

Luis Camnitzer - Carla Stellweg Gallery, New York, New York

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CARLA STELLWEG GALLERY

Luis Camnitzer's work has often seemed a bit understated. His often tiny objects are graceful, yet seem to promise great moment without necessarily bringing it off convincingly. "The Book of Walls," a linked series of 11 works, while attractive enough in its muted violence, suffers from such thinness. The work deals with the political struggles in Latin America and, in particular, amnesty laws passed to protect South American military and police officials from prosecution in countries like Uruguay, where the artist was raised.

The individual works, with titles like El Muro de las Intimaciones (Wall of intimations, 1994-95), El Muro de la Incredulidad (Wall of incredulity, 1994-95), and El Muro de las Salidas (Wall of exits, 1994-95), are modestly scaled wall-mounted sculptures (or assemblages) of various materials, sometimes found, sometimes hand-worked by the artist. El Muro de las Metas (Wall of aims, 1994-95), for example, was a knife with a text photo-etched on it, stuck into the wall. Although the title of the piece suggests knife-throwing and hitting the mark, the text - "He knew the place with such precision that he usually arrived distracted and without worrying too much about . . ." - adds the sinister suggestion of someone walking too casually through a dangerous homeland and being stabbed in the back.

El Muro de los Instrumentos (Wall of instruments, 1994-95), small wood and brass forms hung on the wall, more straightforwardly suggests an array of strange torture devices. El Muro del Silencio (Wall of silence, 1994-95) consists of a piece of whitened glass with "el muro del silencio" engraved upon it; the piece hauntingly and simply evokes at once the silence of repressed speech and the ghostly paleness into which identity fades without self-expression. El Muro de las Identidades Perdidas (Wall of lost identities, 1994-95) is a bottle with a cork in it, enclosing a black and white photograph of a child that has been encased in plastic resin. It seems to draw an analogy between the individual in a repressive society and a biological specimen in a jar of formaldehyde. The child, its life reduced to a two-dimensional, black and white form, is dead before it has had much of a chance to live.

For an artist protesting institutionalized torture in his homeland, there is an odd lack of heat in the work. Perhaps this reflects the fact that Camnitzer has lived in New York since 1964. One leaves with a slightly uneasy feeling that the commitment found in the work is less than fully convincing. Is it really activism when it could have been based on reading the Long Island edition of the New York Times?

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