

# José Gabriel Fernández & Ruth Liberman

at Momenta Art

by Mónica de la Torre

The reason why the works by these two artists were paired together was not immediately apparent when viewing their recent exhibition at Momenta, and that was precisely one of the show's major achievements. Looking at each individual piece was an experience parallel to that of hearing the intelligent dialogue that—one can intuit—has been taking place between the two artists for quite some time.

Ruth Liberman's text-based work appropriates writings of people who have witnessed or have been victims of historical atrocities ranging from the Holocaust to police brutality and the suppression of the American left. In some of pieces she rewrites selected excerpts of diaries and letters on blank sheets of paper; in others, with a dental instrument instead of a pencil, she places the text on carbon typewriter film ribbon. Even before reading their content, the way in which Liberman has painstakingly written down the texts evokes the injuries and affliction that the authors of the different texts have had to endure. Many elements in her work are subtly thought-provoking: the writing goes from being legible to being illegible in the same way that sometimes it's black type on white surfaces and others it's white type on black surfaces. This flux seems to indicate tension between two poles: invention and memory. In most cases one can make out a few words which seem particularly relevant: shootings, stars, truth, indignation of citizens, prison, pen, jargon, nervous, the atmosphere.

A third type of work by Liberman that was displayed at the entrance of the gallery probed the notion of witnessing in a different way. The artist clipped captions of photographs printed in different newspapers, which referred to a date in 1945 when General Patton ordered that 1,000 German civilians be forced to stand and look at a truckload of dead prisoners at the Buchenwald camp, whose "horrors they made no attempt to prevent." She blew up and mounted the captions without the photographs, thus not only representing the loss of the prisoners' lives, but also addressing the complexity of recording and depicting these atrocities photographically. Liberman's piece emphasizes the fact that both cameras and newspapers are anything but neutral.

The issue of the spectacle of violence is one that has interested José Gabriel Fernández for a long time. Violence—like sexual indeterminacy—is both alluring and repulsive, and throughout different eras societies have come up with different rituals to fulfil a human need for catharsis. Fernández, who was born in Venezuela, has been exploring the practice of bullfighting for the last couple of years. A highly allegorical ritual—both a sport and an art, Apollinean and Dionysian—it's a staple of Spain's national identity that has been certainly welcomed in Latin American countries. Paradoxically, matadors are quintessential alpha-males who present themselves in highly feminine ways within societies that wouldn't allow that behavior in other men. In the past, Fernández has spent long seasons in Mexico City, gazing at the bullfighters through a video camera while they, rather homoerotically, are dressed by their male helpers. This art was in the details of matador rituals; yet recently, as if it had arrived at an endgame, it has gone in the opposite direction. Now his pieces consist of monochrome abstract sculptures derived from bullfighters' gestures. Devoid of the color and of pyrotechnics of their suits of lights (their traditional outfit, called *traje de luces* in Spanish, because of their sequins) what remains in the sculptures is the mere shape of the

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capets and jackets in motion. what remains in the sculptures is the mere shape of the capets and jackets in motion.

The loss present in Fernández's sculptures is concomitant to the loss that Liberman's pieces address. When watching Fernández's work one wonders who's more beastly, the bullfighter or the bull. Liberman's pieces pose the question differently by presenting various ways in which those in power have created the dangerous bull that should be annihilated for the sake of "civilization." Both capture this universal gesture: the bullfighter needs the bull in the same way that a legal system needs criminals and one is not more brutal than the other is. Both Fernández and Liberman have an acute sense of the historical moment in which they are making their art. Aware of the fact that a tight focus on identity could be limiting, they've stripped the work of personalizing details and instead dealt with larger historical patterns. What's most striking is that they achieve this in a way that is everything but grandiose.

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