

## HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

## Conjuring a Revolutionary Icon in Art

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

 Valentina Di Liscia 9 hours ago



Still from Leandro Katz's documentary film *El día que me quieras* (1997) (photography by Oliver Sautana, image courtesy of Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC))

this ersatz morgue is a Bolivian colonel in military uniform. He bows his head, not as a deferential gesture but to indicate what lays before him. His right arm is extended; a pointed index finger lingers on the body's motionless chest. This haunting photograph was taken during a 1967 press conference in Vallegrande, Bolivia following the capture and execution of Ernesto "Che" Guevara. In a poignant essay following the announcement of Che's death, John Berger likened its composition to Rembrandt's "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp" (1632) and to Mantegna's "The Lamentation of Christ" (ca. 1480).

Although internationally circulated by Reuters and central to Leandro Katz's work, this image is not at the entrance of *Proyecto para el día que me quieras y la danza de fantasmas* (*Project for the day you'll love me and the dance of ghosts*), Katz's solo exhibition at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico City. The exhibition begins instead with an enlarged passport photograph of Adolfo Mena González, the identity Che Guevara assumed when he entered Bolivia via São Paulo in 1966. It is hard to believe that the disheveled and bearded Che could become this bespectacled, balding man, sporting a pedestrian suit and tie, much less cross the border undetected in his guise. Sterile in its anonymity, González's picture forces us to imagine an unrecognizable Che in a foreign identity; to summon a Che not readily culled from the visual repertoire of the mainstream; to awaken and disrupt the historical imaginary.



Leandro Katz, "Adolfo Mena González" (1993/2018) (photography by Oliver Sautana, image courtesy of Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC))

Leandro Katz rediscovered the photograph of Che Guevara's corpse in the latter part of the 1980s, while sifting through the archives of photography agencies in New York. Galvanized by the stirring power of the image, as well as the lacunae that still enveloped Che in an aura of mystery — the revolutionary's body had disappeared following the 1967 press conference and his remains were not found and repatriated to Cuba until 1997 (and their legitimacy continues to be questioned) — Katz embarked on his 22-year-long research project "El día que me quieras." The project comprises nine related installations produced and cumulatively exhibited between 1993 and 2007 and presented together for the first time as part of MUAC's sweeping exhibition of the Argentine conceptual artist. On the surface, these works constitute an arduous historical and archival investigation into the events surrounding Che's capture and execution at the hands of U.S.-backed Bolivian forces, a contribution that cannot be

understated. But the incisively curated *Proyecto para el día que me quieras*, which also includes *Paradox*, *La huella de Viernes* and *El Proyecto Catherwood* — bodies of work that reconstruct the genealogies that constitute the colonial footprint in Central America — elucidates and celebrates the larger implications of the artist's practice. In his unearthing of the various photographic incarnations of Che, Katz conjures the phantasmagorical processes of memory-making, exposing the inner-workings of mythologies.

Through *Proyecto para el día que me quieras*, he tells the individual stories of Che's guerrilla counterparts in Bolivia, figures such as Tamara "Tania" Bunker, the only woman who fought alongside Che in 1967. One of Katz's most valuable accomplishments was to track down and identify Freddy Alborta, the Bolivian photojournalist who captured Che's post-mortem portrait and whose name was largely unknown until Katz interviewed him for the eponymous documentary film *El día que me quieras* (1997), also on view at MUAC.



Installation view, *Proyecto para el día que me quieras y la danza de fantasmas*, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (photography by Oliver Sautana, image courtesy of Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC))

account of his experiences that day in Vallegrande renders a more transparent version of the events.



Leandro Katz, "Número Señor de Matía" (1993) (image courtesy of the artist)

Katz's revisionist history unravels the tightly wound fibers of the Che Guevara myth by giving a face and a name to the man who contributed to its creation. Though the film is poetically constructed, accompanied by Carlos Gardel's melancholic intonations, it provides Alborta the space to divulge certain aspects of his image's construction. The Bolivian military's decision to leave Che's eyes open, for instance, "[...] helped [him] to photograph not a common cadaver but a person who seemed to be alive and who gave the impression of being a Christ." Rather than emphasizing the glamorized vision of Che the Martyr, Alborta's firsthand account of his experiences that day in Vallegrande renders a more transparent version of the events. *Proyecto para el día que me quieras* is concurrently on view at the Fundación Proa in Buenos Aires, inaugurating its new space, Proa21. However, only the MUAC exhibition, curated by Amanda de la Garza, Cecilia Rabossi, and Cuauhtémoc Medina as part of M68 — a series of programs commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Mexican Student Movement of 1968 — includes three additional bodies of work, which extend Katz's artistic practice beyond Argentina and into a broader Latin American context.

In *Proyecto Catherwood* (1985-1995), drawings produced by Frederick Catherwood during his 19th-century expeditions in Yucatán and the Mayan world converse with Katz's photographs of the same ruins, taken more than a century later. A similar bridge between past and present exists in Katz's film *Paradox* (2001), which alternates images of the ancient stone sculpture Dragón de Quiriguá with footage of toiling workers in the neighboring banana plantations; it is a candid and timely juxtaposition of the harsh working conditions in Latin America with the persistent romanticization of Central American culture. The curators' decision to present these works in Mexico, a country whose archeological inheritance is ever-present in the collective memory, underscores the cultural specificity of Katz's practice and its resonance within distinct contexts — this aspect of his work allows him to forge personal ties with his viewers.



Leandro Katz, "Casa de las Mojaras, a la manera de Catherwood (Yucatán)" (1985), silver gelatin print, edition 9 of 30 (courtesy of Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC))

For those who remember Alborna's famous photograph, the exhibition will resonate on a particularly deep level. Installed in a small gallery leading to the screening room for *El día que me quieras* are 66 black and white images, the complete archive of Alborna's photographs of Che's body. Several of them reveal unsettling details absent from the photograph circulated by Reuters, such as the bodies of El Chino and Willy, two guerrillas who had fallen with Che during the ambush in La Higuera, as they lie, collecting dust, on the floor of the laundry room.

In his interview with Katz, Freddy Alborna mentions in passing something that occurred while he was photographing Che's body. A Bolivian military man brought out a copy of a Cuban magazine featuring a picture of Che and held it up to his face, as if to corroborate the corpse's identity for the media. Katz must have sensed the prophetic nature of this strategic but brutish gesture, one that somehow foreshadowed the revolutionary's elusiveness in the historical imagination, his resistance to identification, and the difficulty of distinguishing between man and myth. *Proyecto para el día que me quieras y la danza de fantasmas* invites the ghosts of history to MUAC, asking that we face them in our memories and in the images left behind by the past.

Leandro Katz: *Proyecto para el día que me quieras y la danza de fantasmas continues at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (Insurgentes Sur 3000, Centro Cultural Universitario, 04510 Coyoacán, Mexico City) through July 29.*