

Muriel Hasbun: Seismic Traces | ESSAY

Registers for the Future: Muriel Hasbun's *Pulse*

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Since the 1980s, images of war, poverty, and victimhood have driven public perceptions about El Salvador. Many of these impressions were shaped over the course of the country's brutal, twelve-year civil war that lasted from 1979 to 1992. This unrest, decades in the making, is often traced to 1932, when labor leader Agustín Farabundo Martí led a peasant revolt against the ruling dictatorship. Within a few weeks, the uprising was crushed in a massive military reprisal known as *la matanza* (the slaughter), in which an estimated thirty-thousand civilians, the majority of whom were Indigenous, were massacred. This state-sanctioned repression would continue for decades, until the assassination of human-rights advocate Archbishop Óscar Romero, in March 1980, helped to unleash a full-scale civil war between the guerilla army of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Salvadoran government's right-wing paramilitary forces. Though the war ended with the signing of the Peace Accords of 1992, visual tropes of pain and repression remain widespread today.¹ Muriel Hasbun's ongoing series, *Pulse: New Cultural Registers / Pulso:*



Muriel Hasbun, *Pulse: New Cultural Registers / Pulso: Nuevos registros culturales*, 2020, *Pulse: Seismic Register 2020.02.28.048 (Niño/17-III-83)* archival pigments on anodized aluminum plate, 2020/2021

Nuevos registros culturales speaks back to these hurtful and simplistic images. Through her hauntingly beautiful photographs, she creates a “visual registry for the future,” that while honoring and reckoning with the trauma of El Salvador’s past, also seeks to transform it into something new.

Hasbun and her family are the product of “multiple exiles and diasporas.” Her Salvadoran-born father, Antonio Hasbun Z., was the son of Palestinian Christians who moved to El Salvador shortly before World War I to escape conscription into the Ottoman army. Her mother, Janine Janowski, a French-born, Polish Jew, survived the Holocaust by hiding with her family in the Auvergne region of France, and later moved to El Salvador, to work as a teacher for the children of the French consul. Hasbun, meanwhile, was born and raised in El Salvador but left in 1979, at the beginning of the civil war, to live in Paris with her maternal grandmother during her first year of college. She then moved to Washington, D.C., where she studied photography under the mentorship of Ray Metzker and continues to live today. In her art making practice, Hasbun often turns to her family’s archives to explore the complexities and contradictions of this “intergenerational, transnational, and transcultural”² migratory history.



Muriel Hasbun, *si je meurs / if I die*, 2015-16, *Family Frames*, 2016.07.06, from the archive, c.1960's, El Congo, archival pigment print, 2016/2021

In her art works, Hasbun frequently mines these materials to bridge past and present and thereby restore familial bonds that have been severed by the passage of personal and political time as well as by the enormity of geographical divides. In images such as *Family Frames*, from her 2015-16 series *si je meurs / if I die*, Hasbun turns to the intimacy of her

family's photographs and documents. She does so, however, not to recover the trauma of her family's migratory past but to create new temporal frameworks for understanding some of its pain and uncertainty. In *Family Frames*, for instance, Hasbun projects a family portrait, taken in 1964 by her father with his Rolleiflex camera, in which Hasbun and her family pose on the first piece of furniture that her parents ever owned—a hand carved, wooden bench inherited from her Palestinian paternal grandparents—onto the very same bench that now bifurcates their faces. Through this visual intersplicing, Hasbun not only places past and present into dialogue with one another but suggests how these temporalities, alongside their hopeful promises and unforeseen failures, might co-exist in fragile tension.

While *Family Frames* explores complexities around the migratory history of Hasbun's family, *Homage (El altar de la memoria)*, from the same series, situates her family's history, and especially that of her mother, Janine Janowski, in terms of the trauma of Central America's past. For this image, Hasbun photographed a work of art by Guatemalan artist Moisés Barrios that was exhibited in her mother's gallery, Galería el laberinto, in 1992 as part of an exhibition marking the 500th year anniversary of the "encounter" between Spain and the Americas.³ For this work, entitled *Altar de la memoria*, Barrios wall papered the inside of a wooden bureau with woodcut prints of *los desaparecidos* (the disappeared). Over these faces, in turn, he overlaid images of roses so as to create an altar of memory. Hasbun amplifies the pain evoked by this altar by photographing two objects sitting inside the bureau. Wrapped in padded burlap and twine, the objects, which stand upright, metaphorically



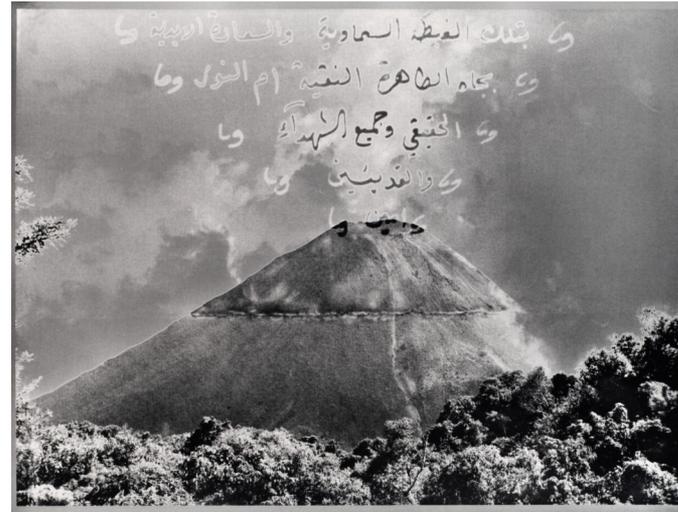
Muriel Hasbun, *si je meurs / if I die*, 2015-16, *Homage, (El altar de la memoria)*, 2014.03.25, *El Congo*, archival pigment print, 2016

evoke the bodies of the dead and disappeared whose pictures line the bureau's walls. Through this juxtaposition, Hasbun visually connects El Salvador's brutal and protracted civil war, which killed seventy-five thousand of its citizens and disappeared another eight thousand, to her mother's gallery and the respite that it provided for artists across Central America, including Barrios, in the midst of this repression and unrest. In so doing, Hasbun recognizes El Salvador's legacy of violence and war. At the same time, rather than use this history to fix understandings about the country in terms of paralyzing tropes of violence and war, she suggests a more complicated temporal framework in which the trauma of the past might be reworked to create a new vision for the future.

Hasbun's most recent and ongoing series, *Pulse: New Cultural Registers / Pulso: Nuevos registros culturales*, continues to explore these ideas around historical memory and the unsettling of both time and space. But though *Pulse* likewise turns to Hasbun's own photographs, including images that she took during return visits to El Salvador in the 1980s as well as materials from the archive of el laberinto, the series differs in how it uses representations from El Salvador's national seismographic registry to bring these personal archives into conversation with the past. Hasbun discovered these seismographic records in 2017, while teaching a workshop for artists in El Salvador that she organized through laberinto projects, a transnational arts, culture, and education platform that she founded to foster contemporary art practices, social inclusion, and dialogue in El Salvador and its diaspora.⁴ Many of the long sheets of Kodak Linagraph paper, which she unearthed in this archive, record the amplitude and frequency of seismic waves and yield information about El Salvador's subsurface structure, including its long history of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. This seismic activity forms a defining feature of El Salvador's history and landscape. In addition to experiencing at least one earthquake per decade, El Salvador contains around 20 active volcanoes, including Santa Ana and its relative, Izalco, whose frequent eruptions of natural night-time light produced its nickname of "El Faro," or the "Lighthouse of the Pacific." Reproduced on currency, postage stamps, as well as tourist posters, Izalco has become a national symbol of El Salvador.⁵ But the volcano also occupies a more painful position within the

country's history. On January 22, 1932, as Claribel Alegría recounts in her important 1966 novel *Cenizas de Izalco* (*Ashes of Izalco*), the volcano's eruption formed the backdrop in the 1932 *la matanza*, in which around thirty thousand mostly Indigenous people were brutally killed in the volcano's environs by order of El Salvador's dictator, General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez.

Although Alegría was only ten years old when *la matanza* took place, as she explains to Carolyn Forché in 1984, this event “marked her”⁶ and she uses the eruption of Izalco to help not only recover and retell her memories of this event but to mediate its traumatic affects. Like Alegría, the oppression enacted during the repressive dictatorship of Hernández Martínez also haunts Hasbun's family history. Shortly after *la matanza*, Hernández Martínez deemed all Arab immigrants, including Hasbun's grandfather, Elías, “pernicious” and thereby required them to have their biographical and biometric information collected in a Special Registry of Foreigners. In 1936, Hernández Martínez amplified these racist acts by passing Decree #49 forbidding *Turcos* (Arabs) from opening “new businesses of any type or even to participate in them as partners or to open branches of existing enterprises.”⁷ This rule included naturalized citizens and immigrant children born in the country. In an effort to work through the intergenerational trauma of this xenophobic history, in 1996, as part of her series *Santos y sombras / Saints and shadows*, Hasbun created *Todos los santos (Volcán de Izalco, amén) / All the Saints (Izalco Volcano, Amen)*, in which she



Muriel Hasbun, *Santos y sombras / Saints and Shadows*, 1991-2004, *Todos los santos (Volcán de Izalco, amén) / All the Saints (Izalco Volcano, Amen)*, toned gelatin silver print, 1995-96/2004

made the volcano Izalco “spew a Greek Orthodox prayer penned in Arabic calligraphy,” as she explains, “by my Palestinian great-grandfather Kosta.”⁸ Through their evocation of Izalco and its aftershocks, both Alegría and Hasbun attempt to make sense of the trauma of El Salvador’s past that they have both witnessed and inherited. *Pulse*, however, puts the history of El Salvador’s seismic activity to different ends. For this series, she uses the seismic registers that she uncovered in the national archive to counter what Guatemalan novelist and critic Arturo Arias calls the “invisibility of Central American culture.” This condition, or “lack of an identity politics for Central American-Americans” is, as Arias importantly theorizes, “an artifact still lingering as one of the unresolved residues of the cold war.” To reckon with this history of “nonbelonging” and “nonbeing,”⁹ *Pulse* seeks to, as Hasbun explains, “heal the general misrepresentation and erasure of our own cultural expressions and identities” and thereby build “a more connected, nuanced, dignified, and restorative future.”¹⁰



Muriel Hasbun, *Pulse: New Cultural Registers / Pulso: Nuevos registros culturales*, 2020, *Pulse: La novia (Homage, Rosa Mena Valenzuela)* archival pigments on anodized aluminum plate, 2020/2021

Pulse: La novia (Homage, Rosa Mena Valenzuela) forms part of Hasbun’s efforts to trace the outlines for this future. This work was inspired in part through research that Hasbun conducted, in 2017, in the Archives of American Art. There she discovered taped conversations, recorded in 1984, between U.S. art critic and activist Lucy Lippard and Julia Díaz, artist and founder of El Salvador’s first fine art gallery, Galería Forma, which, in 1983, became Museo Forma.¹¹ For *Pulse: La novia*, Hasbun brings together two sets of images: a lace detail from the wedding dress of her mother, Janine Janowski, and a section of Rosa Mena Valenzuela’s expressionist painting *La*

novia (The Bride), from the collection of *el laberinto* that incorporates actual collaged pieces of lace within its composition. Over the top of these images, Hasbun evocatively overlays one of the seismic registers that she discovered in El Salvador's national archive. In so doing, Hasbun shifts the meaning of the registry's undulating white lines so that instead of charting the amplitude and frequency of the ground's movement, through their conjoining of Janowski's dress and Valenzuela's painting, they project a new potential landscape or what Hasbun refers to as the lived *Thirdspace* of memory.

In evoking the term Thirdspace, Hasbun turns to geographer Edward Soja's thinking about the spatiality of human life.¹² Soja's theorization of Thirdspace draws upon both Henri Lefebvre's notion of lived space and Michel Foucault's idea of heterotopologies, both developed to overcome the persistent binary within human geography of conceptualizing spatial relations in either materialist or mental terms. In situating Thirdspace as a form of lived space, Soja uses this term to explore other understandings of space that coexists with the "real and imagined 'other spaces' in which we live, in which our individual biographies are played out, in which social relations develop and change, in which history is made."¹³ Thirdspace, in other words, is a form of geographical imagining that resists totalizing ways of thinking and does not follow existing cartographic rules and so, as Soja continues, "can be mapped but never captured in conventional cartographies; it can be creatively imagined but obtains meaning only when practiced and fully *lived*."¹⁴

Hasbun's *Pulse: La novia* gives further visual form to what this lived Thirdspace, or *terruño*, as she calls it, might look like. For Hasbun, *terruño* is a form of geographical imagining that refers as much to the actual soil or dirt of a place as to its representation. Yet, *terruño*, importantly, also functions as lived space through its evocation of the biographical complexity and contradictions of a homeland, which in the case of El Salvador includes the ever-present trauma of its past. In *Pulse: La novia*, Hasbun uses the striking representations of lace, a fabric likely brought to El Salvador during the sixteenth-century Spanish invasion, to map out a future that, while connected to this repressive past, imagines a different set of spatial relations for

its future. In connecting the distinct lived experiences of Janowski and Valenzuela within the shared social and historical space of El Salvador's terruño, Hasbun offers a map of El Salvador that recenters the lived experiences of its artists not only at the epicenter of the country's self-determination and resistance but also as the location of its future.



Muriel Hasbun, *Pulse: New Cultural Registers / Pulso: Nuevos registros culturales*, 2020, *Pulse: No registra temblor*, (Homage, Armando Campos) archival pigment print on Canson Edition Etching Rag

Pulse: No registra temblor (Homage, Armando Campos) also contributes to this future mapping. Within the realm of science, seismograms are studied precisely for how they observe and document the movements of the earth. But historically they have also helped to unravel the earth's meaning, especially that which remains unseen and unknowable beneath its surface. As Emil Wiechert, one of the first professors of seismology, remarks in distinctly poetic terms: "The trembling rocks bear tidings from afar. Learn to read their meaning."¹⁵ Here Wiechert cautions that seismograms are not transparent, rather their messages must be "read," which means they are subject to interpretation and change. It is this instability

and incongruity in the signification of the seismic registers that Hasbun's *Pulse: No registra temblor* importantly explores.

For this work, Hasbun turns to another painting from the collection of el laberinto: Armando Campos' 1993 painting *Hormiga*. But whereas in *Pulse: La Novia*, Rosa Mena Valenzuela's painting takes up over half of the composition, for this photograph, the ant, greatly reduced in size from Campos' painting is projected



Pulse: No registra temblor, (Homage, Armando Campos)
detail

twice near the bottom of a seismic register that reads, “No registra temblor.” This statement, scrawled prominently in all blue capitals, offers a commentary on the white lines rendered above it. Unlike the thin and circuitous white marks incorporated into *Pulse: La Novia*, these thick white lines run parallel to each other across the top of the page. Their continuous appearance is likely caused either by the fact that there are no “tremors” or fluctuations in the earth’s movement for the seismograph to record or the instrument has failed. Regardless, this statement underlines the unreliability of the seismogram’s scientific certainty. As the product of man-made instruments, seismograms render spatial understandings of the land that cannot always be exactly charted, clearly analyzed, or objectively explained. They require, instead, taking a cue from

the ants who appear to have crawled into the undulating otherworldly space of the seismic register, that we read the land and its social significance not only in terms of the real and imagined but also that which lies beyond and between these limits, including the strange and mysterious.

In using the ant from Campos’ painting to evoke the spatiality of this elsewhere, Hasbun again references the geographical imagining of Soja’s Thirdspace. According to Soja, Thirdspace “is a space of radical openness, a site of resistance and struggle, a space of multiplicitous representations, investigable through its binarized oppositions but also where il y a toujours l’Autre, where there are always ‘other’ spaces, heterotologies, paradoxical geographies to be explored.”¹⁶ Here Soja speaks not only to the material and metaphorical aspects of a space but also to those that remain unknowable and outside representation. For Hasbun, then, geographical imagining or Thirdspace provides a means to transform the trauma of El Salvador’s past and its accompanying “cruel invisibility” into something else. This is because as an act of

solidarity, *Pulse* is not beholden to the inevitability of the past. In evoking the lived Thirdspace of El Salvador, Hasbun's series disrupts the past's certainty and thereby opens up other spaces and temporalities, or *terruños*, from which to envision El Salvador's self-determination and future.

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¹ The literature on the Salvadoran civil war is vast. For a general overview, see Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

² Muriel Hasbun, "Five Questions with Photographer Muriel Hasbun," Smithsonian American Art Museum, December 12, 2013, <https://americanart.si.edu/blog/eye-level/2013/12/564/five-questions-photographer-muriel-hasbun>.

³ For additional information about el laberinto, see Muriel Hasbun, "Galería el laberinto: Art in a Time of War," *Dialogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 165-172.

⁴ laberinto projects is a cultural memory and contemporary arts initiative that was founded by Hasbun, after her mother's death in 2012, to foster contemporary art practices, social inclusion, and dialogue in El Salvador and its diaspora.

See also <http://laberintoprojects.com/>.

⁵ For more on Izalco and its history, see Lee Siebert, Tom Simkin, and Paul Kimberly *Volcanoes of the World*, 3rd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁶ Claribel Alegría, "Interview with Claribel Alegría," interview by Carolyn Forché, *Index on Censorship* 13, no. 2 (1984): 11.

⁷ Manzar Foroohar, "Palestinians in Central America: From Temporary Emigrants to a Permanent Diaspora," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 13.

⁸ Muriel Hasbun, "Guggenheim Foundation Statement of Plan" (unpublished manuscript, September 18, 2020), typescript.

⁹ Arturo Arias, "Central American-Americans? Latino and Latin American Subjectivities," in *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2007), 186.

¹⁰ Hasbun, "Guggenheim Foundation."

¹¹ Muriel Hasbun reflects on this discovery in her "Once Upon 1984 in El Salvador" and "Pulse: New Cultural Registers/Pulso: Nuevos registros culturales," in *Art for the Future: Artists Call and Central American Solidarities*, ed. Erina Duganne and Abigail Satinsky (Los Angeles: Inventory Press, 2022), 228-230 and 234-235.

¹² Edward W. Soja outlines this theory of Thirdspace in his, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996).

¹³ Edward W. Soja, "Interview with Edward W. Soja: Thirdspace, Postmetropolis, and Social Theory," interview by Christian Borch, *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 3, no. 1 (2002): 113.

¹⁴ Edward W. Soja, "Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination," in *Human Geography Today*, ed. Doreen Massey, John Allen, and Philip Sarre (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 276.

¹⁵ Emil Wiechert, quoted in Holger Steffen et al., "From San Francisco to Tōkoku—111 yr of continuous earthquake recording in Göttingen," *History of Geo- and Space Sciences* 5, no. 1-10 (2014): 4.

¹⁶ Soja, "Thirdspace," 276.