

UTS Gallery

CLAUDIA NICHOLSON
IF THE MOUNTAIN IS
BURNING, LET IT BURN

UTS Artist in Residence 2023 - 2024

INTRODUCTION

Since 1988, UTS has supported contemporary artistic practices through the activities of the UTS Gallery & Art Collection. The UTS Artist in Residence program was initiated in 2021 to extend the university's commitment to creative practices and support the development and presentation of experimental new work by contemporary artists.

The UTS Artist in Residence pairs one NSW visual artist with a UTS research partner in a dedicated studio space to support the creation of new work over a 12 month period. The residency program seeks to acknowledge the community of practices, knowledges and pedagogies that shape UTS, and provide a supportive framework for knowledge sharing and cross-disciplinary collaboration of mutual benefit to NSW-based artists and university research.

As the 2023-24 UTS Artist in Residence, Claudia Nicholson has worked closely with Associate Professor Dr. Cherine Fahd to develop new material photographic outcomes, and with Dr. Marivic Wyndham to examine the politics of memorialisation in the Latin America region. The residency culminated with the public presentation of new work at UTS Gallery in 2024.

The UTS Artist in Residence program demonstrates the value of embedding contemporary art within a research institution: to enable artists to make work they wouldn't otherwise be able to make, and to demonstrate the impact of research at the university in new ways. The residency program has given Claudia access to UTS's technical facilities and research expertise, resulting in innovative new work that reexamines her relationship to Colombia through an intuitive series of narrative photographs and recent video.

I would like to thank the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Built Environment for partnering with us on this program of enquiry, and express my gratitude to the UTS Operations Division, whose generous support made the 2023-24 Artist in Residence program possible. My gratitude and thanks most of all to Claudia Nicholson, for her trust and generous dialogue. And to Cherine Fahd, Marivic Wyndham, Verónica Tello, Lucreccia Quintanilla, Eleanor Zeichner, and Connie Anthes for their time, care, and critical support during this generative and experimental residency program.

Stella Rosa McDonald
Curator, UTS Gallery & Art Collection

UTS ACKNOWLEDGES THE GADIGAL PEOPLE OF THE EORA NATION, THE BOOROBERONGAL PEOPLE OF THE DHARUG NATION, THE BIDIAGAL PEOPLE AND THE GAMAYGAL PEOPLE UPON WHOSE ANCESTRAL LANDS OUR UNIVERSITY STANDS. WE PAY OUR RESPECTS TO THE ELDERS BOTH PAST AND PRESENT, ACKNOWLEDGING THEM AS THE TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF KNOWLEDGE FOR THESE LANDS.

THE DESTRUCTIVE CHARACTER SEES NOTHING PERMANENT. BUT FOR THIS REASON, SHE SEES WAYS EVERYWHERE

Verónica Tello

For *If The Mountain Is Burning, Let It Burn* (2024), Claudia Nicholson has drawn on photographs that she has slowly been compiling for over a decade. The photographs are stacked high in messy piles on her studio desk or, occasionally, on the adjacent bookcase. Sometimes, they are affixed to the wall of her studio. Or, as a DIY safety precaution, they are placed in plastic bags or sleeves. Her photographic archive is undoubtedly in disarray. Its contents have become disconnected from any previous system or structure they may have adhered to. The archive is devoid of a distinct sense of chronology or context. What is the origin of these images? By whom were the photographs taken? From whom were they obtained? What historical events, periods, or occurrences do they symbolise? In Nicholson's practice, the answers to these queries are intentionally left unclear, hazy, and enigmatic. There is no clear access point to these images' specific historical references.

Those who have researched institutional archives, such as those at the National Library of Australia, the State Library of New South Wales, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, are likely familiar with the tool of the "finding aid" as a way of accessing an archive. Finding aids are comprehensive inventories that document the extent, scope, and volume of a collection of materials. If a finding aid for Nicholson's archive for *If The Mountain Is Burning, Let It Burn* were to exist, it would look something like this:

The collection of Claudia Nicholson includes over two hundred photographs, primarily of Colombia and its capital, Bogotá (Nicholson's birthplace). The collection is structured into three categories:

1. Photographs of Colombia from Nicholson's family album, taken by Nicholson's father.
2. Photographs taken by Nicholson in 2008 during her first trip back to Colombia.

3. Photographs acquired by Nicholson during her 2008 trip to Colombia. Nicholson purchased these photographs in Bogotá's street markets. They depict various historical events, including the 1985 siege of the Palace of Justice.

The historian in me is fond of a finding aid, and it is evident that I am endeavouring to restore some order to Nicholson's archive. However, the historian in me also appreciates the entropy of archives, including Nicholson's.¹ It offers a unique perspective on the past as a trace of the seemingly inevitable erasure of history. It negates the authority of the historical document, in this case, photography, to generate something novel instead. Archival entropy, or even devastation, can be a positive force. It endeavours to establish a new entity that is less concerned with the specificity of historical references in the archive and more with the emotions its materials evoke. This is the precise tenet of Nicholson's practice in *If The Mountain Is Burning, Let It Burn*.

Nicholson has employed various strategies to obscure and, at times, disappear figures or faces in any images she presented for this exhibition, including blurring, redacting, and abstracting. In part, these actions are a way of rejecting the ethnographic gaze inherent in certain of her source photographs and any similar gaze directed towards her images. She reinstates the right of her subjects and herself to decline to be looked at and to define the circumstances under which viewers may look. But Nicholson's intrusions on her image sources are, I think, mainly fuelled by her desire to reclaim history and find a way to appear in Australia. As the exiled German philosopher Walter Benjamin once argued, destruction is a means of self-regeneration that involves clearing space.² Nicholson seeks to work through the rubble, push on and find a way forward. Because she sees a way forward from every angle, she is always at a crossroads.³ There is nothing permanent about her sense of what can be. She destroys history because she is close, not distant, to it. She destroys it again and again.⁴

The destructive impulse behind Nicholson's exhibition at UTS Gallery is evidenced by its title. *If The Mountain Is Burning, Let It Burn* refers to the song *Que Se Quema El Monte* (2006) by the renowned Colombian bullerengue musician Etelvina Maldonado. Although the song title is descriptive in Spanish and can be translated to English as "that the mountain is burning" or "the mountain is burning," Nicholson's translation is comparatively calamitous and instructive: "If the mountain is burning, let it burn."

Sociologist Ipek Demir contends that the global south diaspora's translations are never straightforward.⁵ They are not simply an attempt to transfer meaning from one context to another—from the global south to the global north. Rather, they are expressions of the diaspora's capacities for radical interventions, disruptions and re-readings of language and history within the colonial project of the nation-state.



Palace of Justice, Bogotá, 1987. Courtesy: Stuart Nicholson.

A photograph of one of Colombia's national symbols, the Palace of Justice in Bogotá, is a primary image for *If The Mountain Is Burning, Let It Burn*. In 1986, Nicholson's father captured this photograph of the Palace of Justice's devastated façade, taken just a few months after M-19 guerrilla combatants captured Colombia's Supreme Court to conduct a trial against President Belisario Betancur. The building was stormed and destroyed by the government's security forces, resulting in the deaths of all M-19 members and

approximately half of the Supreme Court justices, including Colombia's chief justice. Her father's photograph, taken on a serene and tranquil blue-sky day, captures the aftermath of the siege, focusing on the disintegrating structure and the voids left behind.



Coup of September 11, 1973. Bombing of *La Moneda* (presidential palace). Courtesy: Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile.

In my own archive, there is an image of the bombed President's Palace in Santiago de Chile in 1973, after it was attacked by the Chilean military to end the socialist regime's power, leading to the mass exodus of over twenty-three thousand Chileans to Australia.⁶ Images of destroyed government buildings have long been part of the archives and histories of the diaspora of the global south, including for Latin Americans in Australia, such as Nicholson and myself. Destruction is part of our inheritance and how we figure out how to constitute ourselves in the present.

While counter-intuitive, Nicholson's approach to embracing the forces of historical and political annihilation by liquidating photography, time, and history is a declaration against tradition and the notion that everything must be preserved for posterity. Conversely, it is a practice influenced by an understanding that life is defined by mortality, violence, and loss.

If The Mountain Is Burning, Let It Burn is ultimately driven by Nicholson's desire to blow up the archive. Scattered and disordered, we don't need a finding aid to read and feel our way through her imagery. Instead, make space and clear the path for passage through the debris.

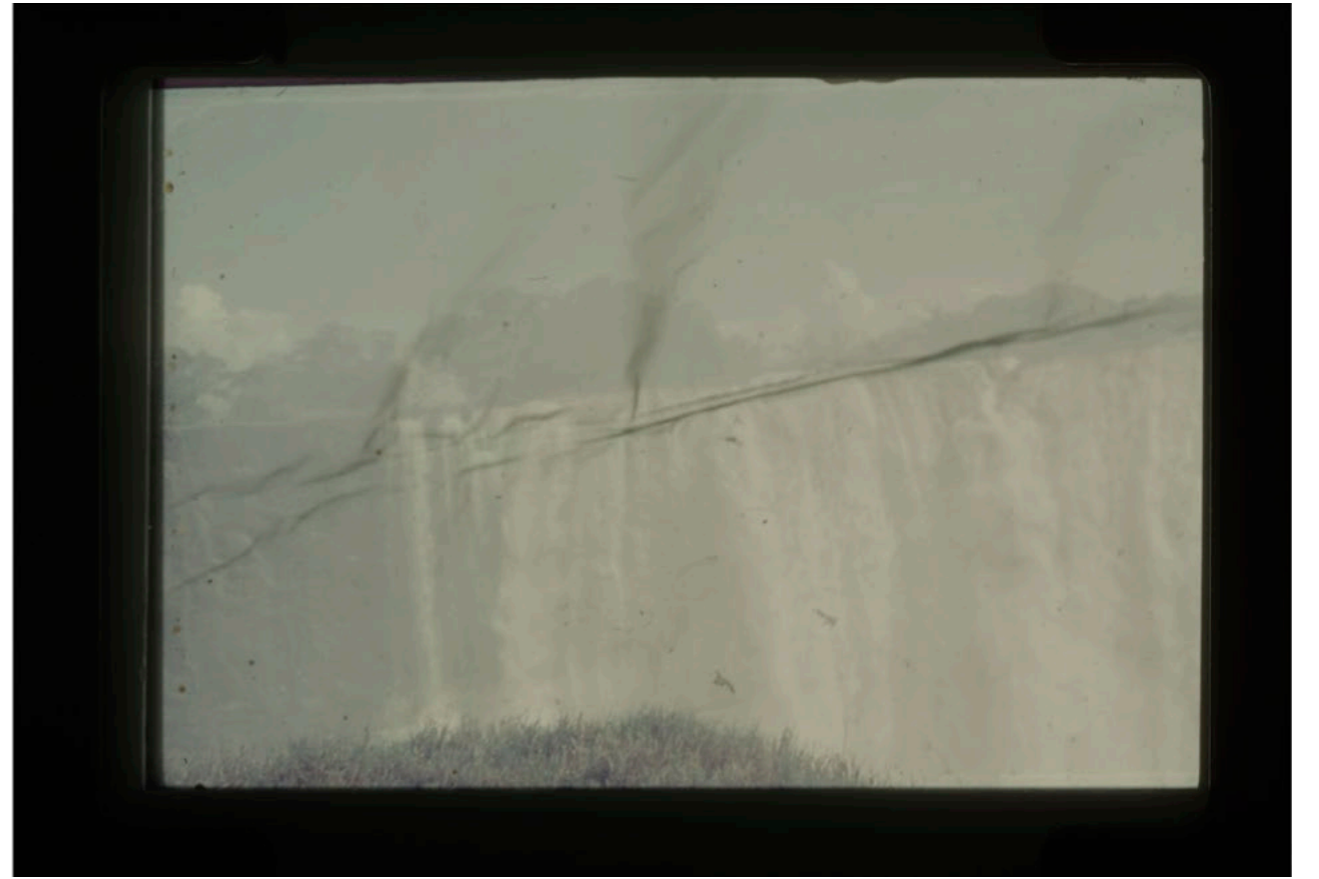
1. Spieker, S. (2017). *The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy*. MIT Press.
2. Benjamin, W. (1931). *The Destructive Character*. In Jennings, M., Eiland, H. and Smith, G (Eds), *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2 (1931 - 1934)*, (1999, pp. 541-542). Harvard University Press.
3. I am paraphrasing Benjamin here, *ibid*.
4. For a history of the destructive impulse in art see Spieker, S. (Ed.). (2017). *Destruction*. MIT Press.
5. Demir, I. (2022). *Diaspora as Translation and Colonisation*. Manchester University Press. Also see Gloria Anzaldua, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco, Cal: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 33-45.
6. I map the specifics of this history and how it connects to how I approach writing about art in Australia in: Verónica Tello, "How to Appear? Writing Art History in Australia after 1973," in *Performance, Refugees, Resistance*, ed Caroline Wake, Suliman, Samid and Suzanne Little, 139-54 http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/unsworks_70415



Claudia Nicholson, *Untitled 9*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



Claudia Nicholson, *Untitled 6*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



Claudia Nicholson, *Untitled 20*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



Claudia Nicholson, *Untitled 2*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



Claudia Nicholson, *Untitled 16*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



Claudia Nicholson, *Untitled 4*, diptych, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



Claudia Nicholson, *Conch*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



Claudia Nicholson, *Self Portrait I*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



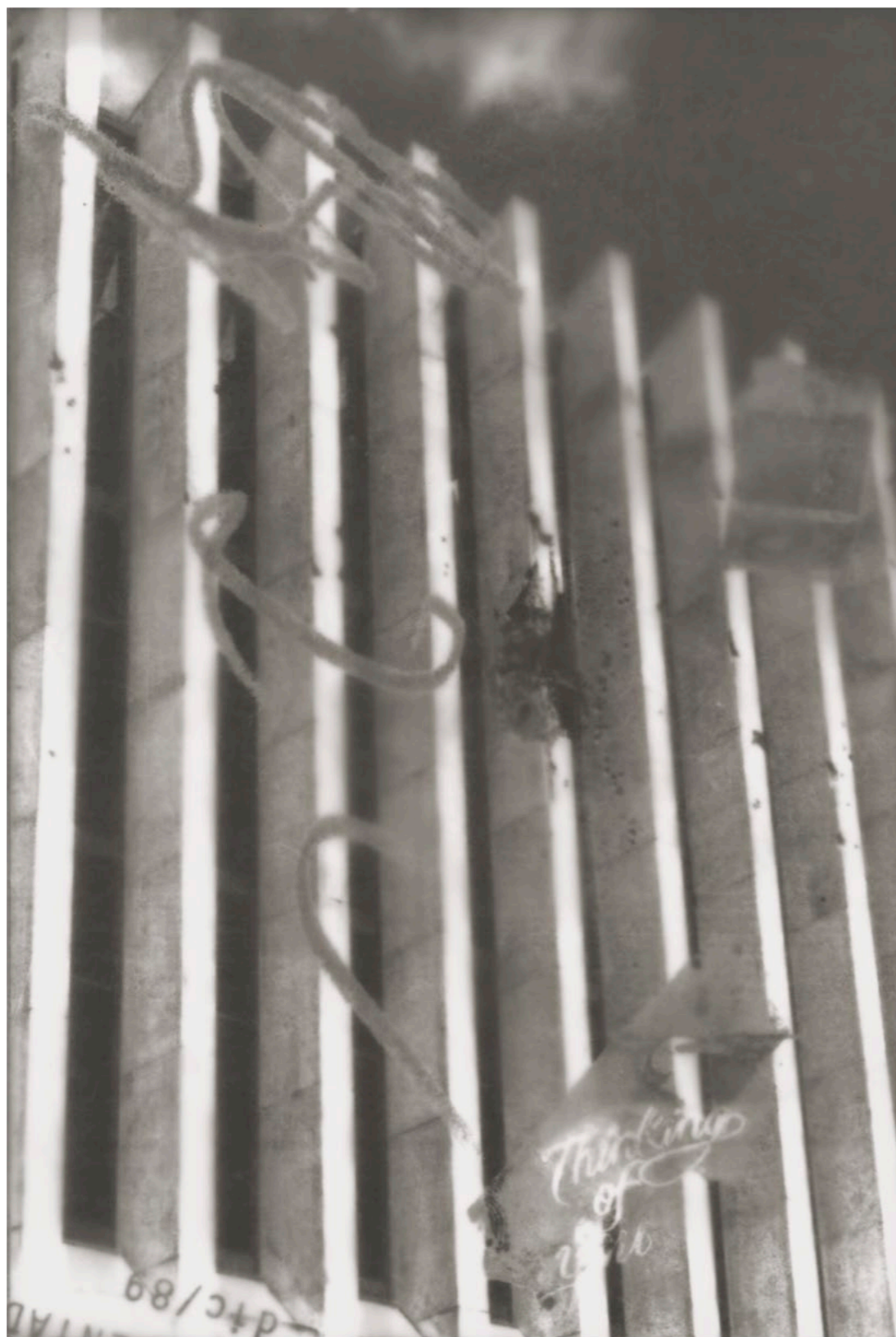
Claudia Nicholson, *Self Portrait II*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



Claudia Nicholson, *Untitled 15*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



Claudia Nicholson, *Untitled 12*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.



Claudia Nicholson, *Untitled 19*, 2024, Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy the artist.

A NEW STORY—OR MAYBE NO STORY AT ALL

Cherine Fahd

The air smells of chemicals, a sharp, almost metallic scent that I associate with making images. Introducing Claudia to the darkroom at UTS reminds me of making my first series of black-and-white photographs. It was 2002, and I was both terrified and liberated. I'd studied painting, so I was an artist stepping into a new medium outside my comfort zone. I loved being an alchemical amateur.

Like me, Claudia is not a photographer, but she is making photographs. She follows a lineage of artists who use photography to craft a series, play with sequences, and draw out themes of process, repetition, and the unrelenting passage of time. I watch her in the darkroom—everything is shadow, save for the dim crimson light that offers just enough visibility. It is a science: the chemicals, the precise timing, the careful handling of materials. To me, the process feels like magic.

Claudia takes a piece of blank photo paper, exposes it to light, dips it into a tray of developer and watches as an image begins to emerge. I feel the exhilaration of creating something new and the fear of making mistakes. The photographic darkroom loves mistakes.

Claudia works with images from her family's archive: photographs, negatives, and slides, faded and worn. The archive spans 70 years of Colombian history. She combines these with found photographs, old and new. She turns these into digital negatives, zooms in, crops, and blows up—distorting the plastic of the negative toward photographic surrealism, merging the familiar with the strange. The overall effect is airbrushed uncertainty.

In her photographs, there is a sense of perhaps, of maybes, of questions rather than answers. They do not inform, they do not disinform. They bypass the need to convey a message. Instead, they offer a form, a wish, or a suggestion. Pictorially ambiguous and blurry, they portray their subjects like dreams or memories that are not quite there. They are not about what is seen, but about what is hard to remember.

Are they even photographs? Though Claudia's images are made in the photographic darkroom, they are assembled through layering photocopied

images. Sometimes the back of a photo, with its annotative memory, bleeds to the front. Her darkroom is for painting.

Back in the studio, she washes them with ink. They appear like watercolours, absorbing a hue of green, pink, purple and red. By blending family photographs with found images, Claudia disrupts the conventional demarcation of personal and collective memory, inviting viewers to question the legitimacy of any single archive or image. And by blending photographic processes with painterly effect, she questions the dominance of any single pictorial medium.

Jacques Derrida's idea of the archive expressed that feverish desire to capture and control memory, but he also acknowledged its inherent instability. When I enter her studio, I want to tell Claudia about everything I've read and loved about photography and memory. Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995) and Hal Foster's *An Archival Impulse* (2004), but I change my mind. What good is a theory in this moment? I don't want to interrupt her intuitive flow.

"Here is my hand; this is me as a child; this a protest; a march in Colombia; a mountain; my sister; long grass; South America; a worker in a field; a face; a mask; a child floating; a boy with his arms crossed; a neck; a newspaper picture; a woman."

I watch her arranging and rearranging test prints. Or are they her negatives? Claudia's processes complicate photography's glossary of terms. She examines the prints, shuffling them and putting them back together. She looks at the photographs, touches them, and moves them around again. She possesses the need to collect, preserve, and repeat.

Each print is a piece of an imprecise puzzle. The pieces don't always fit. A diptych, a triptych, a sequence. This photograph tells one story. That photograph tells another. Together, they make a new story—or maybe no story at all.

I interrupt her, exclaiming, "An elephant's trunk!"

"It's a snake," Claudia says.

She shows me one print. This copy is clear, precise, a twin.

She shows me another print. It's hazy, but some details remain.

By the third print, a shadow appears.

In the tenth, edges are blurred, bodies wobble, a ghost of the original.

The twelfth has distortion in the face.

The twentieth issues a fog.

By the fiftieth, Claudia has scaled up the image. Enlarged to the size of a figure, the drama swells. Greys dissolve into the substrate and the subject evaporates.

On my final visit to Claudia's studio, I see her table crowded with prints, ink, and paintbrushes. The playfulness of Claudia's space points to something new and in the future while holding images of the past. Creating something new means learning to let go of what came before. I leave the studio thinking about the archive and how it's supposed to hold everything—but it can't. Claudia's photographs engage in archival work that doesn't end with a singular image or history but visualises a process of negotiating it. They are gaps, memory holes, and things half-remembered (or half-forgotten). Each photograph isn't proof but a risk.

DÉJALA LLORAR¹

Lucreccia Quintanilla

Memories are organic, and ever-changing things. They visit us and morph and unfold as we get to know ourselves in the world. They help us gain insights into the time in which an event took place as well as filtering the world and time at which we recount it.

Claudia and I talk about memory as we look through her new series of photographs. They grow new layers of colour and texture each time we meet. There are warm depictions of beautiful panoramas or groups of people gathered, others are more politically revelatory; the perforations of war engraved on architecture.

As we chat, I think through my own layered memories of my own Central American country of origin. An empty street, no cars, no shops open, smoke and noise. Around 300-400 people walked through the two-lane road with each person carrying homemade white flags, all together in sombre silence. The group of people were trying to flee from one end of the city to the other. This moment remains in my mind frozen. A photographic still of sorts. My mind has traced and retraced this image, caressing it, trying to understand it, and evaluating it for its significance to me now and at so many junctures in my life. Claudia mentions to me sensitively that her video work for the show ends in a scene of white flags. Our images layer together in solidarity.

We exchange Colombian music, big emotive songs that speak of landscapes, of relationships, of hardship sung by women, their elegant voices expansive, emotional and resonant. Indigenous melodies and African drums, a product of colonisation, accompany voice in elegant compositions. Claudia asks me what I think the lyrics mean and I translate the words to a song titled *Déjala llorar* which, I tell her, is infused with a particular drama only Catholicism brings.

Being uprooted as a child to another place requires in us sense-making. An attempt to understand and form connections between our own intimate and complex lives; through separation from friends and loved ones, war, adoption, new lives, as well as having to reconcile how this process inevitably fits into

bigger historical and socio-political narratives. These narratives are beautiful, fragmentary, and fraught.

Claudia tells me about how the photos she took of people at a protest in Colombia feel ethnographic. I challenge these feelings as we discuss why these photos are important for her. I see her gaze as a search to find, wherever she could, someone who looked like her, whom she could identify.

Each of Claudia's photographs functions as an individual composite from a process of careful selection and is revisited, abstracted and added to. Claudia is tracing and recontextualising—rather than recollecting—memories by visiting her family's albums. The finished works are empowered by a refusal to collapse into simplicity. They confidently articulate the irreducibility of an experience shaped by the forces of disconnection, grief, anger, and the joy of finding comfort in familiar and unfamiliar spaces.

1. Maldonado, E. (2006). *Déjala llorar* [Recorded by Etelvina Maldonado]. On Etelvina Maldonado. MTM.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Cherine Fahd is one of Australia's leading photographic artists. For over twenty years, she has exhibited, written and curated works that focus on photography and video performance. Her projects often incorporate members of the public, her immediate family, friends, and the artistic community. Fahd is interested in the ways photography brings people together and how we use photography to perform, connect and tell stories. Her work has been commissioned by major cultural institutions in Australia, including the Sydney Opera House, Carriageworks, Performance Space and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. She holds a PhD from Monash University Melbourne and is an Associate Professor at the University of Technology Sydney.

Claudia Nicholson is a recipient of the NSW Emerging Visual Arts Fellowship (2017) and a three-time finalist of the Sir John Sulman Prize (2022, 2019, 2018). In 2022, she was commissioned by the Sydney Opera House to develop new video work *The Deep Rivers Say It Slowly* for Shortwave Festival. In 2020 she was commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia to develop Art Trail, an art education resource for young people. In 2019 she was commissioned by Museum of Contemporary Art and Vivid Sydney to create a light up of the MCA facade. Recent exhibitions include *Braving Time: Contemporary Art in Queer Australia*, National Art School (2023); *Fulgora*, National Art School (2023); *A Park is Not a Forest*, Sydney College of the Arts Gallery (2022); *Belonging*, Art Gallery of New South Wales (2019); and *The National: New Australian Art*, Carriageworks (2017). She has held residencies with TWT Artist Studios (2019–2021) Carriageworks (2017–2019) and Firstdraft Gallery (2012–2014). Her work is held in private and public collections including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Campbelltown Art Centre, The University of NSW, and Artbank.

Dr. Verónica Tello is a Chilean-Australian art historian, writer, editor, teacher, and curator. Her current research focuses on transnational art histories — and their archives — in and out of Australia, Chile, the Pacific, and Latin America. Her recent book, *Future Souths: Dialogues on Art, Place and History*, offers a multi-vocal, global contemporary art history (Third Text Publications and Discipline, 2023). Her writings have appeared in *Third Text*, *Memory Studies*, *Afterall*, *Frieze* and *Artforum*. She is Sydney editor of *Memo Review* and editor-in-chief of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*. Tello is Senior Lecturer of Histories of Contemporary Art and Culture at the University of New South Wales, Sydney.

Dr. Lucreccia Quintanilla is a multidisciplinary artist and arts worker. She was Co-Director of Liquid Architecture (2022–24) and completed her Doctoral research at Monash University, where she received an Australian Post-Graduate Award for her research. Recent exhibitions include *Speaking Surfaces*, St Paul's gallery, Auckland University of Technology, NZ. She has presented sound works at Kunstraum Niederoesterreich as well as locally in Australia. Quintanilla has presented at the Sound System Outernational Conference in Naples, Italy and has been a resident artist at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Canada. She is editor of *The Place In Which I Fit Won't Exist Until I Make It* (2022), a collection of writing by artists and organisers involved in radio, sound making and writing. Quintanilla received a Creative Australia international engagement grant to travel and research the archives of Octavia E. Butler in Los Angeles.

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