ANDRÉS FELIPE ORJUELA

Archivo Muerto/ Archivo Iluminado



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— Text by Kim Knoppers

One afternoon in 2011 several boxes were placed on the street outside the former offices of daily newspaper *El Espacio* in Bogotá, Colombia. They were first picked up by someone who earned a living recycling rubbish. The boxes turned out to be a goldmine. They were full of original photographs that had once been published in the daily, which describes itself as *El Diario Del Pueblo Colombiano* – the newspaper of the Colombian people. The earliest of the photos dates back to 25 August 1966, barely a year after the founding of the paper.

By an indirect route, the black-and-white photos ended up in the hands of artist Andrés Felipe Orjuela. Having studied art at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia he moved to Mexico City to work on his PhD. There he encountered Mexican tabloid photojournalism, known as *nota roja* (literally: bloody news), of which the magazine *Alarma!* is one of the most illustrious examples. Set up two years earlier than *El Espacio*, it catalogues hardcore crime and violence in Mexico. Corpses trapped in wrecked cars in the most contorted of positions, horribly maimed victims of stabbings and decapitated bodies are presented graphically and without restraint.

The photos from the rescued *El Espacio* archive became the starting point for Orjuela's *Archivo* project, including the featured *Archivo Muerto/Archivo Iluminado*. The photos he selected do not show any random accidents or crime scenes. Instead they reflect the violent period in Colombian history that followed 'La Violencia' (the civil war that lasted from 1948 to 1958), a time in which the government, shadowy paramilitary groups, leftwing guerrillas and crime syndicates fought each other as they strove to increase their influence in the country. Drugs were an important factor in all of this. Orjuela chose the most interesting images and made high-resolution scans of them, which he then enlarged. The original newspaper photo *Luis Aldana Uno de los Antisociales Detenidos en la Mañana de Hoy Cuando Trataba*

de Huir (Luis Aldana One of the Antisocial Arrested in the Morning While Trying to Escape) is now around ten times its original size. As a result, the facial expression of the huddled man as he resists arrest is far more clearly visible. The matching grimace on the Pre-Columbian mask hanging on the wall is much clearer too. From the lower left corner of the photo a booted foot on a uniformed leg powers into the man's flank. In other photographs in the series, dead bodies lie on the street under white sheets or drugs are seized.

The explicit depiction of violence and crime is something often associated with Central and South American media, yet fascination with the spectacle of death is a phenomenon of all times and all places. The popularity of the true crime genre online and on television in the United States has increased hugely of late. It was recently announced that Adnan Syed, the condemned man who became famous through the podcast *Serial*, which garnered 68 million listeners, has been granted a retrial. Jeremy Meeks, the strikingly handsome criminal with penetrating grey-blue eyes whose mugshot quickly went viral, was freed in March and is now hoping for a career in Hollywood. Crimes that actually happened are changed in character by being re-enacted and then shown on computer screens, on television or in the cinema. Evil and death are defused and made less threatening by mediatisation. In *Archivo* by Andrés Felipe Orjuela, a comparable process takes place, even though the events are distilled into a photo.

Orjuela changes the character of the photos and the voyeuristic gaze by the use of colour. He introduces photo oils and pigments with his fingertips and small balls of cotton on fibrous paper. The procedure he uses has its origins in the mid-nineteenth century and is almost as old as photography itself. After the invention of the daguerreotype, in which the world is shown in black and white, there was a desire to portray people in as true-to-life a way as possible. That meant introducing colour. At first it was hard to adjust to the change. The naked truth, mechanically captured by the camera, was highly challenging after it had been painted to order, transformed into idealized portraits. So the people in the photos were given beautiful, softly coloured hair and romantic flushes to their cheeks. The colouring of photos thereby satisfied both the desire to portray the world the way it really is and the need to make the image more attractive.

It is this that makes the photos from both *Archivo Muerto* and *Archivo Iluminado* so intriguing and paradoxical: the hardcore, real-life violence of Colombian history, recorded with a quick press of a button, contrasts with the gentle seductiveness of the beautiful pictorial image to which colour has been applied with great care. Orjuela's work intervenes simply but effectively in the way in which people consume media images. By the act of introducing colour, Orjuela dramatically changes the voyeuristic experience of the sensational news photo. The introduction of a range of pastel palette softens the images, transforming the atmosphere from explicit and gruesome to gentle and nostalgic, sometimes almost with something of the cartoon or slapstick about it. It enables Orjuela to make the violence in the photos innocuous.

All images © Andrés Felipe Orjuela, courtesy of the artist

ANDRÉS FELIPE ORJUELA – (b. 1985, CO) is a Colombian photographer living and working in Mexico. He graduated from the School of Fine Arts at the Colombian National University, and later completed an MA in Visual Arts at the National Autonomous University of Mexico where he is currently pursuing a PhD. His work, which typically makes use of found archival material, has been exhibited in Colombia, the US, Mexico, Panama, Brazil, Peru, Argentina, France, Spain and England.

KIM KNOPPERS – (b. 1976, NL) is an art historian (University of Amsterdam) and curator at Foam. Since 2011, she has worked on exhibitions including *Collaborate: On Artists' Collectives*. Knoppers is founder of *Artists' Recipes* which explores the intersection of art and food. She lives and works in Amsterdam.