

**DORIS SALCEDO: SHIBBOLETH**  
**The Unilever Series, Tate Modern, London,**  
**8 October 2007 – 6 April 2008**

By *Annie Tse*

Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* begins with an inconspicuous crack at the entrance of Tate Modern, inviting the viewer to follow its meandering course which runs 167 meters down the full length of the Turbine Hall. This encourages visitors to walk meditatively along the widening chasm, in contrast to a very different journey down Carsten Holler's slides in a previous exhibition last year, also in the Turbine Hall, where all thought was suspended during the exhilarating descent. *Shibboleth* is groundbreaking – not only in the literal sense but also because it is the first time in Tate Modern's history that a work of art has been embedded in the building itself, leaving a permanent mark after the crack is filled at the end of the exhibition in April.

The word 'shibboleth' originates from a story in the Bible's Book of Judges (12:5-6), which recounts the massacre of the Ephraimites. Having been defeated by the Gileadites in battle, the Ephraimites attempted to flee across the river Jordan. They were stopped by the Gileadites who tested them by asking them to pronounce the word 'shibboleth'. Those who could not pronounce the word correctly were identified as Ephraimites and killed, resulting in forty-two thousand deaths. Salcedo's work alludes to this powerful story of racial hatred, and finds resonance in the modern world. In the exhibition catalogue, Salcedo describes *Shibboleth* as 'a negative space', a symbol of racial divide. It addresses 'the w(hole) in history that marks the bottomless difference that separates the whites from non-whites,' this w(hole) being 'the history of racism, which runs parallel to the history of modernity, and is its untold dark side'.

Salcedo's chasm cuts into the floor of the gallery, though not into clearly delineated 'we' and 'they' zones. The chasm branches off into smaller cracks, some forming a part of the artistic conception but others probably an accident of the installation process. To look down this chasm is to confront the experience of otherness. One sees a carefully constructed concrete cast formation, lined by a chain-link wire mesh. As the exhibition's curator, Achim Borchardt-Hume, suggests in his contribution to the catalogue, *Shibboleth* evokes images of the wire fence used as the most common means of border divisions and crowd control. It is thus that the themes of segregation and containment are brought together.

Politics is integral to Salcedo's art. *Shibboleth* is conceived as an intrusion on the space of the Turbine Hall, disturbing its grandeur, and ultimately questions high Western culture itself. Borchardt-Hume invites the viewer to see *Shibboleth* as a challenge to the claims to beauty and truth that underpin much of the art in Tate Modern, thereby reclaiming 'a territory for those excluded from these unilateral ideals.' A sense of subversion may be felt as one's attention is directed from the lofty heights of the building to the chasm in the floor, creating a sense of constraint which is uncharacteristic of the Turbine Hall experience. This subversion, however, is not pervasive. A subtle interplay between this politically charged piece and the aesthetics of Tate Modern's architecture is also felt, which becomes increasingly prominent as *Shibboleth* is viewed from the windows of the upper floors. From this perspective, Tate Modern's architecture seems to re-assert itself as *Shibboleth* becomes a part of a dynamic vista. Given the height and distance, the chasm loses its depth and jaggedness as it takes on the form of a river negotiating the flow of visitors across the pristine landscape of the Turbine Hall.

An installation of this scale inevitably raises questions concerning the artist's personal involvement in the creative process. During the press conference following the unveiling of the work, Salcedo was reluctant to go into the details, as she asserted that 'what is important is the meaning of the piece. The making of it is not important.'

Despite the clarity with which Salcedo attributes racism as the message behind her work, the enigmatic quality of *Shibboleth* defies definition. Intended by its author as a symbol of racism, *Shibboleth* also brings to mind divides based on gender, sexuality and beliefs, and possibly also of divides within the family and oneself. *Shibboleth* can thus be seen as a specific statement on racial divisions, but it can also be interpreted as a general statement on otherness, which provides a focal point for perspectives as diverse as post-colonialism, feminism and other movements motivated by being the excluded – the 'other' – in relation to the dominant. One's engagement with *Shibboleth* can be enriched by one's personal experience of otherness, which may or may not relate specifically to racism.

These reflections lead one to question the extent to which an artist should be allowed to direct the viewer's interpretation of his or her work, being one of the issues arising from Roland Barthes's

proclamation of the death of the author.\* To disregard Salcedo's message, however, is likely to undermine one's appreciation of her art. Born in Columbia, much of Salcedo's art is inspired by her personal experience of trauma and loss from the violent history of her native country. This can also be seen in the artist's other works, such as *Unland: audible in the mouth* (1998) and the *Untitled* sculptures - also on display at the Tate Modern as part of the *Poetry and Dream* display - which bear witness to the tragedy of Columbia's civil war. In the case of *Shibboleth*, Salcedo's engagement with politics extends beyond the geographical limits of her country to address racism as a global phenomenon. Not to acknowledge this dimension as integral to *Shibboleth* would be to do it an injustice. Perhaps the author's voice should be treated not as the god-like pronouncement which Barthes objects to, but as the beginning of a dialogue between the artist and the viewer. On the day I was at the exhibition, children could be seen jumping from one side of the chasm to the other. The wire mesh in the rift, intended as a symbol of containment and segregation, proved irresistible to inquisitive hands and feet. The innocent joy with which they greeted *Shibboleth* is ironic in light of the authorial message, but it is also a source of hope in the dark reality of human dividedness.

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### Suggested Further Reading

*Doris Salcedo: Shibboleth*, exhibition catalogue, ed. by Achim Borhardt-Hume (London: Tate Publishing, 2007). See, in particular, Achim Borhardt-Hume, 'Sculpting Critical Space' and Doris Salcedo, 'Proposal for a Project for the Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London 2007'.

Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image-Music-Text*, selected and translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977) 142-148.

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\* [Editor's Note:] See 'Suggested Further Reading'. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was a French literary theorist and semiotician (among other things), who argued in his essay, 'The Death of the Author' (1967), that literary criticism ought not to, and really cannot, constitute a search for the true meaning of a text based on the author's biography, politics, psychology &c. It should rather consider literature as something created by the reader.