Doris Salcedo
Exhibition Guide
Lead support for Doris Salcedo is provided by the Harris Family Foundation in memory of Bette and Neison Harris: Caryn and King Harris, Katherine Harris, Toni and Ron Paul, Pam and Joe Szokol, Linda and Bill Friend, and Stephanie and John Harris.

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The exhibition is organized by Curator Julie Rodrigues Widholm and Pritzker Director Madeleine Grynsztein, with the support of Curatorial Assistant Steven L. Bridges.

Introduction

For the past three decades, Doris Salcedo has created sculptures, installations, and public interventions that address the experience of loss due to political violence, and the importance of remembering and mourning. As a fundamental part of her process, the artist collects testimonies from those who have suffered at the hands of others. Her minimal, sculptural forms—meticulously crafted in her Bogotá, Colombia, studio—are informed by these personal accounts. Using common materials such as wooden furniture, concrete, rebar, clothing, grass, and rose petals in uncommon ways, Salcedo conveys how trauma makes daily life strangely unfamiliar. Her artwork attempts the difficult task of recovering individual dignity for the many victims, giving presence to the absent body, los desaparecidos (the disappeared), the marginalized, and those who remain invisible in the eyes of greater society.

On this occasion, her first-ever retrospective exhibition, the MCA brings together the largest presentation of Salcedo’s work to date. The exhibition follows a loosely chronological trajectory from the earliest Untitled works to the debut of the newest series, Disremembered, as well as the US debut of the major installation Plegaria Muda. The exhibition also includes an MCA-produced documentary featuring the artist’s major public artworks, many of which were site-specific and temporary. Salcedo’s artworks, in their myriad forms, do not offer answers to the many issues they raise but instead invite contemplation about our shared humanity.
About the Artist

Doris Salcedo was born in 1958 in Bogotá, where she continues to live and work. She earned a BFA at Universidad de Bogotá Jorge Tadeo Lozano (1980), focusing on painting and theater and studying under painter Beatriz González (b. 1938). She earned an MA in 1984 at New York University, and was influenced by the work of Joseph Beuys and his notion of “social sculpture,” which integrated political awareness with art making. In 1985, she returned to Bogotá, where her first solo exhibition was mounted at the Casa de Moneda, Banco de la República. Interested in arts education, she worked as director of the Instituto de Bellas Artes, Cali (1987–88) and taught sculpture and art theory at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (1988–91). Her first solo show in the United States was held at Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, in 1994.

Recognized since the early 1990s as one of the leading sculptors of her generation, Salcedo has works in many museum collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art, National Gallery of Canada, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Tate. She has been featured in numerous exhibitions such as the Carnegie International 1995, Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh; Roteiros, XXIV Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil (1998); Trace, the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art (1999); Documenta 11, Kassel (2002); the 8th International Istanbul Biennial (2003); the Triennial for Contemporary Art, Castello de Rivoli, Turin (2005); and produced the installation Shibboleth at Tate Modern, London, in 2007. Her awards include a Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Grant (1995), the Ordway Prize from the Penny McCall Foundation (2005), Premio “Velázquez” de las Artes Plásticas (2010), and the 9th Hiroshima Art Prize (2014).

Plegaria Muda
2008–10

Plegaria Muda, which translates loosely to “silent prayer,” began with Salcedo’s research into gang violence in Los Angeles. The artist noted how victims and perpetrators of gang violence often share socioeconomic circumstances that lead to conditions of increased violence. They are often viewed as lesser in the eyes of broader society, resulting in a lack of empathy for the loss of their individual lives. The work was also made in response to Salcedo’s experience of mass graves that she visited with grieving mothers in Colombia, who were searching for their missing sons.

Each sculpture is composed of two hand-crafted tables, which approximate the size and shape of a human coffin. One table is inverted upon the other, with live grass growing from an earthlike layer in between. The installation counters the anonymity of victims in mass graves with hand-wrought, unique works, and asserts the importance of each individual’s proper burial—whether in the United States, Colombia, or elsewhere. For Salcedo, the individual blades of grass evoke a sense of optimism: “I hope that, in spite of everything, life might prevail, even in difficult conditions . . . as it does in Plegaria Muda.”
Untitled Works 1986–89

This gallery includes some of Salcedo’s earliest works and re-creates, in part, an installation she developed for the XXXI National Salon for Colombian Artists, held in Medellín in 1987. The sculptures are made primarily from abandoned hospital furniture and reveal the artist’s ongoing interest in combining different objects and materials for their symbolic value.

*Untitled* (1986), partially constructed from a found bed frame, juxtaposes animal tissue, ten plastic dolls, and the severe angularity of the steel frame. Salcedo physically transformed the surfaces and colors of these objects, applying acids or allowing the pieces to weather and collect dust. These works developed out of the artist’s consideration of how Colombian drug cartels have recruited poor boys from Medellín as hired assassins, known in Spanish as *sicarios*.

**Untitled (detail), 1986**
Steel shelving, steel cot, plastic, rubber, wax, and animal fiber
Tate: Purchased 2002
Photo: Orcutt & Van Der Putten

Installation view, Doris Salcedo Studio, Bogotá, 2013
Photo: Oscar Monsalve Pino
Reproduced courtesy of White Cube

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Untitled Works 1989–90

The installation in this gallery re-creates one of Salcedo’s earliest solo exhibitions at the now defunct Galería Garcés Velásquez in Bogotá in 1990. Minimal in nature, the sculptures are made of hospital furniture, such as cots, that have been wrapped in animal fiber. The cots, leaning against the wall, contain white shirts, wrapped like cocoons. This gesture of combining organic and inorganic materials, as well as embedding objects, is seen throughout Salcedo’s work.

These works are joined by eleven sculptures composed of white cotton shirts in plaster and impaled by steel rebar. These sculptures were created in response to two massacres that took place in 1988 in the north of Colombia on the banana plantations of La Negra and La Honduras. Salcedo’s research into these events greatly influenced both visual and material qualities of the resulting artworks. Alluding to the absent human body, the shirts reference the standard dress of workers on these plantations as well as funerary dress for the dead. Stacked in different quantities, these sculptures also appear to take measure of the loss of human life.

**Installation view, Doris Salcedo Studio, Bogotá, 2013**
Photo: Oscar Monsalve Pino
Reproduced courtesy of White Cube
La Casa Viuda
1992–95

Salcedo’s interviews with displaced rural Colombian women forced out of their homes in search of safety resulted in the series La Casa Viuda. Doors without buildings, unmoored from their foundations, evoke the loss of home and lack of shelter that these women and their families were forced to endure.

The title of the series, roughly translated as “the widowed house,” furthers this sense of loss and disruption to the domestic sphere. Embedded within or joining the pieces of furniture, one finds other material remnants that evoke the human presence: a child’s toy chair, human bone, and articles of clothing. Using a strategy employed throughout her work, Salcedo creates uncanny experiences out of the seemingly familiar. As such, the house is transformed into a space of mourning.

La Casa Viuda VI, 1995
Wooden doors, steel chair, and bone
Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem; gift of Shawn and Peter Leibowitz, New York, to American Friends of the Israel Museum
Photo: D. James Dee

Video and Reading Room

The video on view here documents Salcedo’s site-specific and large-scale public projects, which have been a significant part of her artistic production over the past fifteen years. It highlights Salcedo’s interest in moving beyond the boundaries of museums and galleries, inserting her sculptures directly into public spaces—and public consciousness. This gallery also includes a selection of books about the artist as well as titles from her personal library of poets, philosophers, and scholars who have informed her work.

The works featured in the documentary include:

Untitled (1999–2000), a series of three public interventions in the streets of Bogotá was made following the murder of popular political satirist Jaime Garzón.


In Untitled (2003), approximately 1,550 wooden chairs were stacked between two buildings, addressing the history of migration and displacement in Istanbul.

Doris Salcedo
Video still
© MCA Chicago
Untitiled, August 20, 1999
Roses
Dimensions variable
Ephemeral public project, Bogota, 1999

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Neither (2004), an empty room with wire mesh fencing embedded in the walls, situates visitors in a space reminiscent of a detention center, such as the US-run Camp Delta in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Abyss (2005) entailed a feat of engineering that extended the brick ceiling of a gallery in Turin’s Castello di Rivoli nearly to the floor, creating an oppressive environment.

Shibboleth (2007), a 548-foot long crack created in the floor of the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London, drew attention to the postcolonial fissures in society that persist today.

In Acción de Duelo (2007), nearly 24,000 candles were lit in Plaza de Bolívar, Bogotá in response to the death of Colombia’s Valle del Cauca Deputies who had been taken hostage in 2002.

Palimpsest (2013–present), a yet-unrealized major work, addresses victims of gun violence in the United States by layering the names of victims, some written with water that emerge from the ground.

Disremembered
2014

The three sculptures in this gallery represent Salcedo’s newest series. Made of woven raw silk and incorporating nearly 12,000 needles each, these works developed out of years of research into what Salcedo perceives to be society’s inability to mourn.

At the core of this investigation is a lack of empathy that pervades public life, in which one person’s loss is not registered by others, and instead those in mourning become stigmatized, adding to their pain.

When viewed from different angles, the details of the sculpture oscillate between visible and invisible: the glint of the nickel and the sheen of the silk appear and disappear simultaneously like a fading memory. The work thus embodies a sense of paradox. Beautiful yet dangerous, it is unclear whether these sculptures, with their thousands of needles, are intended to protect or to harm.
Atrabiliarios
1992–2004

In the early 1990s, Salcedo continued to research the lasting effects of violence through extensive fieldwork across Colombia. During this time, she learned that female victims were treated with particular cruelty and that shoes were often used to identify remains—especially in the context of los desaparecidos (the disappeared).

In Atrabiliarios, worn shoes—primarily women’s—are encased in niches embedded into the gallery wall, covered by a layer of stretched and preserved animal fiber that is affixed to the wall with medical sutures. The semitranslucent surfaces of the niches obscure their contents, alluding to the fraught relationship between memory and time. The empty boxes are also made of animal fiber and seem to anticipate more deaths to come.

Thou-less
2001–02

This installation marks an important shift in Salcedo’s process away from using found materials. These sculptures are steel casts of a wooden chair, with wood grain hand-etched into the steel. As a result, the solid steel objects appear vulnerable, creased, and crumpled.

These works also play on the anthropomorphic qualities projected onto furniture, especially chairs—which have legs, a back, feet, and so forth. Numerous works in Salcedo’s oeuvre use chairs to conjure the presence and absence, and the strength and fragility of human bodies.
Unland 1995–98

*Unland* is comprised of three distinct yet related works: *Unland: the orphan’s tunic*, *Unland: irreversible witness*, and *Unland: audible in the mouth*, completed in that order. All three works were made in response to interviews Salcedo conducted with orphaned children in northern Colombia, who witnessed the murder of their parents. Each of the works joins together two different tables, creating one elongated form, with human hair and raw silk laboriously sewn through thousands of tiny, follicle-like holes drilled into the surfaces. These fractured, dismembered tables allude to an interrupted, broken family and home—resulting in a life held together by the most precarious of means.

The title, *Unland*, is a word invented by Salcedo to suggest a sense of displacement. She was inspired by the poetry of Paul Celan (Romanian, 1920–1970), whose own words are appropriated for the subtitle of each sculpture. Celan is known for his writings in the aftermath of the Holocaust, a time when language seemed insufficient to address the traumatic events of that era and therefore required reinvention.


Throughout her career, Salcedo has conducted extensive interviews with victims of political violence, transforming their experiences into sculptures that convey a sense of how their everyday lives are disrupted.

The sculptures in this gallery represent Salcedo’s largest body of work to date, spanning nearly two decades. Salcedo used only those materials that would be readily available to these victims, the majority of whom live in rural, impoverished areas of Colombia. She filled domestic furniture—such as armoires, bed frames, dressers, tables, and chairs—with concrete and, at times, clothing, rendering them functionless. She explains: “The way that an artwork brings materials together is incredibly powerful. Sculpture is its materiality. I work with materials that are already charged with significance, with a meaning they have acquired in the practice of everyday life.”
1 Untitled, 1992
Wooden armoire with glass, wooden chairs with upholstery, concrete, and steel
The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Society for Contemporary Art

2 Untitled, 1989
Wooden chair with upholstery, concrete, and steel
Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, gift of Barbara Lee, the Barbara Lee Collection of Art by Women

3 Untitled, 2007
Wooden armoire, wooden chair, concrete, and steel
Private collection

4 Untitled, 1995
Wooden chair with upholstery, concrete, and steel
Cejas Art Ltd: Paul and Trudy Cejas

5 Untitled, 2008
Wooden armoire, wooden cabinet, concrete, and steel
Collection of Clarissa Alcock Bronfman

6 Untitled, 2008
Wooden armoires, wooden cabinet, concrete, and steel
Collection of Jill and Peter Kraus

7 Untitled, 1998
Wooden cabinet with glass, concrete, steel, and clothing
Collection of Lisa and John Miller, fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

8 Untitled, 2008
Wooden armoire, wooden cabinet, concrete, and steel
Tate: Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery 1999

9 Untitled, 1998
Wooden armoire, wooden table, concrete, and steel
Collection of Leo Katz

10 Untitled, 1998
Wooden armoire, wooden chair, concrete, and steel
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1999

11 Untitled, 1998
Wooden armchair, concrete, and steel
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Museum purchase, Robert and Daphne Bransten New Art Purchase Fund

12 Untitled, 1998
Wooden armoire, wooden cabinets, concrete, and steel
Planta, Fundación Sorigué, Spain

13 Untitled, 1998
Wooden armoire, wooden cabinet, concrete, and steel
Collection of Carolyn Alexander

14 Untitled, 1998
Wooden armoire, wooden cabinets, concrete, and steel
Planta, Fundación Sorigué, Spain

15 Untitled, 1989
Wooden nightstand, concrete, and steel
Private collection

16 Untitled, 1992
Wooden armoire, wooden cabinet, concrete, and steel
The Rachofsky Collection

17 Untitled, 2001
Wooden chair with upholstery, concrete, and steel
Planta, Fundación Sorigué, Spain

18 Untitled, 1998
Wooden armoire, wooden cabinet, concrete, and steel
Collection of Jill and Peter Kraus

19 Untitled, 2000
Wooden chair with upholstery, concrete, and steel
Planta, Fundación Sorigué, Spain

20 Untitled, 1995
Wooden armoire, wooden bed frame, concrete, steel, and clothing
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 1995

21 Untitled, 1998
Wooden cabinet, wooden dresser, concrete, and steel
Private collection

22 Untitled, 1995
Wooden armoire, wooden cabinet, concrete, and steel
Private collection

**Untitled Works, 1989–2008**
Described by the artist as a “shroud,” *A Flor de Piel* is composed entirely of rose petals that have been treated and preserved, in effect suspending them between life and death. Utilizing the same surgical stitching method as in *Atrabiliarios*, the petals have been sutured together by hand. The piece developed out of Salcedo’s research into the story of a nurse in Colombia who, after overcoming great obstacles in her life, was kidnapped and tortured to death. The title of the work is an idiomatic Spanish saying used to describe an overt display of emotion, similar to the English expression of wearing one’s heart on one’s sleeve. Salcedo explains that “*A Flor de Piel* started with the simple intention of making a flower offering to a victim of torture, in an attempt to perform the funerary ritual that was denied to her.”

**A Flor de Piel**, 2014
Rose petals and thread
Installation view, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Kazuhiro Uchida

**Related Programs**

For a complete listing of MCA programs and more information regarding those listed here, visit mcachicago.org.

A fully illustrated catalogue is available for purchase at the MCA Store and at mcachicagostore.org.
Hardcover $50 (Members $45)

For more information on the work of Doris Salcedo, visit mcachicago.org/salcedo.

An interactive guide to *Plegaria Muda* is available on the museum’s multimedia publication 4 Stories, at 4stories.mcachicago.org.

**Sat, Feb 21, 3 pm**
MCA Talk
Doris Salcedo
To inaugurate the opening of her MCA exhibition, Doris Salcedo reflects on her practice, processes, and inspirations. She discusses the social and political landscape in which she creates her work as well as specific works on view.

Ticket required

**Tue, Mar 3, noon**
MCA Talk
Julie Rodrigues Widholm, Curator

**Sat, Mar 14, 11 am–3 pm**
Family Day: Loop
Make, explore, and experiment with art that lingers and reverberates, inspired by the exhibition, *Doris Salcedo*. With guest artists 500 Clown.

Free for families with children ages 12 and under

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**Tue, Mar 24, 6 pm**
MCA Studio
Kirsten Leenaars, *Notes on Empty Chairs*
Chicago-based artist Kirsten Leenaars presents the first in a series of in-gallery programs exploring themes of empathy, community, and remembrance.

**Tue, Apr 7, 3–6 pm**
MCA Talk
Doris Salcedo Panel
This interdisciplinary event focuses on the political, social, and philosophical aspects of Salcedo’s work around memory, mourning, violence, and history. Speakers include Rebecca Comay, professor of philosophy and comparative literature at the University of Toronto; Daniel Quiles, assistant professor of art history, theory, and criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez, PhD candidate in art history and criticism at Stony Brook University; and others to be announced.

Presented in partnership with DePaul University.

**Sat, Apr 11, 11 am–3 pm**
Family Day: Lost and Found
Uncover hidden secrets, play with new ideas, and find your creative voice at this Family Day. With guest artists Poems While You Wait.

Free for families with children ages 12 and under
Sat, Apr 11, 3 pm
MCA Talk
Malcolm London
Internationally recognized Chicago poet, activist, and educator Malcolm London presents an in-gallery spoken word performance, and discusses issues related to activism and social justice with Lisa Yun Lee, director of the School of Art and Art History at the University of Chicago Illinois.

Tue, Apr 14, 6 pm
MCA Studio
Kirsten Leenaars, Notes on Empty Chairs
Chicago-based artist Kirsten Leenaars presents the second in a series of in-gallery programs exploring themes of empathy, community, and remembrance.

Sat, Apr 18, 3 pm
MCA Talk
Rebecca Duclos and Daniel Quiles on Doris Salcedo
Rebecca Duclos, graduate dean, and Daniel Quiles, assistant professor of art history, theory, and criticism, both at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, discuss the social and political context surrounding Doris Salcedo's work.

Sat, May 9, 3 pm
MCA Talk
Drea Howenstein and Margarita Saona on Doris Salcedo
Drea Howenstein, associate professor of art education and sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; and Margarita Saona, director of graduate studies, Hispanic and Italian studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, discuss the use of objects, memory, and empathy in Salcedo's work.

Thu, May 14, 6 pm
MCA Talk
Voice of Witness
Mimi Lok, cofounder, executive director, and executive editor of Voice of Witness, a nonprofit whose oral histories illuminate human rights crises, speaks about the topic of witnessing with Max Schoening, editor of the publication Throwing Stones at the Moon, a Voice of Witness publication that recounts the most widespread of Colombia's human rights crises: forced displacement.

Ticket required

Sat, May 16, 3 pm
MCA Talk
Theaster Gates and Lisa Lee on Doris Salcedo
Artist Theaster Gates and Lisa Lee, assistant professor of art history at Emory University, speak to social issues and the use of materials in both Gates's and Salcedo's work.

Tue, May 19, 6 pm
MCA Studio
Kirsten Leenaars, Notes on Empty Chairs
Chicago based artist Kirsten Leenaars presents the third in a series of in-gallery programs exploring themes of empathy, community, and remembrance.