizes and materializes a personal history of cultural memory and religious expres-

sion through cloth's fragility, transparency and tangibility. The properties of cloth partake in the narrative process in these works, speaking through Christian and Andean religious traditions, exposing the commonalities and disparities between the two. *The thing that cloth does is speak. And also, it listens. It remembers, it purges, it distills, it veils.* "The veil" serves as an icon, a device, and a filter for the soul we contain yet so often cannot access. During this exhibit, slate gray gallery walls created an environment in which the layering of veils did not get lost as it would have against white walls. The dark ground served to make this elusiveness of the soul somehow more clear. In the title piece of the show, *De lacrima rerum*, a densely embroidered image of a rib cage appeared as if it were a halo, floating in a plane of transparent cloth. Faced with the impossibility of divesting oneself of the religious past, icons must be transformed. The halo has turned, through cloth, to meet the body. It is both material and transcendent, an apparition in a gown of tears, longing for home.

*La espera*, or "the waiting chair", is a symbol of homelessness. Two hard wooden chairs were each encased in a film of organza. One would think that the material would serve to soften the chairs' mean austerity, but rather it floated around the forms in sharp contrast to the chairs' solidity. One chair sent out organza roots which searched for lodging against the uprootedness of the Latin-American people. The other was the site of a performance by dancer Jennifer Roche. The performance took place within the confines of the space between the body and the veil. Though the organza is transparent, the condition of "waiting"

confines one to the space of that hard chair.

Along one wall was a series called *Hosts*, referring to the "host" of Catholic communion. This series consisted of white dinner plates which had been broken and glued back together. Cloth physically contained the pieces. For Michelsen, the host is a symbol that can't be believed in anymore. It is still filled with beauty, but there is no place to put it. It can't be gotten rid of, so it is carried around in fragments, just as relics are revered in Catholicism as fragments of some holy personage.

A confusion between the body and cloth becomes apparent when Michelsen uses cloth as a metaphor for the human body in two pieces called *Paño de lágrimas*, or, "Cloth of Tears". *Paño de lágrimas* is a common Spanish expression denoting a person whom others rely on to absorb their problems and worries by listening. In trying to shift this quality/duty of absorption of another's tears back onto cloth, as the expression originally suggests, the difficulty of this project is exposed and the "necessity of tears" in a culture saturated by Catholicism is further emphasized. In the *Paño de lágrimas*, Michelsen's use of The Book, as the arch symbol of Colonialism, and the dislocated body upon which those texts come to be written, comments blithely on the hybrid culture of the Latin American. Book and body merge. The pages are transparent, almost like skin. The text is illegible, the body is incomplete. In the desire for a Whole, cloth holds together the many schisms and splinters of identity, the fragments and modifications acquired from passing through multiple cultures. Cloth contextualizes these experiences in a way that text cannot. In one of the

*Hosts*, garbled text billows like cloth to fill the mouth and sprouts from the body again in the *Paño de lágrimas*, as images of communion blur into a quest for communication. Behind *La espera*, text climbs the gray walls in a silent fog. The emphatically incomprehensible mix of Spanish, English and German describes the frustration of coming to a place where you don't understand the language. It is a new language in and of itself, designed to express its own impossibility. It is as un-readable as space, as dense as circumstance, as muddled as intention.

By creating a dictionary of personal symbols through metaphor and materiality, the burden of language is eased. A whirlwind of words melts in the mouth, and is swallowed wholesale, like the body of Christ. But it is not digested. Western Christian language has fallen like an almost forgotten veil. It is now as unconsidered as the wedding veil, the billowing dress of marriage, or the tangled sheets of a bed. Language, like cloth, surrounds and shapes body and identity, and yet meaning is continually forgotten. When all sense of home has been lost, memory becomes a choice, a process of selection. Identity will be re-generated. Books on the shelf will become bolts of cloth, a transparent materiality through which to speak. In the cupboard, the plates have broken. No longer can they serve up the body of Christ. Shattered is the host of communion. But the fragments have been collected and pieced together again. In the emptiness of that old symbol there is no more haunting question of originality. There now exists a space to re-write beauty, without critics. ■

Karen Michelsen, *La espera*, 1996. Installation view. Galerie Articule. Photo: Paul Litherland.