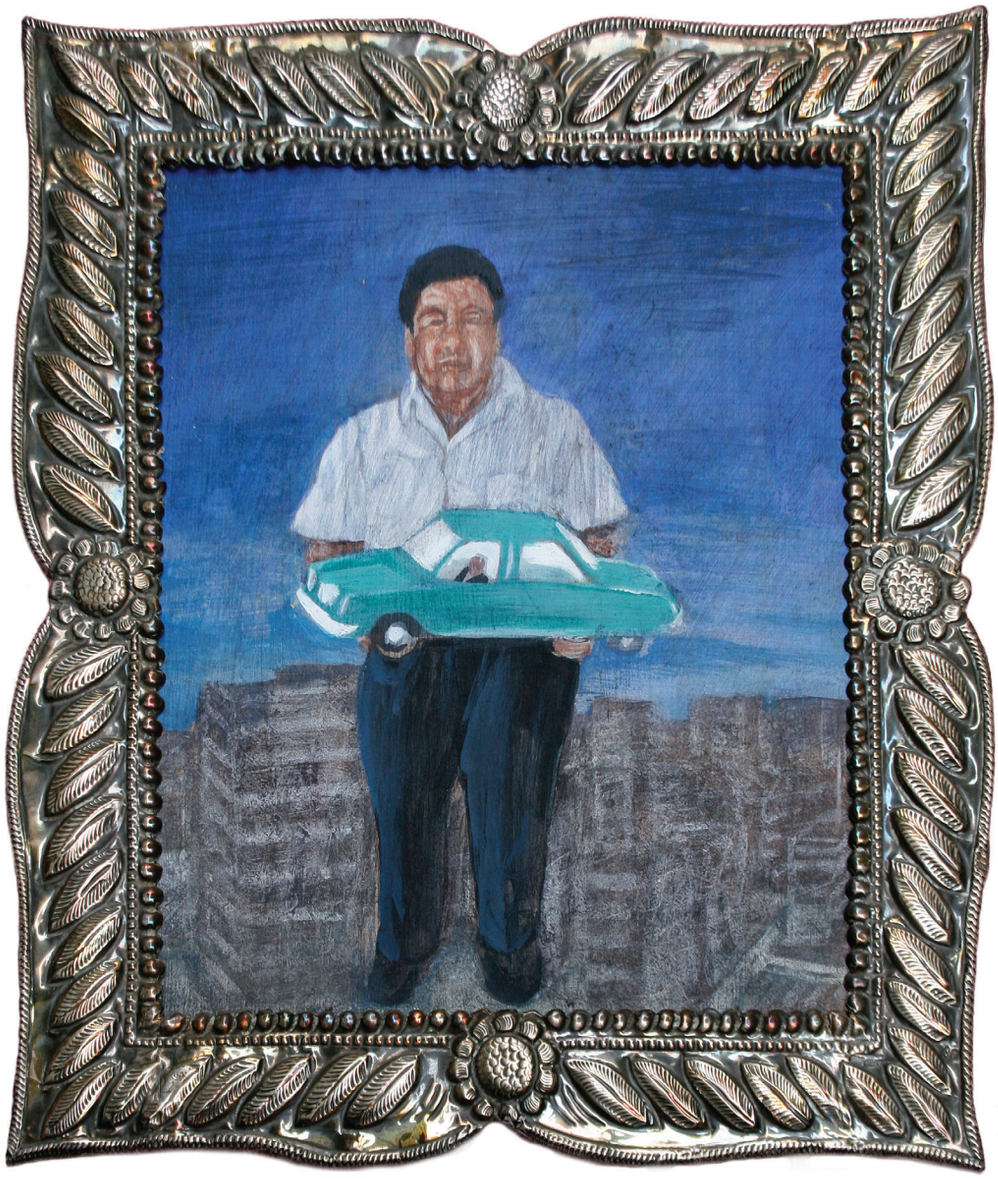

Colonial Shadows

Obstacles For Imagining Community

BY GUSTAVO BUNTINX AND VÍCTOR VICH

PERU IS IMMERSED IN A NEW WAVE OF CAPITAL-ist modernization; its market has expanded in an extraordinary fashion and social mobility is now possible. However, we are still far from conceptualizing ourselves as a nation or an imagined community, to use Benedict Anderson's famous phrase: we still do not perceive ourselves as a collective of citizens all equal under the law with the same rights and responsibilities.

Something remains of an old history that does not manage to lose its grip, that is repeated over and over again in a karmic fashion and continues to play an important role in our society. Although a new era is emerging in which Peru is governed by the middle classes, the old vices of extreme inequality arise all too often in the interaction among Peruvians, including tutelary practices, traditional or reverse racism and the mania to create hierarchies.

As a part of a larger research project, we seek to look at the way in which contemporary art recognizes these failures, concentrating on just four of the many artists who try to show things that our daily inertia makes invisible. Our unimagined communities.

The works of art we look at show an

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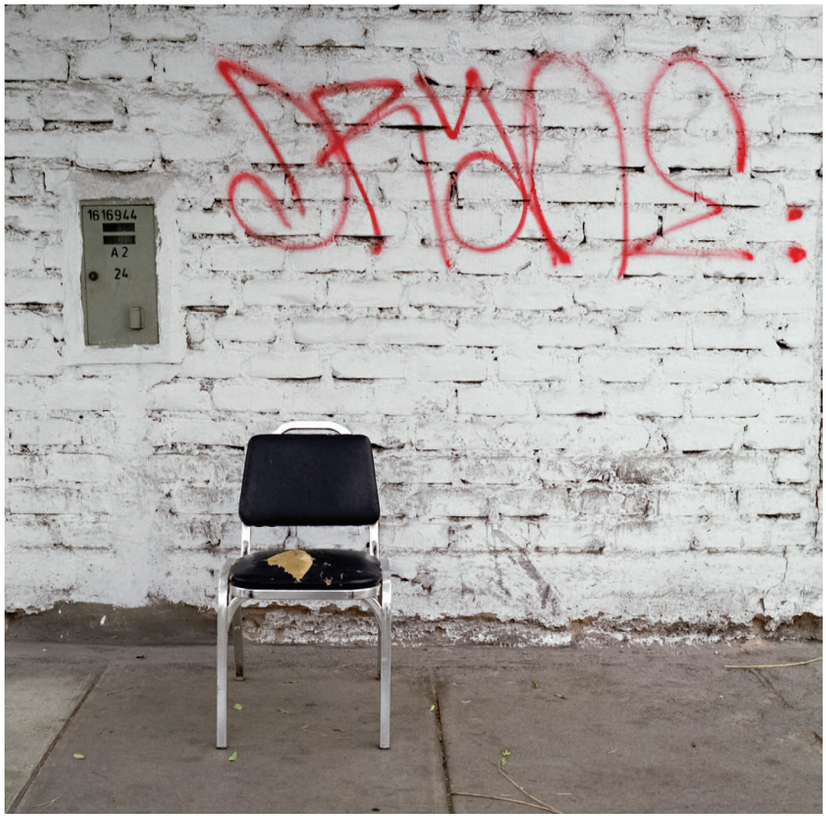
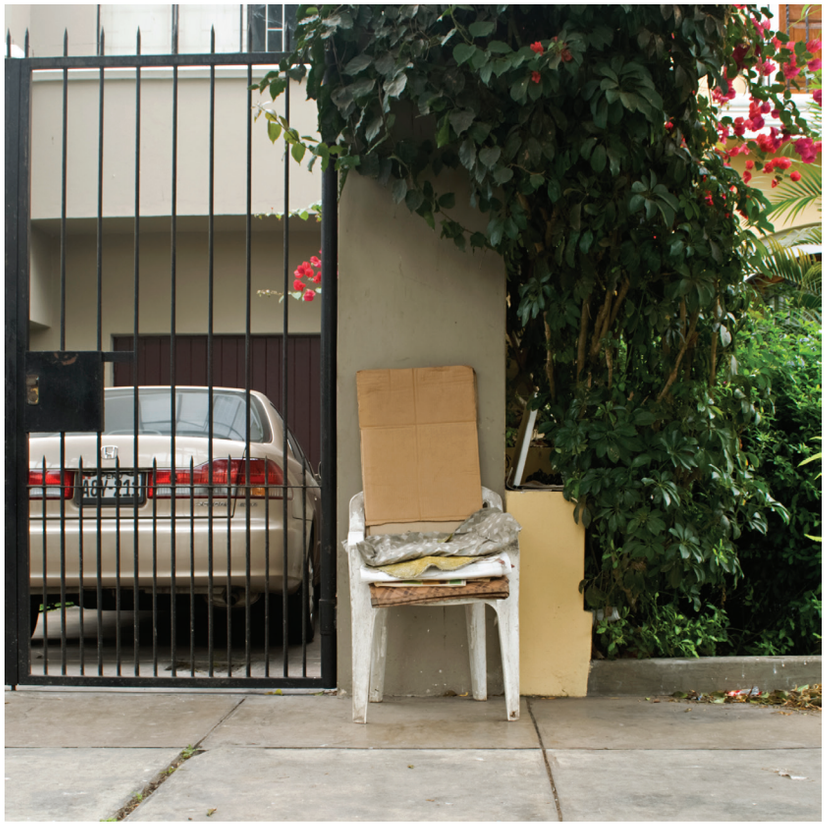
awareness of the huge gaps that impede the construction of more just relations among Peruvians. Through the use of different aesthetic resources, these works reveal what is evident but often denied in the emotional and political registers of everyday life: those hidden colonial shadows that threaten the most recent liberation of our vehement and legitimate (post)modernity. Ominous remains of a traditional past—remnants of an old order that still keeps alive within us.

Sometimes these works are marked by profound ambivalence, a reflection also of a certain social indefinition experienced by many artists. The subject of domestic employment is in this sense incisive, because of the intimacy—even the affective intimacy—with which servants embody differences in social class. The emotive portraits of his parents' servants that Moico Yaker created in 1998 show an anguished personal testimony and a loving symbolic reparation: although small, all of the paintings are framed in

Left: El chofer (The Chauffeur) from the series *"La tuya, la mía, la nuestra"* by Moico Yaker, 1998; Right: Adriana Tomatis Souverbielle's *Estudio de color I (La otra)*, 2006, Colección Joseph Firbas





embossed silver, the *repujado* technique whose colonial overtones today conjure up images of sentimental or religious devotion. These connotations are also present in the distinctiveness of the servants, and each of their tasks is portrayed as a particular attribute, similar to the way the Christian saints were identified in viceroyal paintings by the instruments of their martyrdom. The waiter stands with the napkin on his arm; the chauffeur sadly shows off an automobile that is not his own. And the laundrywoman is immersed in a huge vat whose dirty waters seem to have washed her features half off.

In contrast to these unique images, diminutive but individualized with first and last names, between 2006 and 2008 Adriana Tomatis reinterpreted in huge paintings the uniformed anonymity of the nannies, sometimes accompanied by the children under their care. A complex rendering of plastic and conceptual modes, underscored by disturbing titles such as *Prueba de color* (Proof of Color) or *Blanco sobre blanco* (White on White). Or indeed *La otra* (The Other), an explicit reference to photographer Natalia Iguíñiz's series on the same theme.

Tomatis is also the creator of *Panic Room* (2009-2013), a caustic sequence of drawings and watercolors that depict, in an architectural fashion, the omnipresent and somewhat shoddy booths set up for hired security all over Lima; our great capital city that is pathetically unprotected by the incompetent and corrupt police force, and by the state apparatus in general. It is this precariousness that her drawings ironize, with a sharpness in counterpoint to the beauty of plastic expression.

For some months now, Eliana Otta has opted for the opposite formal strategy. She treats the same issues through a series of eight photos that are deliberately insipid: barely registered dull images of the worn-out seats that hired guards are provided with in the frightened middle-class neighborhoods. They are

Left, top and bottom: Untitled works by Eliana Otta from the series "Señores de la intemperie," (Lords of the Elements) 2013

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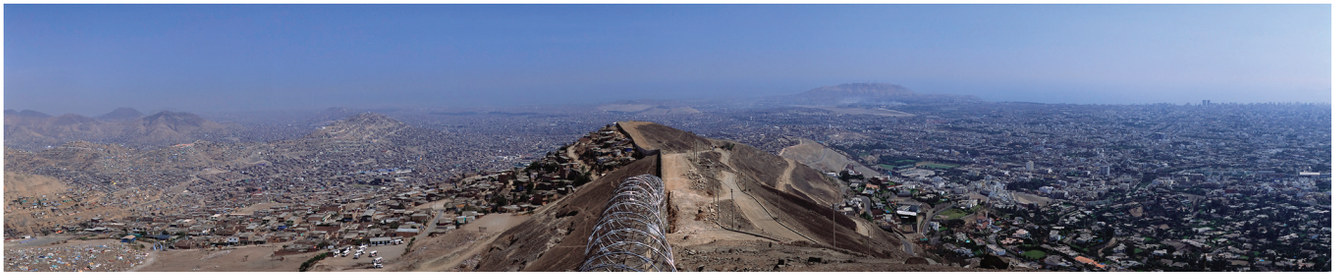

Top: "Playa pública/playa privada" (Public Beach/Private Beach), 2009, by Roberto Huarcaya Bottom: "Pamplona casuarinas," by Roberto Huarcaya, 2011 (Micromuseo collection)

a vestige of common household items, a domesticity that now pervades public space and politically impacts us through the scenes depicted in these photos. These chairs—old, broken, uncomfortable—slowly reveal themselves to us as a moving attempt to fill the gap left by the state, but they also provide additional evidence of the precariousness of work, of still lamentable conditions in some contexts of our recent prosperity. The title could (almost) say it all: *Señores de la intemperie*—Lords of the Elements.

But all this is achieved not by representing individuals, but rather the tools of the work that defines them. These off-center images reject the current popular aesthetic, reminiscent of advertising, that "includes" working-class figures in almost postcard style. On the contrary, in Otta's (and Tomatis') images, the subject—the figure of the security guard—does not appear anywhere, and we must face the disturbing nature of pure objects. These chairs—the kind that we would never find inside one of the houses they guard—speak for themselves. And they speak of a hidden or minimized hegemony: the instability the political order generates and which, at the same time, paradoxically sustains it. And more: the uncomfortable manner in which some of these guards are still situated, like vassals on the borders of the modernizing process itself.

Two impressive photos by Roberto Huarcaya focus on these and other borders in the most explicit way possible, but not less poetic because of that. A panoramic format and extremely oblong image contribute to the poetic sense, but also to the deficient horizontality in Peruvian society. The decisive element in both photographs is the central and dividing axis marking the center of the composition. The first image (2009) depicts a dock that separates, like a virtual wall, the exclusive beach of the Regatas Club from the popular shores of Agua Dulce and Pescadores. In the second photograph (2011), we have a literal wall—indeed with barbed wire—that prevents people from the working-class neighborhood of Pamplona Alta from transiting near the gated Las Casuarinas condominiums.

The borders are as symbolic as actual. In spite of the undeniable economic mobility and increasing social movement, art works such as those discussed here insist that elements of inequity still persist, the remnants of the great divisions and fractures that have constituted our society. The colonial mentality survives.

P.S. Pay special attention to the subtle punctum in Huarcaya's virtual diptych. The secret punctum: the profile of a building appearing above the hills at the extreme right of the first photograph—*Playa pública/playa privada* (Public Beach, Private Beach)—is where the photographer lives with his wife and children. Practically a beacon for the daily contemplation of the symmetric assymetries that the camera now registers in a reverse form. The artist's vital gaze of unfolded creation, deconstructed through its own technological—and social—glance.

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