

BIOGRAPHIES

Toronto artist, **Alicia Coutts**, received her MFA from NSCAD in 2009. Her work investigates the cultural and psychological identities of people in post conflict societies. Her photographic series, *The Lost Synagogues of Poland*, documented former synagogues, which are now being utilized for various secular purposes such as swimming pools, movie theaters and mechanic shops. With a deep interest in secret historical spaces, she pursued an Art Conservation post-baccalaureate at SACI University in Florence. Her thesis, *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in a Time of War*, examines strategies for the conservation of war affected UNESCO sites. Coutts is the Director of a conservation company dedicated to the preservation of cultural icons.

Born and raised in Southern Spain, **Coco Riot** grew up surrounded by pencils, comics, and stories of social revolutions. Using drawing, Coco focuses on the visual storytelling of political histories and mythologies through open and playful visual conversations. Coco's capacity for telling visual stories has been acknowledged by art professionals at an international level. Their art has been shown in contemporary art museums, artist-run centres, political events, and friends' living rooms. From Toronto to Berlin, from Seoul to Buenos Aires, from New York to their small hometown, Coco's art has received the support of different artistic and activist communities.

Rachel Gorman is Assistant Professor in the Graduate Program in Critical Disability Studies at York University, with a background in dance theatre and performance art. Since receiving her PhD from the University of Toronto in 2005 with a dissertation on cultural production, disability, and class consciousness, she has held a Lectureship at the Women and Gender Studies Institute of the University of Toronto, and Fellowships at Manchester Metropolitan University and the University at Buffalo. She has worked on the programming committee at A Space and the editorial committee of Fuse Magazine. She has two decades of anti-occupation and anti-violence experience.



May 31 – July 13, 2013

Unburying Our Histories

Alicia Coutts
Coco Riot

Essay by Rachel Gorman



Coco Riot, *Los Fantasmas #6*, Ink and Acrylic Paint on Paper, 2013, photographed by Salma Al Atassi

Opening Reception Friday May 31, 6–8 pm

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Unburying Our Dead

Unburying Our Histories lays bare the devastating intimacy of political violence, and the centrality of its denial to our unequal social and political reality. In works that trace their families' histories in meticulous detail, Alicia Coutts and Coco Riot have created vivid, trans-generational archives of genocide that confront us with the violence of their disavowal.

Coco Riot's *Los Fantomas* documents the 200,000 civilians killed by fascist troops and buried in mass graves during the Spanish civil war of 1936-1939. Historical knowledge of these killings remained suppressed by Franco's fascist regime from 1936-1975, and by liberal democratic governments since 1975. Riot's mural dwells in the "cohabitation between the dead and alive"¹—this cohabitation is complex and contradictory. While some panels detail the heartbreak of family members who seek to locate their loved ones and honour their resting place, most of the living seem unaware of the dead that lie under their feet. Riot's chronicling of the Spanish tourist industry details swimming and sunning northern European vacationers who are visually overwhelmed by the mass grave placed above them in the image. However, this historical oblivion is not expressed as naïveté, but rather as a willful un-knowing. In the same space, a migrant crouches on the beach, apprehended by police, yet unnoticed by the vacationers.

The small scale of the images, and the repetition of the act of recording hundreds of individuals, creates a terrible intimacy with the dead, with the mourning, with the survivors, and with the oblivious—each connection devastating in different ways. We witness blindfolded adults and children; a single bloody cane; a dead parent shielding their dead child; siblings holding hands. Riot's archival panels are meticulously researched, reenacting histories of specific massacres, and chronicling the brutality of the fascist suppression of civilians. The work includes references to anti-Roma racism that was a prominent feature of Franco's Spain, and continues in the present day. Visual symbols reference specific people, including members of Riot's family, and Republican poets and artists who are known to be among the dead. In an homage to Republican Internationalism, one panel reconstructs Norman Bethune's account of the massacre at Malaga.



Coco Riot, *Los Fantomas* #5, Ink and Acrylic Paint on Paper, 2012

Alicia Coutts's ghosts give us a striking representation of ways in which the unspoken is transmitted in families in *The House in which Florence Sabina Jantina Coutts-Zawadzki Grew Up*. The work takes up the post-war disavowal of Jewish identity, and the intimate enactment of racism within mixed families. Coutts' grandfather, born Jakub Frajermauer, was a Jewish doctor in wartime Poland, who escaped a transport train on the way to the camps,

and worked with resistance fighters in the forest. Having survived the war, he immigrated to Canada under his gentile identity, married a gentile who hated Jews, and continued to observe Judaism secretly. The work represents the uneasy household that followed. The living in the house cohabit with the dead—the artist's grandfather, represented as a doctor in a home examination room, tends to ghosts instead of patients; the artists' grandmother reads a book as a ghost peaks from behind the curtain; and the artists' mother sits alone in her room with a ghost under her bed.

In naming her mother in the title of the piece, Coutts draws our attention to her embodiment of these disavowed histories. We can engage with the work as witnesses, through the wonder of a dollhouse and the tactile engagement it evokes: dolls are meant to be touched and moved from room to room; furniture and fixtures turned over in our hands and replaced. Looking at this house reveals the hours of labour of recovering the intimate history of racism and of



Alicia Coutts, *The House in which Florence Sabina Jantina Coutts-Zawadzki Grew Up*, Mixed Medium, 2009

mass killings. The objects Coutts' creates through her uncovering become the documentation of ongoing histories of violence, and of racism enacted within family bonds. Coutts' work examines a question that emerges for children of mixed families whose histories have been suppressed: more than *having* a family secret, what does it mean to *be* the family secret?

These violences, experienced at the most intimate level, are, as all violences are, intensely political. Through the careful performance of unburying the dead, these works demand that we consider the political significance of violent forgetting. Jakub Frajermauer's work for the resistance, and the social organization of genocide, is buried under his racialization. Coutts' grandmother's last words to her mother were "You always looked like a Jew, smelled like a Jew, and talked like a Jew. And you will not survive the next Holocaust."²

Placing Riot's work alongside Coutts' returns the histories of the 1930s-1940s to the political contexts in which these two genocides were perpetrated. Bethune, like Frajermauer, was a doctor working in the Internationalist effort alongside the Republicans in the Spanish civil war, which was won by the fascists through the Nazis' support for Franco. Beyond liberal revisionism on all sides, the people's history shows us the centrality of the Republican loss for the success of German imperialist expansion and the concurrent mass murder of disabled children, communists, LGBT people, Roma, and Jews. In the context of this uncovered history, Riot prompts us to consider the ongoing disavowal of Franco's mass killings: the centrality of suppressing this history of Republicanism for a Spanish capitalist state; the importance of US postwar triumphalism in the international arena; and the global significance of recasting racist and imperialist genocide as a story of violent excess and Jewish exceptionalism.



Alicia Coutts, *The House in which Florence Sabina Jantina Coutts-Zawadzki Grew Up*, Detail, Mixed Medium, 2009

Unburying Our Histories turns us toward the affective work of the political. We might think of these apparitions as matter out of place: European hauntings in a middle-class Toronto household; Spanish genocide reproduced on paper and placed on walls. These works prompt us to unbury our dead and acknowledge that their disavowal continues our unequal social and political reality. We must honour the trans-generational archives that chronicle the intimate political violence and ongoing genocide of the Canadian settler colonial state.³ Haudenosaunee children lie southwest in unmarked mass graves near the Mohawk Institute in Brantford; Anishnaabeg children lie northwest outside the Indian Residential School in Spanish; and Cree children lie north at Bishop Horden Hall in Moose Factory.⁴

¹ Coco Riot, artist statement

² Alicia Coutts, artist statement

³ See, for example, Alanis Obomsawin (1971) *Christmas at Moose Factory* (NFB) and Nadia McLaren (2007) *Muffins for Granny* (Feather Productions)

⁴ Map of Residential Schools of Canada, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, <http://www.trc.ca/>, accessed April 2, 2013.