

RADAR

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2006
FAN

Seeking a symbol of peace

An artist chooses her favorite work: Catalina León and funeral art

By Catalina León

What I loved and surprised me about the tomb of César Vallejo is that, like most of the tombs in that cemetery, a heavy rectangular marble stone covers it. And there was something different from the striking graves or the sculptures usually found in the tombs of famous characters: that many people had gone and had left various elements. There was for example a handkerchief with embroidery covered by a plastic supported by stones, a rosary, a badge of Peru, personal cards with e-mails from people, a pair of blue earrings, a poem, subway tickets, a little sculpture also from Peru; small bird bones, soil... Different elements that were not with any pretension nor are usually associated with death but were of everyday use gathered there and ended up being a kind of oracle, of magic word that opens to step to the other side, as little notes passed under the door. I am very interested in finding a contemporary funerary art. And suddenly there were personal cards with their e-mails, which is a feature of the age we live in: it seems that different people in the cemetery also were interested in César Vallejo and get in contact through the grave, and then the grave is a living thing, that moves, that is still making connections. As if these elements would allow entering the privacy of that person instead of introducing him as a great character. It's like a soft trace, a sound in the distance, coming from him.

It is no accident that I got to know Vallejo's tomb. I often visit cemeteries, because I'm long in that search: what we do, how do we represent pain? What objects we choose to represent what is happening? I always have this idea that may be it will not change the pain and fear that we have before death, but the attitude we have towards those feelings. And that is why I like so much the coffins of Ghana, which are made in the form of giant hammers, or fish, or Coca-Cola bottles. But not only for thinking that later those objects will be underground, with bodies inside, nor for the pilgrimage of people that carry a giant colored fish shaped coffin. These coffins were created by a carpenter in a village in Ghana relatively recently, about fifty years ago, and have a relation between what the person did in life and the coffin he/she chooses: for example, for the carpenter, a hammer, for the snail seller, a giant snail, to a lady who had never flown a plane, a plane, for the fisherman, a fish... May be that will not change the pain and anguish, but in the everyday representation we have of death, it is different the opinion about a fish and a coffin as we know it, that loads a density and does not allow to connect with death as a transition or transformation or a place of retreat, of union between people. It's almost like not wanting to see: it makes me think that there is a relationship

between the wood of the coffin, opaque and polished, and the brightness and reflection of the dark glasses that people wear not to show one another their crying. I think that the pain is added a bonus of density and sordidness that could be otherwise.

Two years ago I realized that my focus of interest had shifted to the funerary art and rituals, but I think that comes since forever. When I was little and I was told that one could not be buried wherever one wanted, it already seemed to me a very strange situation. It could not be that the government had to decide how to see off oneself. I imagined until then that one could be buried or bury people one loved in the house's backyard. And when my mom told me not, I felt imprisoned and furious. I also remember that once I found a kitten on the street and got really happy, but two days later it died and I got really sad, until it suddenly occurred to me that I could have a funeral and was soon fascinated, I had a neighbor who had a garden center and asked him for permission to make the funeral there.

May be the permission to intervene the ritual as we know it is with the animals: we have a freedom in their deaths, perhaps because we eat them- that allows some creativity. We make transition rituals all the time. We have that need. Beyond what one believes there is after death, what matters is daily life, how we deal with death in our daily lives. We cannot change the pain, the fear, the anguish, but we can change how we relate to this, through these little things, like a symbol or a ritual.

Many people do not think and talk about death. I guess each one relates in whatever way they can. But, at least for me, to be able to talk about my death and the other's with the people I love is a very liberating act.

I would love to open a physical space where people could design their own funeral or coffin or their epitaph, or if they don't want to and if they want the others to do it, they could have that dialogue. That there could be a real connection between the one who left and those who remain.