

Yoshua Okon at the Hammer Museum

Guatemalan soldiers-turned-day laborers restage their civil war in the Home Depot parking lot where they seek work

By Catherine Wagley

published: September 01, 2011

"It felt like a job," said Carlos El Pájaro when an interpreter and I met with him at the hot dog stand outside the Cypress Home Depot. He was describing the unusual project he took on last May, when he agreed to play out moments of the Guatemalan



PHOTO COURTESY OF KAUFMANN REPETTO, MILAN



Home Depot shoppers greeted these military scenes with cracked smiles and curious glances, but nothing more.

civil war in the store's parking lot. A day laborer who for nearly a decade has been based out of this Home Depot, waiting for contractors or homeowners to offer work, El Pájaro looks to be near 40. He asked that I call him El Pájaro, or "the bird," because that's what he went by during his six years in the Guatemalan military.

Mexico City–based artist Yoshua Okón found El Pájaro while assembling from L.A.'s Mayan-speaking Guatemalan community a group of men who had fought with the guerrillas or military during the last stretch of their country's decades-long civil war. Okón wanted to film these men as they covertly navigated the busy Home Depot

parking lot, evoking the specific dexterity required of guerrilla warfare.

It took some back-and-forth before El Pájaro understood what the artist intended: to put the military pasts of these laborers on a collision course with the anonymous big-box parking lot where many of them spend their days. The idea intrigued him, and he agreed to help organize other men he knew. "I wanted to see if I could do it," he said. It was work, but work he put special "emphasis" on.

Okón's video installation is now on display in the Hammer Museum's upstairs video gallery, projected onto four walls, surrounding the viewer on all sides. The title is *Octopus*, Guatemalan slang for the United Fruit Company, which owned swaths of Guatemalan land and reached its tentacles into both local commerce and national politics. The piece is 18 minutes long and riveting, showing men in T-shirts and jeans somersaulting across asphalt, crouching in garden sheds, riding in bright orange carts and wielding imaginary rifles.

You don't have to know anything about these men or their particular backgrounds to lose yourself in the action. It's enough to know you're watching bodies still wholly fluent in the stealth and agility of combat, and yet weirdly comfortable in the space of Home Depot. "It feels like a sort of transport occurred," Okón says. "Their bodies are in the parking lot, but they're somewhere else, almost as if I had taken footage from one place and transposed it over another."

The idea for *Octopus* took root last year, when Okón was an artist in residence at the Hammer. He'd read *The Art of Political Murder* by his friend Guatemalan-American writer Francisco Goldman, detailing the massacre of Guatemala's Mayan population during a war that began in the 1950s, ended

in 1996 and was manipulated throughout by U.S. government and commercial interests. Okón he realized the men he'd been picking up at Home Depot to help him prepare his Los Angeles home for the renters' market came from the very places Goldman wrote about. When the Hammer invited him to propose an exhibition, he pitched this civil war–Home Depot mash-up.

Okón has been working in video since the mid-1990s, and while politically charged, potentially violent circumstances often define his projects, he stays just far enough from reality to make participants feel safe. "Fiction can sometimes be more real than the real," he notes, "and the camera gives you the freedom to say, 'I was just acting.'"

In 1999 he invited policemen into his studio and asked them to demonstrate how to wield a steel baton or, in the case of one policeman, argue aggressively over whether the artist could film him while the camera rolled. In 2007, Okón collaborated with Mexican connoisseurs of Third Reich history, who dressed in authentic Nazi garb and saluted and paraded on film. Despite staged circumstances, his videos nearly always slip into what feels like raw honesty.

Octopus doesn't do much slipping, however. Its version of honesty is more lyrical than raw. The laborers stay steadily focused, while their environment stays steadily oblivious. Even when men's faces show awareness of the absurdity, like the perpetually smirking guy on lookout in a shopping cart ("He always looks like that when he's self-conscious," El Pájaro said), their bodies keep up the act.

Some of the participants fought for the guerrillas, and others for the military or for both, due to shifting loyalties and aggressive recruitment strategies, and in *Octopus* they wear black and white shirts to indicate their different sides. But in the video they aren't pitted against each other. Instead, the sides seem to act in tandem. "I was much more interested in juxtaposing them and the environment," Okón says. He did not request permission to film at Home Depot because "I wanted specifically to have no control over the parking lot."

"Yoshua relishes that kind of chaos," says the Hammer's new-media associate, Amanda Law, who arrived six hours into the main day of shooting to film her own "making of" feature. She was struck by the smallness of what was happening relative to the hustle of the parking lot on the whole. "It felt very insignificant," she says. The scenes of men dragging themselves under cars, or cupping hands over their eyes like binoculars, led to some cracked smiles and curious glances from shoppers but nothing more. Even the security guards seemed hesitant to intervene. Finally, after noon, one guard came over and said, "OK, you're done here," though Okón dismissed her, and filming continued a few hours more.

The failure of the parking lot's inhabitants and commercial trappings to engage in any meaningful way with the weird warfare playing out around them is what makes *Octopus* so mesmerizing. In one shot, a group of men dressed in black ride down a parking-lot aisle, posed beautifully on one of those flatbed metal carts. For a prolonged moment, they're side by side with a Toyota that's waiting for a parking spot. The truck's bumper sticker reads, "Voter for a New Foreign Policy." The blatancy of this message annoyed me at first. The sticker, so embarrassingly cliché, threatened to turn the scene into something trite, an obvious illustration of U.S. policy, including its interest in Guatemalan politics, gone wrong. But as the shot wore on, the discomfort it caused seemed more and more fitting, because, as the viewer, I was the only one who felt it. The truck's driver was oblivious, and the men on the cart were focused on something far away.

YOSHUA OKÓN: OCTOPUS | Hammer Museum | 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Wstwd. | Through Nov. 6
| hammer.ucla.edu