



Past Imperfect

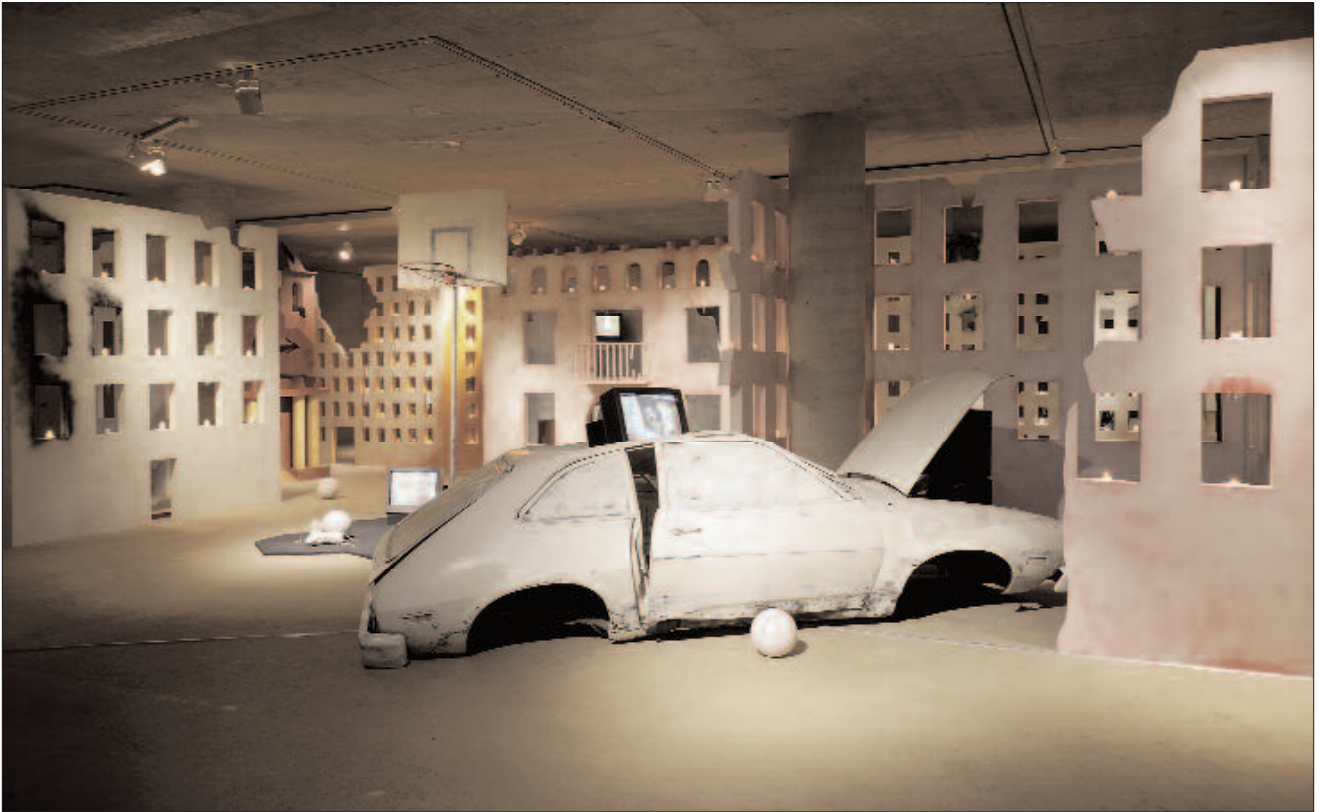
Francesc Torres's
theatrical installations
explore the way we process
history and memory

BY ROGER ATWOOD

“Hieronymus Bosch was the father of all art, as far as I am concerned,” says Spanish artist Francesc Torres. “In the triptychs that Bosch used, I see a precedent for contemporary installation. You can open them, close them. The panels create a narrative device of enormous complexity.”

Torres cites diverse influences—including Goya, John Dos Passos, and Nam June Paik—but Bosch leads the pack. The Netherlandish painter might seem an unlikely forebear of this pioneering conceptual artist, who works in video, sculpture, photography, and almost any area that captures his attention. But the Bosch connection becomes especially clear when viewing Torres’s installation *Dark Is the Room Where We Sleep* (2007), a Dance of Death for the modern era. The work consists mainly of large black-and-white photographs made during a 2004 exhumation, by a team of forensic archeologists and volunteers assembled by Torres, of 46 skeletons. The photographs—showing skulls, skeletons heaped in a common grave, bullet casings—document the horrific results of a 1936 attack during the Spanish civil war, when Francoist gunmen rounded up Republican loyalists in the town of Villamayor de los Montes. The victims were among the 75,000 to 150,000 supporters of the Republic estimated to have been killed by Nationalist forces in the war. Francisco Franco ruled until his death, in 1975.

The project chronicles an excruciating trajectory, from discovery to excavation and finally to atonement, as villagers gather to pay tribute to the dead. The work’s somber poetic title “refers to the space where the victims and the living must live together when they have been denied the knowledge of their own history,” says Torres, who has a gentle voice that contrasts with the intensity of his work. “In Spain, we have lived since the beginning of the democratic transition in the mid-1970s under an unwritten agreement that the crimes committed in the name of Franco will not be investigated. But it was an agreement between politicians, behind the backs of the people. And so we Spaniards are not the owners of our own history.”



The installation—which was shown first at the International Center of Photography in New York and later at the Museu d'Art Contemporani in Barcelona—is the sort of work that has drawn critics and curators to Torres since the '70s. His elaborate multimedia installations explore the confluence of war, historical memory, and the ways in which social groups—families, villages, whole countries—process trauma.

Although the Spanish civil war, Franco's atrocities, and the unexamined aftereffects of both are the artist's core subjects, Torres has spent most of his career aloof from the Spanish art scene. In the past two years his work has come to the fore in Spain. The Barcelona museum mounted a retrospective in 2008, and last year the government of Catalonia gave Torres its National Prize for Visual Arts in recognition of his ability to use "new tools and languages . . . to understand the present without forgetting the past." His countrymen show a new willingness to listen to his confrontational reading of Spain's past. "Torres is possibly the first Spanish artist who works with war's raw materials and not in allegories," said writer Justo Baranco in the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia*.

Born in Catalonia in 1948, Torres grew up in a Spain that was not a congenial place for artists. "The whole world was changing, but in Spain there were no galleries, no museums, no books," he recalls. "It was a desert, and I looked at it and thought, You can go into politics to try to change this, or you can go into art." Torres received little formal training and, like Goya and Picasso, fled the repressive Spain for France. He arrived in Paris in time for the anti-Gaullist riots of 1968 and apprenticed himself to Piotr Kowalski, the Polish-born sculptor whose work straddled art, architecture, and urban design. On returning to Barcelona, in 1970, Torres found that the capital of independent-minded Catalonia had blossomed into a center of underground artistic experimentation. Soon he became a junior presence in the Barcelona conceptual-art scene. "There was basically no difference between making art and



ABOVE In 1970s Barcelona, Francesc Torres learned to blur the lines between art and political activism.

TOP *Belchite/South Bronx*, 1988, contrasts the actions of Americans fighting for freedom in 1930s Spain with the neglect of our own inner-city neighborhoods in the '70s and '80s.

OPPOSITE The two-channel video *Icarus*, 2008, juxtaposes a perpetually falling figure with images from the two Gulf Wars.

being involved in political activism," Torres says.

He completed his obligatory military service before moving to the United States, in 1972, as Franco's rule was weakening. In New York, he began developing installations that combined performance with sculpture while drawing on historical narratives. *Almost Like Sleeping* (1975) featured Torres lying in bed beneath projected images of the dying Franco; Torres's grandfather, who had been a political prisoner; and the artist biting his nails. Performance

gave way to the juxtaposing of evocative pictures and artifacts in works like *Belchite/South Bronx* (1988). In that installation, objects from the ruins of a Spanish town ravaged by fighting between Franco's forces and American antifascist volunteers were placed alongside objects from a burned-out section of the Bronx, including the shell of an abandoned Ford Pinto. "It was a huge piece, like theater, except that you could walk into it," Torres recalls.

The artist drew wider critical attention in 1989 with his installation *Oikonomos* (Greek for "economics") at the Whitney Biennial. Transforming a modern bronze cast of a classical statue of Zeus, Torres put a baseball bat in one of the god's hands and hung a television showing clips of a stock-exchange trading floor and the Indianapolis 500 from his belt. Nearby, an office chair held a race-car driver's jumpsuit covered with sponsor logos. "The driver's overalls could be read as belonging to Zeus, the ultimate chairman of the board," says Torres, who saw the installation as a way of exploring how power is exercised—by the gods in ancient Greece, by the moneyed in New York.

The piece was well received critically. But when two museums that shared ownership of the Zeus cast voiced their disapproval, saying Torres's work disrespected the piece, the ensuing publicity added an unintended layer of irony. "It turned into this strange, postmodern moment in which a copy was being invested with the meaning of the original," says John Hanhardt, then a curator at the Whitney and now at the Smithsonian American Art Mu-



Each photograph in the installation *Dark Is the Room Where We Sleep*, 2007, such as this one showing an excavated bullet casing, was presented as evidence of a 1936 massacre.

seum. "The politics don't ride on the surface of the work. They are integral to the work and shape it. You might learn about history in his work," Hanhardt continues, "but as you decode it you see that it's informed by a wish to understand power and human aggression, both politically and cognitively."

Torres's later installations continued to mix disparate historical artifacts, often with a theatrical air. His *50 Rains* (1991) combined objects from the Spanish embassy in Berlin that was destroyed in

1943; a facsimile of the car in which Franco's heir apparent was assassinated, in 1973; and an imaginary Spanish apartment from the near future, filled with chic decor and fragmentary, unreadable imagery. Torres showed little after the turn of this century, as he spent more time curating and collaborating on commissions and other projects. "Now I only do things because of their intrinsic

social, political, or intellectual importance," says Torres. "If the final result is an artwork, fine; if not, that's fine too."

Today Torres divides his time between Barcelona and New York. (His videos are sold by Electronic Arts Intermix in New York. Other works, priced from \$4,000 to \$200,000 or higher, are handled by Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery in New York and Galería Elba Benítez in Madrid, where he has a sculptural installation up through the end of this month.)

Despite his recent critical success in Spain, Torres believes Spaniards have not fully come to grips with their past. Many look at the imagery in *Dark Is the Room Where We Sleep* and see only provocation. He hopes for a time when they can embrace the work's message of justice and reconciliation. "There is almost a violation implicit in seeing someone's dead body," he says. "If you go for the spectacle of it, it shows, but if you do it in a spirit of empathy, that also will come through." ■

Roger Atwood has been writing for ARTnews since 1999. Some of his articles can be read online at www.rogeratwood.com.