

REVIEWS

ALMA LEIVA: EN LA CELDA

The 6th Street Container - Miami

By Janet Batet

The 6th Street Container in Little Havana is one of those interesting “trouvailles” in our city. Like an intimate room, this experimental space nestled in the rear part of a modest studio complex in the southwest section of Miami has been presenting, since its inception back in 2010, a very interesting exhibition program with an emphasis on emerging artists and alternative projects.

En la Celda (Inside the Prison Cell), by Honduran-born, Miami-based artist Alma Leiva, is no exception. The touching installation is an allegory of the pressing issue of violence in Central America. The region, which is enduring post-war violence, gang-related crime and drug cartels, is, according to the United Nations Development Programme's Report on Human Development in 2009-2010, home to the highest rate of non-political crime in the world.

Born in San Pedro Sula, an important industrial city in the northwest of Honduras that has become the third-most-violent city in the world, Leiva is interested in portraying the alienated daily life, generated by the terror of death.

Her installation currently at the 6th Street Container illustrates the plight of the common Central American family that, terrorized by escalating violence, is forced to live enclosed in its own house, which becomes bunker and prison at once.

Each element that articulates the overwhelmingly heavy atmo-

sphere has been carefully chosen to represent depressing aspects of this sordid reality. These include boarded windows as symbols of the barricades; TV news replaying instances of death and deportations in a fateful loop; a humble altar and crucifix that refer to Catholic faith and how God is the only possible salvation; embroidery as a nod to Mayan heritage and how ongoing gender roles encourage violence in the domestic setting; and family photos in front of an empty table waiting for those loved ones to return.

En la Celda is part of the ongoing series *Celdas (Prison Cells)*, which Leiva has been working on since 2009. Using the popular imagery of Central American culture as its inspiration, these striking imaginary spaces re-create the daily struggles of this forgotten region where violence, gangsterism, human trafficking, drug cartels, extreme poverty, migration and repatriation generate an extreme conflict that has now lasted for more than five decades¹.

Taken as a whole, Leiva's installation seeks to process this anguish and raise awareness about its effects—a reality often ignored by media only interested in sensationalism. ■

(August 20 – September 18, 2011)

NOTES

1. The outbreak of the armed conflict in Guatemala in 1962 marked the beginning of the Central American crisis. In the 1970s, several civil wars erupted in the region, and in the mid-1980s the Esquipulas Peace Agreement started a long movement towards pacification. The still-persistent consequences of these civil wars, along with the militarization of an impoverished region, the expansion of drug cartels from Mexico and Colombia and the massive deportation of Central Americans from the United States, are some of the factors that have contributed to the increased violence in the region.

Janet Batet is a curator and art critic based in Miami.



Alma Leiva, *En La Celda (Inside the Cell)*, 2011, video installation, dimensions variable.