The Retablos of Edilberto Jiménez

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Victor Vich

(Translation by Danielle Geary)

"I was born when the cold winds were blowing." Edilberto Jiménez

The Ayacucho retablo has changed dramatically as a result of life events and experiences. Its most prominent architects were not strangers to the period of violence, as they experienced it firsthand. I want to comment on a set of Edilberto Jimenez retablos in what we might call an "ethics of testimony," or an act by which authors take responsibility for that which they represent, believing that their goal is to reveal the truth and to discover a new range of possible truths by doing so. It is my belief that these retablos are worth contemplation, for they represent something forbidden to reveal, yet urgent to be shown. They are like uncontrived storytellers that did not come about through the beauty of traditional art or history books. Their stunning images use various artistic techniques to tell of horrific events that are, by definition, always indescribable.

The Ayacuchano retablo dramatically changed the rhythm of life events. Its most prominent architects have not been strangers to the period of violence, whether as witnesses or as a result of the exodus they had to endure when circumstances demanded it. Among them is the predominant Jiménez family. Florentino, the family patriarch, became famous around 1940 in Alcamenqa’s surrounding communities for his skills as a sculptor of retablos. He learned the art from his grandfather and father, and then spent his life restoring the images of the churches in the area, developing and producing crossroads retablos that eventually became very famous in Ayacucho and then in Lima.

His seven children inherited the trade and would gradually change the aesthetics of classical retablos over the following years. They all broke away from the traditional forms of sculpting, which can be observed in the structure of the box, the colors used in the composition that give the character movement, and, above all, in the subjects represented. Today, Nicario, Claudio, Edilberto, Eleudora, Mabilón, Odo, and Neil are some of the main representatives of an art that "in the most adverse conditions, resurfaces,

1 Retablos are pieces of Andean folk art in the form of boxes that represent religious, historical, or everyday events in the lives of the indigenous people of Peru and Bolivia.
surprisingly, in the region most tormented by war for more than a decade” (Degregori, 1992, p. 4).

In this essay, I want to comment on two series of retablos created by Edilberto Jiménez that are currently at the Institute of Peruvian Studies (IEP). If one compares Edilberto’s collection to that of his brothers, even though it is not very prolific or large in number of pieces, it is of unmatched artistic value. The first series was at the end of the last century (and in the midst of violence in Ayacucho) and the second was the result of the testimonies collected in the area known as the “dog ear” north of Ayacucho. Edilberto is not only a sculptor but also an anthropologist by profession (graduated from the Universidad Nacional San Cristobal de Huamanga) and author of one of the most successful books about that period of national history (Jiménez, 2009).

For this reason, most of his retablos have focused on depicting political violence, and have done so uncensored and with unusual expression. In all cases, these images have emerged from his life experiences in Ayacucho and what he witnessed in three decades of constant travel throughout different rural communities of the region. Amazing creative energy, unmistakable restlessness, and an ethical commitment to the memory of his country are evident in all of his pieces, from beginning to end.

I am interested in discussing these retablos in spite of what Agamben (2000) might call an “ethics of testimony,” as an author who takes responsibility for what he says, believing that speaking the truth reveals a new range of possibilities to further potential conversation on the subject. I argue that the works of Edilberto Jiménez bring knowledge to the observer, as they boldly lie between what is forbidden to say and what remains to be proven. These pieces show substance that has been hidden, constituting a kind of speech that was not aesthetically programmed into the traditional art of the time. In all respects, his images transgress many classical patterns and find new ways to tell the story of horrific situations that, by definition, are indescribable.

What memory is depicted in these Ayacuchano retablos? What are the form and interest that guide his life work? What type of language does he choose to tell the story of what really happened through the eyes of the victims? Let’s begin with a piece called Leva (see Fig.1), which was created in 1978 and shows how many young Andean were forced into military service. This is an image constructed two years before political violence began, yet it should be analyzed because it describes the tension leading up to the aggression.

In the Andean imagery, the Peruvian military rarely appear as an ally of the people, but rather as a foreign, hostile, and often violent institution. In many renowned Peruvian novels, it is portrayed as abusive and, indeed, as a partner of political or economic powers that has kept the Andean population marginalized and socially excluded. In fact, this is the case of Deep Rivers by Jose Maria Arguedas, The world is Wide and Far Away by Ciro Alegría, or the series Silent War by Manuel Scorza, to name a few.

Shining Path, a Peruvian communist guerrilla force, took advantage of this perception and gave a radical speech proposing that the people confront the military further. Through this speech, people in many rural communities identified with the Peruvian people, as they had had many painful experiences against the Peruvian government. One such familiarity, for example, was a series of levas that occurred during the months of November and December and that were experienced (and suffered) at the establishment of an authoritarian government.
The retablo in Fig.1 portrays a symbol of such a relationship. In fact, it was given to Edilberto’s father in the years of his youth and serves as the testimony of what Flor­
entino had told his children. In it, we see the violent way the army was recruiting future
soldiers and the grief of their relatives. We see the injustice of the situation but, more
importantly, we are witness to the power disparity: while the military use guns and ride
horses, parents can only feebly protest as their children have no choice but to accept the
agony of their circumstances.

As I said at the beginning, this retablo was made two years before the start of polit­
ical violence but alluded to a situation of antagonism between the people and the state.
Moreover, its story is important because during the years of violence the levas’ ferocity
continued. While the military began levas as a part of its own institution, Shining Path
imitated the custom and also kidnapped young peasants against their will and their
families’. When the senderistas (Shining Path’s communist guerrillas) entered the
communities, they selected and forced young men to go with them without possibility
of a protest.

Thus, this retablo represents a dramatic situation that includes parrots flying
through the air (which I will expand on later) and a river that divides the scene into
two. That river, in effect, would come to be a permanent presence in the works of
Edilberto and, as we observe it again in another part of this period, The Flower Of The
Broom (Fig.2), whose images portray the antagonistic relationship that had been estab­
lished (during those years) between peasants and the government.

As is known, the revolt of Huanta occurred eleven years before Shining Path took
up arms, but was an episode that permeated deep into the memory of the people and
served as an argument for further confrontations. This protest was a result of a decree abolishing free education for students who had failed a course during the school year. After its enactment, this decree was rejected across the country, but especially in rural areas where education was a symbol of solid internalization and an agent of modernization and progress. Low income farmers protested loudly, especially in Huanta where the march ended in a violent struggle that left more than 50 dead. Finally, the law had to be abolished by the government. Still, Ayacucho peasants were shocked by the violent reaction of the state and its inability to understand that protests did not warrant such a degree of oppression. An investigator, Carlos Ivan Degregori (1990), argues that it was this day that Shining Path came to realize the possibilities of their mission and that it would behoove them to take advantage of the peasant unrest of the time.

**Figure 2: The Flower of the Broom**

![Image: The Flower of the Broom](Photo by author)

In the picture above, we see the two distinct groups. This is evident by the place, the type of dress, and the interests each is defending. They are two completely opposing groups. If political theory holds that the state is the representative body of the nation and that it works well when the nation is effectively represented by the state, then this piece shows exactly the opposite. It shows pure externalization as the Peruvian government exerts violence against the people, is hostile to popular interests, and uses the militia to establish its authority via violence and the absoluteness of social domination.

But it's not just two opposing groups in a battle; it's a battle unequal and therefore unfair. While farmers protest with banners and chants ("They give you boots, books are
expensive,” says the banner of one character in the painting), the military directly attacks the protesters without mercy. Then we see dead bodies jumping into the air to the surprise of the public. It is dramatic realism that is a sign of a bigger tragedy. Again, the river divides the piece in two, except now it’s painted red because the tension between the state and society has begun to acquire shades of tragedy. The central theme of the composition is that of a mother who is not afraid to confront the “sinchis,” (a specially trained police anti-terrorist group) who continue shooting even though they, too, have injured even their own group members.

Later made into a very famous song, Huanta’s protest was the event that explains or symbolizes what came later. That day, both society and the state became more polarized, their differences deepened, and the nation of Peru, which was never a community of equals to begin with, began to crumble more radically. The next retablo (Fig.3), entitled Death, shows the hole the people were descending into, increasing in size and disintegrating all sense of belonging to the national community.

Figure 3: Death

Source: Photo by author

The key to this piece is in the relationship established between the parrots flying through the air and corn planted in the ground. As is known, the peasants hate parrots because they destroy all their crops. For the peasants, parrots represent an evil force that ruins the work you’ve done and that can ultimately force you into extreme poverty (see Fig.5).

Thus, the retablo portrays their images using a clever counterpoint: the parrots represent the military and the corn depicts the Andean communities destroyed by them. These images are sparse, but are there to emphasize the meaning of the story and to be both realistic and protagonistic. This is, in effect, the scene of an unjust confinement of a character taken prisoner, not to investigate him or to make a judgment under existing law, but to kill him cruelly and secretly.
Edilberto Jiménez created this retablo in the early 1980s when he saw the mothers of the missing searching for the bodies of their relatives in places like “the Infiernillo” (a popular stream off the Huatatas river) or Purakti, a landfill where some bodies had been thrown away and eaten by dogs (see Fig.4). Since 1983, these places have been known as “body dumps,” as many mothers say they’d often go there in search of their children (ANFASEP, 2007).

Now, why are the soldiers disguised as military Franciscan priests? What is the effect of such symbolism in regard to the work? What kind of meanings does the representation depict? First, I must say that this piece was made to circumvent censorship when the military entered many houses in Huamanga to conduct searches and find information, especially in the neighborhood of Santa Ana where the Jiménez family had their studio. Edilberto told of a time when, due to extreme social tension, he decided to dress up the characters as Franciscans to escape censorship and avoid major problems. Once in Lima and able to paint, he used colors to reveal the true identity of these characters: boots, a green rifle, and robes with double cuffed sleeves.

On the other hand, we know that the Franciscans were the first religious order that came to America and that one of them, the priest Valverde, was there the initial day of Pizarro’s conquest of Peru. Five centuries later and in a political context where the church was no longer an ally of the people, the piece continues to represent a power that was always against the peasant village. In any case, the symbol set is very complex, but clearly stated and formally impeccable. It shows how rural communities remained confronted by various powers during those years. The entire image is set in the
evening and stands out with a captivating, bloody red color announcing the black of the night.

The retablo entitled *Dream of a Huamanca Woman* (Fig.6) is similar and tells the story of a dream that becomes tragic: the disappearance of a loved one. At that time, the political class declared a "state of emergency" to give the armed forces full control against the fight to establish a social order and virtually ignore what was happening in Ayacucho. To make matters worse, the church would not address any complaint related to human rights, and peasants were left unprotected, with no one to speak for them. Today, we know that about 15,000 people went missing. This image tells the story of one of them.

**Figure 6: Dream of a Huamanca Woman**

![Image of a retablo](image-url)

Source: Photo by author
This hill is called the Rasuwilca. A female, Apu, is protecting the Ayacucho region. In her womb is a homeless woman whose dream reveals the truth of what happened. The woman also sits in a pool of blood whose drops, like flowers, are part of the story. There we can see four distinct moments: the arrest, imprisonment, death (either because dogs devoured the body or because the body was later thrown to them) and the ascent of the soul to heaven by an archangel who appears as an intermediary figure. A God father, however, also finds himself torn between Christian pantheon and the sun, and the Andean religiosity moon.

It is a retablo of the lost but, above all, it is about re-establishing the truth of what really happened. The piece represents a dream that reveals the truth as well as an explanation that is impossible to find elsewhere. That is to say, it is only through the images of her dreams that this woman is able to overcome the power structure that hides the veracity of what happened. Put another way: if the piece is a dream of a place where truth is revealed, then the images suggest that reality is covered by power and ideology. The allegory of this piece, where the colors black and red symbolize the protagonists, is to escape and expose the true story of what happened.

Thus, the work proposes that we cannot directly access the hidden reality due to the prejudice contained therein. It describes sleep as a courageous tool against ideology, i.e., as a place that reveals a society of outcasts against a dominant force that always covers up the truth of what really happened.

But while relations between the state and the rural population were increasingly crumbling and violence had been historically inherited, the fact is that Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) was not formed as a group to do justice and defend the rural population; on the contrary, they attacked the people further. Luminoso not only killed those who did not adhere to its logic; they intensified local conflicts by spreading rumors to polarize the people. This is why the violence in Peru was also violence "between neighbors" that resulted in fighting within their own communities (Theidon, 2004). The next retablo (Fig7 & Fig.8), titled Yerbabuena, after the community of the same name, illustrates the situation.

As we know, Shining Path began the period of violence, mercilessly attacking the Peruvian state and then the civilian population. According to the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC), Shining Path was responsible for the most deaths during these years of upheaval. This was a terrorist organization that justified death in the name of building a new society. As has been well studied, the senderistas remained under a delirium of ideology, void of morals and motivated by a perverse logic of war and militarization (Degregori, 1989; Gorriti, 1991).

"There is no real cruelty but in the idea" (Badiou, 2005, p. 151), in fact, was a dogma that mobilized the senderistas, or at least their main leaders. Put another way: if the development of political identities in Peru was a noticeable shift from "race" to "class," it is fair to say that Shining Path radically catapulted from "class" to "party" in a single jump. Shining Path made differentiations between the people not by ethnicity or even economic class, but rather as a privilege for "party" members as a superior and indisputable entity. The dogmatism of the senderistas was that the only valid distinction was whether people belonged to the party organization. If they were not members of the party, it didn't matter whether they were "poor," "Indians" or "peasants;" they were worthy of death.
The retablo in Fig. 7 portrays a slaughter against the peasant population that occurred in Chunguiin in 1984, in the community of Yerbabuena, which was organized to resist continuous attacks by Shining Path. The image comes from the testimony of a survivor, María Alarcon Ccorahua, who Edilberto Jiménez himself came across on one of his travels. She told of how the senderistas locked up all the local community and then chose a few at a time to beat, shoot, and stab in various ways. It was revenge for the lack of support they had received from the people—a reckoning for the confrontation with the peasant patrols. The massacre lasted about four hours and ended with the murdering of the wounded, looted houses, and burned villages. It all happened before the eyes of some children who, in the retablo, are fleeing through the hills and later serve as witnesses of the massacre. María was one of these children.

“The party has a thousand eyes and ears” was a popular phrase that the senderistas circulated to deter any attempt of resistance against them. The horrific situation in rural communities is cleverly depicted by the many eyes that cover the sky, representing infernal and sinister undertones.

The deeply disturbing expression of the retablo (Fig. 7) is intended to portray something that occurred repeatedly throughout the armed conflict: Peruvian soldiers raping peasant women. This was a common practice that deserves further investigation, as the armed forces have always tried to cover it up (Falconi & Agüero, 2003). During the most violent of years, rape was systematic and widespread. This piece succeeds in bringing the issue to light through a scene filled with realism and terror.
The setting is nightfall. The color black invades the work as does the color red, painted across the sky from end to end. Shown here is men’s violence against women. Not only do they rape the women; they kill them and throw their bodies into the abyss. It is the presentation of a power that enforces cruelty and respects no one. The piece shows the precise moment when everything moral is suspended and “only the strong” have merit. It is, in essence, a time of barbarism: a feral time in which sexual violence becomes a war strategy.

"Where there were soldiers, there were rapes" maintained Theidon (2004, p. 120) after extensive investigations throughout the farmlands. Rapes occurred in various ways, in towns and communities, in the deserted fields, and especially in the barracks. Several witnesses claim that sexual violence was practiced as a form of “bartering” as women were forced to “give their bodies” to save a family member who had been arrested. Also, upon approaching military bases to seek information and explanations, women would often be raped.

Rape is a traumatic event due to the abuse itself, the marks left on the body, the public stigma and humiliation, the psychological trauma, and the compilation of consequences that follow. Shining Path terrorists also raped women, but all research confirms that the bulk of the cases were committed by the armed forces and carried out with impunity. Of more than 2,000 cases reported, not one rapist has been sentenced. Often and without shame, soldiers raped women at public events and in front of others. Such brutality was a way to demonstrate their power, define a hierarchy, and spread terror, which is the case of the scene shown in this piece. What began as terror inflicted by Shining Path followed by terror inflicted by the government. The two adversaries
took part in a merciless competition of horror across the Peruvian countryside and against the people.

**Figure 9: Chischiharco**

![Image](source: Photo by author)

How does one represent an event that is indescribable? What is the relationship between violence and brutality, and the manner in which this art seeks to present it? For Agamben (2000), the witness who has been murdered can never tell what happened. There is a dimension of horror that we will never know and that is impossible to communicate. Moreover, it can be argued that we will never know all that happened because a massacre of a population includes a massacre of any evidence that may have been left behind.

However, the case can be made that personal testimonials are one important way to narrate the events of what happened. These testimonies affirm something truly occurred and for Edilberto it must be illustrated. While it is true that we cannot speak on
behalf of the dead, still, it is critical to ask questions, report what happened, and escape from that which encourages silence.

Thus, it is evident that the above retablo breaks the ideological rules responsible for hiding the truth. The work “keeps staring at the unspeakable” to force it out of hiding. A Peruvian film, *The Mouth of the Wolf* (1988), directed by Francisco Lombardi, aimed to play a similar role in recording such historical events. As Agamben (2000) notes, in this case “one cannot properly speak of death, but of something infinitely more scandalous: men do not truly die here, but rather are converted into corpses” (p. 78).

The characters thrown into the abyss and finally crashed into the floor tell a story not only of extreme violence but also of the complete loss of humanity in connection to their bodies. Beyond the expressiveness with which they have been carved and the way in which the artist has designed the disposal of the bodies into the box, is the presence of the red sun that accompanies the scene and seems to fill with blood throughout the entire work.

Along the same lines, in an attempt to restore the truth and authority of testimony as a form of mediation, the retablo entitled *Torture* shows another practice of “widespread and systematic” political violence. Again, through stark images, it reveals facts that have been officially denied and that ordinary citizens do not want to see or are often reluctant to confront.

**Figure 10: Torture**

![Figure 10: Torture](source: Photo by author)

The key is to follow the sequence step by step. This portrayal is not of various kinds of torture on various victims, but rather successive moments of extreme cruelty on a single victim. It has been said that the visual arts provide a form of speech where physical pain appears more severe and here, indeed, we see pain pervading the entire composition (Scarry, 1985).

During the years of political violence, the prohibition of torture was not yet incorporated into the penal code (this did not occur until 1998) and, therefore, became a habitual war tactic. The *senderistas* tortured many people in so-called “popular trials,” and for the armed forces “suspicion alone was cause for torture.” (CAPS, 2010 p. 8)
For this reason, many testimonies tell of this type of revenge—one that used punishment as justice. They refer to their evilness, their horror, the way in which the torturers lost all compassion and the victims became no more than a body to abuse.

In the image, torture is depicted by a sequence that advances slowly, little by little: the ear, the hand, the neck, the head. The obscenity of such violence is not hidden and instead focuses, at all times, on showing the conditions under which it was committed: it is no longer a clash between two people but a profoundly unequal relationship where one is armed and the other is not where one is dressed and the other is not, and where one is fundamentally a force of strength and the other is just a body.

But things appear to get even worse; in the last scene, the torture is not intended just for the victim, but for all the prisoners who are forced to witness it. At the very left of the scene, we see a group of people sitting, forced to watch what happens. Indeed, torture was always that way, and neither the senderistas nor the military had any qualms about making the obscenity public display. For both sides, the war had to be inscribed on the body, but also—and with the same force—in the eyes and on the memory.

In Chungui, the largest pit, called Chischiharco, is located 10 minutes from the military base. They say it is in this place where the bodies of the many people who were executed by the military are located (see Fig.9). The piece in Fig.11 was created following the testimony of Dionisio Casán, a character in the work who appears with his head in the air toward the top. Dionisio says that he was buried that way...that he was shot in the head, but that the bullets fell to the ground and he didn’t die.

Figure 11: Dionisio

Source: Photo by author
Again, the picture is grim: extrajudicial killings went on with no control and the land became a hidden cemetery. Mass graves multiplied and today it is estimated that there are many more to be discovered. Each one contains stories that society doesn’t want to hear. Reality is built on silence. This piece depicts how what occurred has become clandestine.

We see the dead and perhaps some survivors—those unable to bear witness and those who tried to describe what happened. The work shows a concrete fact, but also brings a reflection on the understanding of reality. What we see is no guarantee of exactly what happened. The truth is oppressed underground.

In Fig. 12, death is a punishment. It is the peasants who dig their own graves where they will die. Punishment ends in murder, and murder results in burying the body. The piece sets death as the protagonist, as something definitive for the future of the farmers, but the truth is that this is not the only representation of death in the ingenuity of Edilberto Jiménez. The poetry of César Vallejo offered another.

Figure 12: Mass

The work depicted in Fig. 12 is the staging of one of the most famous poems by César Vallejo: “Mass” tells the story of a resurrection that occurs as a result of the emergence of a true universal community. Let’s recall the words of the poem. It begins with a dead person and someone who approaches to try to revive him. He fails. Later, more people with the same intention approach, but also fail. It is said that people then come in groups, but cannot succeed against death. Only when “all the people of the earth” (Vallejo, 1988 p. 378) come together do the dead return to life. Vallejo built this image to represent socialism and, with it, the powers of human solidarity and a commitment to the collective whole.
This retablo is a particular interpretation of the poem. It gives us a tour of world history translated as a brutal scene of horror and death. The ambition of the powerful is what has generated worldwide war. Thus, here we see Roman soldiers' helmets, medieval kings, bishops' mitres, Napoleon's hat, American Yankees' hats and, as if that weren't enough, a Nazi tank that attacks with force, crushing them all. Moreover, many symbols of Peruvian history accompany this sequence in contrast: the objects of the Spanish conquest, the power of the landowners, the battles for independence, and the actions of Shining Path.

We can say that the retablo presents death as the engine of history. Wars, the exploitation of man by man and social injustice are constants that provide a gruesome unity of man's experience on earth.

Now, if we turn our gaze from left to right, it is at the top—at the center point of the arc—where the narrative of the poem appears more clearly. Recall that the first verse begins, "At the end of the battle and died fighting..." (Vallejo, 1988 p. 378) and so we see that the retablo has cleverly interpreted the word "battle" not as a specific event, but as a constant force that has effectively turned humanity into a tale of horror, injustice, death, and destruction.

After this movement, the dead person appears and is portrayed through a biblical image that is accompanied by a woman and a Peruvian peasant. The retablo acquires greater movement, almost a cinematic quality, at the moment when the mother picks up the dead body. Note also that, on the right, a group of people with raised hands is screaming while a crowd of men passes the body to the center of the piece.

This is a brilliant display of the poem: the men on the right are the ones who shout the famous verse, "So much love and still, we cannot stop death," "Stay brother!" "Do not leave us! Be brave! Come back to life!" (Vallejo, 1988 p. 378) but, at the same time, they are the representation of a growing crowd that is getting closer and closer to the cadaver. In all, millions of individuals (mostly represented as workers and peasants), are those who come before the body to triumph against death and build universal community. Let us remember the last verses:

Then all the men of the earth
surrounded him; they saw the body, sad, excited;
he sat up slowly,
he embraced the first man; he fell at walking. . . (Vallejo, 1988 p. 378)

The epic movement is visually captivating and very intense. In a circle, five characters lift up the corpse and spin him around out of pure delight in a peasant party. They represent the five continents as a way for the retablo to portray the verse "all the people of the earth," (Vallejo, 1988 378) a unique and indispensable state to conquer death and build a new society. Shown here in great expression is a utopian conversation as a mobilizing desire. And even more so as the river in the scene changes (no longer red but full of flowers), heavenly trumpets sound, and the color green, for a new society, appears.

Are the images in these retablos tolerable? What is it, then, that makes them irresistible to the eye at times? Are they too realistic? Is it because of what they represent
and how essential it is to have their presence within a national community, like Peru’s, which refuses to accept the truth of what happened?

It should be noted that, on one hand, these images challenge the imposition of visibility while, on the other, they cause the viewer a lot of pain and indignation (Ranciere, 2010). In fact, these images come from the connection between that which is verbal and that which is visual (Edilberto Jiménez composed many of them after interviewing the residents of Chungui) and, as a result, disrupt the regime protocol of what should and should not be displayed in the national community. We note a kind of ethics that results from their own production process, for these retablos want to testify and we know that this is tantamount to not being afraid to show the truth of what happened, but still, the truth remains intolerable for certain groups in the country: some of the military, many journalists, certain authorities of the church, and the right, in general.

It can be said, then, that the politics of these retablos is to change the status of the visible and to courageously take responsibility for any consequence it may entail. Despite the time that has passed, the images have the power to reveal the truth and make us experience the pain and horror of that period. In reality, these images have multiple recipients: the victims of the violence see a symbolism of their testimony, the offenders see a condemnation for what they did, and society as a whole can barely tolerate the images due to feelings of guilt—of passiveness in which most of the country lived while others suffered greatly.

Edilberto Jiménez’s retablos are, without a doubt, one of the most poignant testimonies of political violence in Peru, and serve as an example of how Andean art constructs a response to what happened. That response includes not only what was “unsaid” (something heinous, candidly exposed) but also the transformation of the way to tell a story. As has been noted by several scholars (Rivas Plata, Del Solar, Ulfe Castrillón in 1992, and Ulfein 2011), the history of the retablo is one of permanent change in its structure and its function. It is a history of great vitality that, in recent decades, has not been afraid to seek new forms of expression.

Figure 13: Sample Views of Wooden Retablos
In this intense process of change (described as "from the Chapel of Santero to the drawer of San Marcos" and, hence, the retablo that we know today), there are three cracks in the wood that Edilberto Jiménez seems to have made. The first relates to the organization of space inside the box, as the opposition between heaven and earth has dissolved inside the piece. Now everything seems to be located on land, meeting the need to represent a society where hell appears to become a part of the earth. For this reason, the very form of the box has also been transformed; it is now a sign of death. It is not a box, but a coffin (see Fig.13). Finally, it should be noted that the festive colors of the composition are gone. The artist does not only use plaster to build the figures, but also dirt that he collects on his travels through the Ayacucho communities that, over time, builds up in his shop. This dirt enters the boxes with a strong smell and modifies the colors that have acquired a greater role in all the works: red and black.

Didi-Huberman (2003) and Richard Kelly (2011) have argued that this work is important as a new political arena, like a danger zone that always break the depictions of the culture of the time. In that sense, and unlike any traditional speech, the power of these retablos is to not only tell what happened, such as informing us about the events of the past, but also to convey meaning about how those facts were experienced by the people involved. In the words of Hayden White (2010), this is a kind of speech that says "what happened" as well as "how what happened made one feel" (p. 206).

Thus, I believe that today the retablos of Edilberto Jiménez operate as very important memory devices in Peru in a game of extreme artistic tension taking on the difficult task "of fabricating signs of the past in a very complex pattern of power and silence" (Richard, 2011). In fact, the thoroughness with which the figures have been carved, the impressive expression of the faces, the movement in which they have been prepared and the composition itself, produce meanings that perhaps other types of discourse cannot produce. That is, these pieces venture into the meanings of violence, the role of the actors in play, and record, without fear, the most extreme events that
Peru has experienced (Recalcati, 2006). And they do it, above all, to challenge citizens politically by showing the hidden side of the story.

**Figure 14: Sample External View of Decorated Wooden Retablos**

These retablos are presented as a testimonial and understand their artistic act to be a statement of the impossible—as something that was not an original part of the screenplay. One must look at these retablos as a political statement, as objects that transform pain into a demand for universal justice. All of them describe violence in Ayacucho but reveal something more about the human condition in general. What do they say? That man "is the rest of mankind," that the man is dead but so is that which has been able to "survive him" (Agamben, 2000, p. 85). I think this is one more idea to add to the many others dramatically exemplified in these impressive Ayacucho retablos.

**References**


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