Conjuring a Revolutionary Icon in Art

Art + Weekend

The works of Leandro Katz constitute an archival investigation into the events surrounding Che Guevara’s capture and execution.

Valentina Di Lorenzo 3 years ago

MEXICO CITY — His eyes remain an infinite abyss. Dark and half-open, they seem to gaze out into the distance as if looking for a horizon line in the fog. The parted lips are spread slightly, enough to reveal the beginning of an expression that seems materialized on the revolutionary’s face. His mustache rests on a stubble, its bristles frayed and wild like the dead man’s subverted trousers. The remains have been placed on top of a cement slab in a small mausoleum erected by journalists. Among the cenotaph encasing the body of this iconic figure is a Bolivian soldier in military uniform. He looks up, not as a deferential gesture but to indicate what lies before him. His right arm is extended; a pointed silver finger (it is not clear whether it is the right or left hand) points toward the mannequin’s chest. This haunting photograph was taken during a 1967 press conference in Valparaiso, Chile following the capture and execution of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, a poignant moment following the announcement of his death. Joko Degen showed its composition to Richard J. Frank’s “The Anatomy Lessons of Dr. Nicolas Tulp” (1573) and to Mannington’s “The Lamentation of Christ” (ca. 1490).

Although internationally celebrated by Kenner and central to Leandro Katz’s work, this image is not the outcome of Projeto para o desenho da estatua de Che Guevara (Project for the drawing of the statue of Che Guevara) in which Katz’s solo exhibition of the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUSEC) in Mexico City. The exhibition began with an enlarged passport photograph of Adolfo Mena Granados, the identity of Che Guevara assumed when he escaped Bolivia via El Paso in 1956. It is hard to believe that the embroidered and bearded Che could become this bearded man, sporting a pensive look and furrowed brows as he sits across the battlefield beneath the stars. His gaze is on a man in glasses who seems to be a revolutionary stereotype, to whom he is linked.

Leandro Katz nostalgically watched the photograph of Che Guevara’s corpse in the letter part of the 1960s, while scrolling through his collections of photography in New York. Captivated by the missing pieces of the image, as well as the license that still enthralled Che in an aura of mystery — the revolutionary’s body had disappeared following the 1967 press conference and his remains were not found and restored to Cuba until 1997 — Katz embarked on a 12-year-long research project to find the reasons. His research project was a combination of the experiences and further research into historical events surrounding Che’s capture and execution at the hands of U.S.-backed Bolivian forces, a contribution that cannot be underestimated. The inclusively created Projeto para o desenho da estatua de Che Guevara, which also includes Pinar, Le bate de Vermelho e o Projeto Colombo — Studies of work that reconstruct the geographies that constitute the colonial frontier in Central America — includes a vast collection of Che Guevara’s photojournalist’s photographs, as well as a comprehensive selection of the testimonies of the men who contributed to its creation.

Through Projeto para o desenho da estatua de Che Guevara, Katz, who had been a student of Che’s guerrilla counterpart in Bolivia, figures such as Teresa “Tere” Baskin, the only woman who fought alongside Che in 1956. One of Katz’s most valuable accomplishments was to track down and identify Pedro Alvarado, the Bolivian photojournalist who captured Che’s post-mortem portrait and whose name was largely unknown. Katz interviewed him for the eponymous documentary film El fotografo che guevara (1997), also on view at MUSEC.

Katz’s exhaustive history recounts the tightly wound fibers of the Che Guevara myth by going to the source and to the man who contributed to its creation. Though the title is posthumously constructed, accompanied by Garcia Gaitán’s endearingly distanced account, it provides Alvarado the space to describe certain aspects of his photographer’s construction. The Bolivian military’s decision to burn Che’s eyes open, for instance, “[c]aused [J] to photograph not a concrete calmer but a person who seemed to be alive and who gave the impression of being Che.” Rather than emphasizing the planned visit to Che’s martyr, Alvarado’s frontman account of his responsibilities that day in Valparaiso removes a more transparent trace of the image.

Projeto para o desenho da estatua de Che Guevara is currently on view at the Fundación Franz in Buenos Aires, inaugurating its new space, Press. However, only the MUSEC exhibition, curated by Ana maido de la Garza, Cecilia Bahuoz, and Claudia Medina as part of MiM — a series of programs commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Mexican Student Movement of 1948 — includes three additional bodies of work, which extend Katz’s artistic practice beyond biography and into a broader Latin American context.
[to Projects Catherine] (1976–1995), drawings produced by Frederic Catherwood during his 19th-century expeditions in Yucatán and the Maya world connotes with Kaci's photographs of the same ruin, taken more than a century later. A similar ledge between past and present exists in Kaci's film Periphery (2005), which alternates images of the ancient site with designer Greg E. Combs (1955) with footage of milling workers in the neighboring banana plantations. It is a model of the juxtaposition of the harsh working conditions in Latin America with the persistent romanticization of Central America culture. The common decision to preserve these works in Mexico, a country whose anthropological heritage is ever present in the collective memory, underscores the cultural specificity of Kaci's practice and its resonance within different contexts — the aspect of his work allows him to forge personal ties with his viewers.

For those who remember Alberto's famous photograph, the exhibition still evokes, on a particularly deep level, the visuals in a small gallery leading to the television room for Eladio and his queen. In black and white images, the complex archives of Alberto's photographs of Che's body reveal some unsettling details from the photographs contained by Kaci's images, such as the body of El Che and Willy's two guardians who had fallen with Che during the ambush in La Higuera, as they lie, reflecting dust, on the floor of the homely room.

In his interview with Kaci, Freddy Alborno mentions the experience that occurred while he was photographing Che's body. A Bolivian soldier was brought in a copy of a Cuban magazine featuring a picture of Che and held it up to his face, as to overcome the corpse's identity for the audience. Kaci must have sensed the prophetic aspect of this energetic figural presence, one that somehow foretold the revolutionary's afterlife in the historical imagination, its resonance to identification, and the difficulty of distinguishing between man and myth. Projecto para el día que me quieras y la danza de fantasmas invites the ghosts of history to MÉXICO, asking that we face them in our memories and in the images left behind by the past.

Laudrino Rafa: Proyecto para el día que me quieras y la danza de fantasmas constituent the Almán Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (UAM/Iztapalapa, Mexico City) through July 22.