

REVIEW

At Harbourfront's Power Plant gallery in Toronto, artists untangle clashing cultures and the colonial legacy

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Artist Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa in the 2016 performance "Life in His Mouth, Death Cradles Her Arm".

AMENOTEP CORDOVA AND JOSE MIGUEL OROZCO/HANDOUT

The Guatemalan artist Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa creates paintings, sculptural installations and performances; several videos of the latter are woven into his current show, *Asymmetries*, at Harbourfront's Power Plant gallery in Toronto. One of them, from a performance enacted in Guatemala City's central cemetery in 2016, shows the artist standing between wall crypts studded with memorial plaques and cradling a block of ice wrapped in a baby blanket. As he remains immobile, the precious bundle slowly melts.

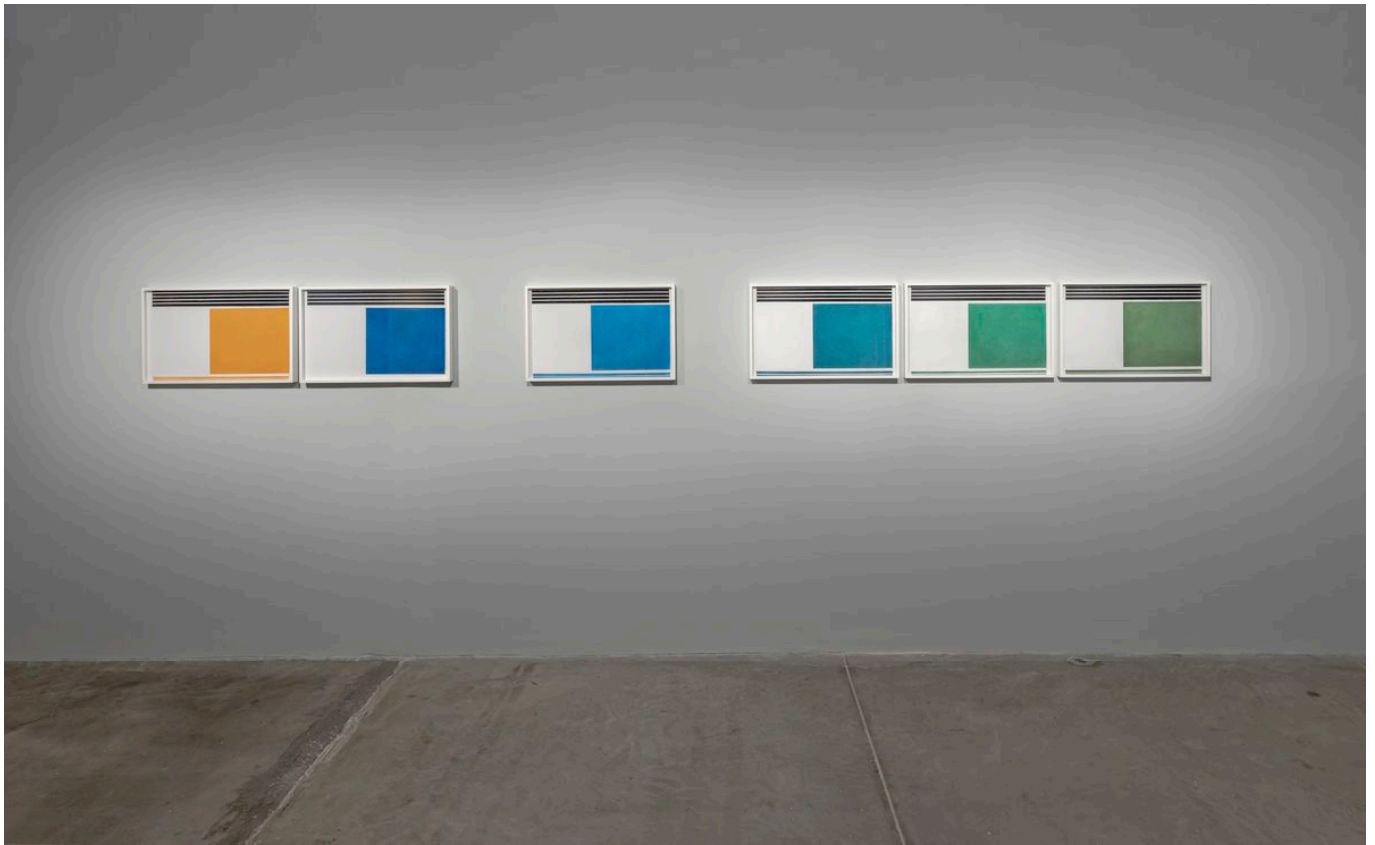
In a wall text, curator Lauren Barnes explains the performance was part of a series that the artist described as "an attempt to exhaust my interest in the Guatemalan Civil War." That

genocidal conflict lasted from 1960 to 1996 and is estimated to have killed 200,000 people, most of them Mayan. Ramirez-Figueroa grew up as a refugee in Vancouver and studied art there and in Chicago before returning to Guatemala. But you don't really need to know this background to be instantly struck by the mournful symbolism of the melting baby.

Ramirez-Figueroa belongs to a new generation of politicized, multidisciplinary artists widely ranging in their techniques, but tightly focused on specific historic or current events. Experiencing their work can sometimes feel like watching the rushes for a half-completed TV documentary through a gauze curtain: How much do you remember about the war in Guatemala, anyway? If Ramirez-Figueroa rises above that kind of ineffectual ellipsism, it is partly because his work is so deeply rooted in personal memory: The centrepiece here is a recreation of a lost agitprop play originally staged in 1975 by a group of Guatemalan students that included his uncle. But the artist's success is also due to a distinctly visual talent for creating symbols: The play's vivid, clown-like costumes representing the military, the church and society are also on display.

That mastery of symbolism seems to rise from his brave use of his own large and fleshy body in ways that hark back to the masochistic body art of the 1960s and 1970s. In 2013's *Feather Piece* (also shown in a video), he makes a wing for himself by threading big black feathers into the flesh of his arm in a gesture with chilling resonances of a failed flight from torture.

But there is humour, too: *A Brief History of Architecture in Guatemala* is a 2010 performance in which Ramirez-Figueroa and two collaborators clad their naked bodies in foam-board architectural models representing the Mayan pyramid, the colonial church and



Eritrean artist Dawit L. Petros has found a powerful image to represent clashing cultures and the colonial legacy, in a show he called *Spazio Disponibile*, seen here at the Power Plant in Toronto.

TONI HAFKENSCHIED/POWER PLANT

Eritrean artist Dawit L. Petros, who works in Montreal and Chicago, has also found a powerful image to represent clashing cultures and the colonial legacy, in a show he called *Spazio Disponibile*. In the *Rivista Coloniale*, an Italian-language news magazine published in Eritrea during the colonial period, he discovered empty pages set aside for ads. For Petros, these “available spaces” symbolize Eritrea as an empty space in the Italian imagination, and in an exhibition curated by Irene Campolmi, he adapts the magazine pages as coloured reproductions or uses them as the basis for his own abstracted prints.

Like Ramirez-Figueroa, he also looks to the emphatic power of architecture in a video in which he analyzes the fascist style of Montreal’s Casa d’Italia cultural centre, which dates to 1936, while Eritreans recall, without rancour, the period of their Italian occupation.

As always, the Power Plant’s choice of artists for simultaneous solo shows is deft. Without Ramirez-Figueroa’s exuberance to counterbalance it, Petros’s work might feel merely earnest; without Petros’s meditative simplicity, Ramirez-Figueroa might look wacky. Together, they probe the scars left by their tangled geographies.

Work by Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa and Dawit L. Petros is on display at the Power Plant to May 10.