

## Human Human Rights

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Translated by Thérèse Tardio

It is very difficult to depict issues of human rights, for one can fall into facile binaries: good and evil, victim and victimizer. As for my murals that focus on this topic, I want them to represent something ghostly; I want them to raise questions. Art works through complexities, helping us both to understand and to complicate matters. Human rights are simultaneously abstract and concrete. Much has been written about the subject, but little has been drawn. At times I think that I will no longer work on this topic, but then I find a new edge, a new angle, and return to it.

How does one work on memory? I have not been exposed to much theory. Rather, I learned through my praxis. I began working on human rights in 1982 after the Malvinas War, a war that pained me deeply. I don't belong to the generation of the disappeared; I am a member of the Malvinas generation. As each day of the war passed, I was in shock. It seems that the country needed a genocide, and carried it out on six hundred young people from the next generation. In 1982, a month after the end of the Malvinas War, I started working on this subject in a comic strip called *Los Mutyladitos*, which was published in the magazine *Superhumor*. It was three pages long and was reprinted in my first book, *REP!* I remember the circumstances: I had ended a relationship in a time of social and political crisis, which was reflected in the comic strip. The protagonists (a couple), were mutilated like the rest of society, without legs. Alongside a romantic breakup there was the disintegration of society, with its symbolic actors in

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the background: the military, the judges, the police, the politicians, and the mothers with their scarves. Everything was crumbling into pieces. And even when something was born, it emerged crippled. That is my instinctual way of working on the topic—from the micro to the macro, with anonymous people, with pain, with hope, showing everything, with Eros and Thanatos. Memory was always there: both history and personal experience have to be present. It is important not to forget, even in new situations; show everything without melancholy and see what can be done with it.

I have had an informative approach to human rights since the transition to democracy. I was working for the magazine *Humor Registrado* during the last phase of the dictatorship. Through the magazine I had access to news and information, much of which was shocking. Then came democracy and the prosecution of the military juntas, and I had a lot of contact with former detainees, as well as with children, parents, relatives, and now grandchildren. In 1987 *Página/12*, a newspaper dedicated to human rights, made its appearance. And I worked on human rights issues on a regular basis. Like a Russian doll, with human rights, you open something and you continue to find more.

My work on memory feeds on what I have lived, what I have read, and what I believe it means to be on the side of the defeated. That is my ethical and aesthetic decision. I am like a customhouse of existing memories with possibilities of future ones. I choose the erotic side, what gives life, rather than the many variants of Thanatos. The most valuable of materials is what nourishes life. I do not understand why other graphic artists (specifically *humoristas*) do not work on these issues. History is the understanding of the present; it is sheer humanism. And if it can be transformed into a work of art, it can even become beautiful. What I can't explain is how, from a young age, I ended up working so much on this topic when there aren't any precedents in the graphic artist and comic strip tradition. It was always customary to work on current happenings, the quotidian, the colloquial.



March 24, 2012, *Página/12*



September 27, 2006, *Página 12*

I have been interested in human rights since the dictatorship. While I continue working on the topic of the dictatorship, I also work on other topics: the Malvinas War, my own family, and the dramas that have been playing out in these twenty-nine years of democracy. Such was also the case when I worked with the history of Argentina for my *Mural del Bicentenario*, which I did, as I always do, from both the micro and the macro perspectives. The subject of human rights constantly renews itself and is not limited to state terrorism. The dictatorship in Argentina may have ended, but there are human rights violations all over the world.



March 24, 2011, *Página 12*



December 29, 2001, *Página 12*

For me, humor, which has the same root as the word *humanism*, uses pain as its primary source. My themes are pain and death. That is what I work on, and I try to provide another interpretation, one that questions the solemnity that surrounds pain and death. I think of humor as a multidisciplinary exercise, an activity that is intertwined with many humanistic subjects, such as philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, history (memory), dramaturgy, poetry, and the visual arts. In other words, everything that leads to a better understanding of the essence of humanity, from as many viewpoints as possible. And, in my case, being on the side of the defeated entails first a sensuous decision and then a rational one. The latter leads directly to pain and sorrow, which are both the antithesis of humor and inseparable from it. The raw material for humor is pain, as is sorrow, which is my point of departure for understanding, accompanying, and dismantling the solemnity that is often generated by extreme pain. Humor can be a humanistic activity, and therefore a reflection on human rights. Take, for example, the issue of human trafficking. I had not worked on this topic in my drawings until recently. I did some research and then over the last year I began working on it in my strips for *Página/12* and in my mural *Twelve, Human Rights*.



October 18, 2012, *Página/12*

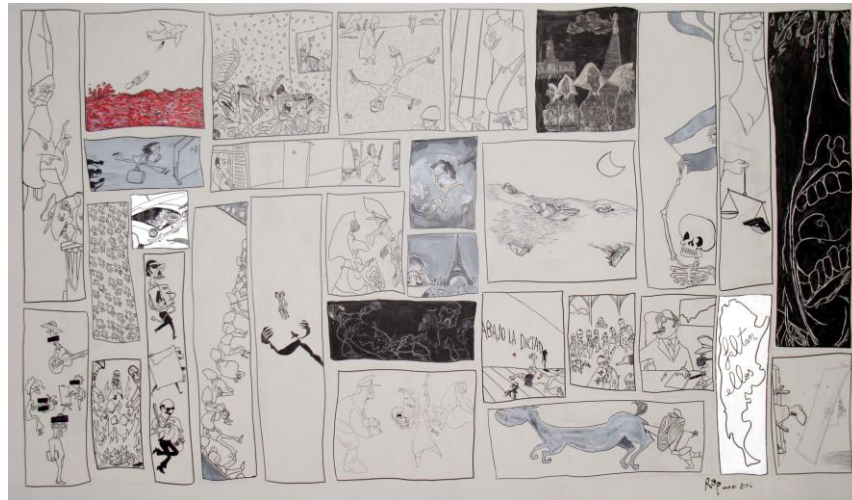


December 13, 2012, *Página/12*

I am a graphic artist, with all the faults that this medium entails. In other words, I think about visual impacts on broad audiences. I think about synthesis, based on drawing, through line strokes. I bring all of this baggage to murals large and small, to different media and destinations. But there is always in me a desire to convey to the audience the intention of what I am drawing, doing so with a firm concept of color and line, aiming to make my work as free as possible when it comes to form. The graphic intention is *masividad* and the mural is shown in situ, with the public connecting with the original in the space where it was created. The destination is different, even though the artist does not change. A daily comic strip is not the same as a twelve-meter piece of wood installed in the National Library. A weekly page is not the same as a book or as a wall in the open air in some distant and historic city.

A newspaper always affords one the opportunity to work on the same subject time and again, to add subtleties, to become obsessed and to emphasize. The medium is there every day, and I have been given the privilege of artistic freedom. A mural, on the other hand, is a single opportunity: everything has to be there, and what isn't gets left out. There are no second chances, no room for regret, nor can you emphasize the theme. You do it, you know that it is finished, and it stays that way. With comic strips you implicitly hope that the work can be lost, forgotten, or redone. They are two very different media and I like both of them, although perhaps I like murals a bit better because they allow me a chance to spread out, to open up in a way that the limited format of comics does not. Murals are sheer excitement; it's like being a tightrope walker without a net. Murals force you to encounter your own limits—technical, expressive, and physical. While you can say “the end” or “to be continued” with printed work, murals can only be abandoned.

In 2006, marking the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of the civic-military dictatorship, which lasted from 1976 to 1983, I was invited to exhibit in three vaulted rooms in the Spanish Cultural Center in Rosario. It was an opportunity to exhibit work from my entire career, from all media and in all sizes. They also asked me to do a mural. We chose as a canvas an MDF measuring 1.5 meters, and I began to work. I opted to do a sort of comic, a mural in squares, that when seen up close would not narrate anything sequential. I decided to do thirty scenes from life under the dictatorship and to call the mural *Treinta*. The composition is very elaborate. While the lack of rigidity in the squares and lines might suggest otherwise, it is very carefully thought out.



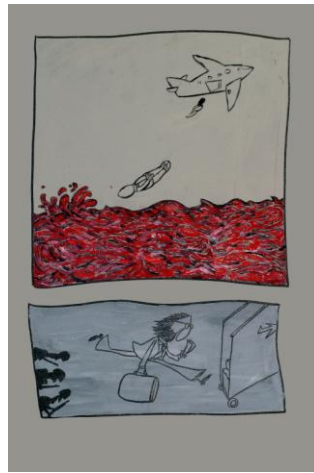
*Treinta* (2006)



*Treinta* (2006) [detail]

The scenes are very raw, and some seemingly impossible. Nevertheless, they are realistic—what I mean by that is that they are, paradoxically, possible. Others, like the horse or the map, are stylized and metaphorical. My drawing is grotesque. I used an expressionistic tone. Many of the scenes are obvious—exile, torture, stolen babies, Malvinas, Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, abduction victims—but in order to get to thirty, I had to use more imagination. Thirty is a lot, and I wanted each one to be unique.





*Treinta* (2006) [detail]



*Treinta* (2006) [detail]



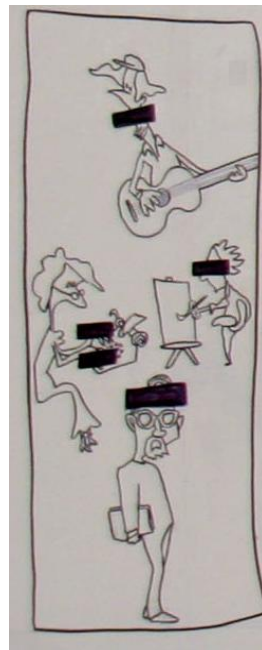
*Treinta* (2006) [detail]

If we think about it, there are not so many micro themes within the macro. It took a lot of effort to do thirty paintings that did not repeat motifs. In any case, the purpose of the mural *Treinta* is to discuss what happened

during the Argentine dictatorship. The first image I did was of the death flights, one of the few that employs color. The base is a pearl gray, and the other colors are black, grays, white, and red. Two paintings stand out for their use of *grattage* over black. Basically, the subjects are power, the complicity of the Church, death flights, the 1978 World Cup, the Malvinas War, prison, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, nationalism, justice, torture, exile, pillaging, censorship, the burning of books, the disappeared, abductions, the stealing of babies, the financial and business power that drove the dictatorship, and terror in the streets.



*Treinta* (2006) [detail]



*Treinta* (2006) [detail]



I completed the mural in Rosario, Santa Fe. It was later shown at the ArteBA art fair in Buenos Aires, and the Argentine ambassador in Madrid subsequently requested that it be installed in his official residence in Spain, where it has been ever since.



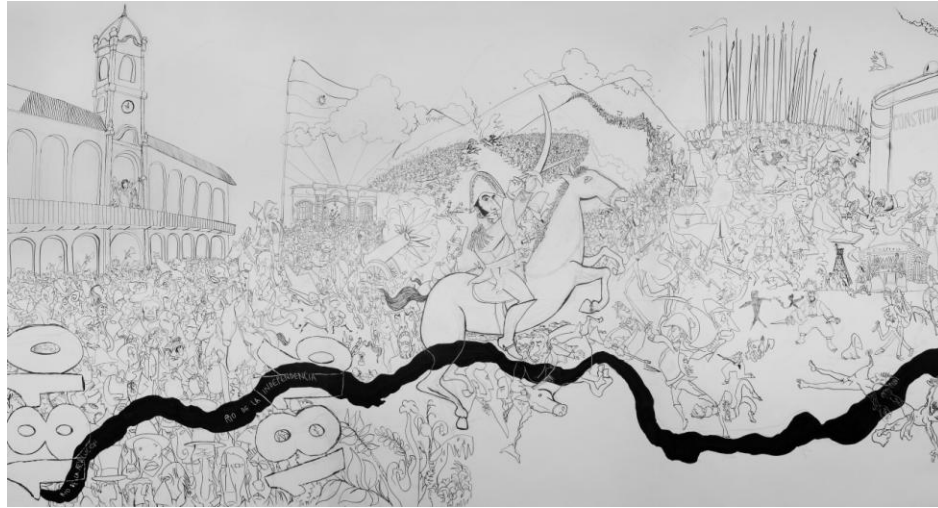
*Treinta (2006) [detail]*

Very recently, in May 2012, the Office of Human Rights in the School of Economics at the University of Buenos Aires commissioned me to do an allegorical mural for the victims of state terror from that school, for the disappeared workers and students. I selected one of the drawings from the mural *Treinta*, a map that reads “faltan ellos” (they are missing). In contrast to the original, I added the Malvinas. The mural measures about six meters wide; its cement slabs are mounted on the wall in an outside courtyard. I wanted to create a visually powerful image with conceptual clarity, one that could be seen from a distance, so I chose to use black and white.

My work has an undeniable narrative quality. This is due to my old habits and my origins: I am a cartoonist and I make my living telling stories, whether with one picture or with several. They are two different ways of narrating: through sequences of strips, or with only one. Both in the aforementioned murals that directly address the theme of human rights and in what is perhaps my most well-known work, the Bicentennial mural, I use single pictures and narratives that do not depend on sequences.



*Mural del Bicentenario (2010)*



*Mural del Bicentenario (2010) [section]*



*Mural del Bicentenario (2010) [Section]*



*Mural del Bicentenario (2010)*

In the Bicentennial mural, I decided to tell many micro histories in one frieze in order to narrate two hundred years of Argentine history in a single drawing. The panel is 12.2 meters long. To work on memory, first you have to know what you are talking about: you either lived it, or read it, or both. There is the subjective and the more or less objective (dates, places, people). I am moved by the lived experience, or remnants of what I have not lived but that continues to have repercussions today. There is memory of what is current and memory of events that took place prior to our birth. Memory teaches us that there are no exact dates, except when it comes to natural disasters. There is transformation. There is a before March 24, 1976, that culminates in that date, but whose antecedents date back to the dictatorships of the 1930s and the practice of state terrorism exercised by the Argentina Anticommunist Alliance (Triple A). There is September 1955. Trelew. Triple A. And then there is resonance on a more personal level: a repressive school or an authoritarian father and, at the same time, a rebellious personality.



*Mural del Bicentenario (2008) [detail]*

There is something like a visual continuum, a timeline without the interruptions of the comic strip. History as gradient: popular milestones, protests, social changes, and anonymous heroes. These are my opinions, my metaphors about certain concepts. When working on human rights, artists usually appeal to the macro. I prefer to also include the micro. I like to look through a magnifying glass.



*Mural del Bicentenario (2010) [detail]*



*Mural del Bicentenario (2010) [detail]*



*Mural del Bicentenario (2010) [detail]*

When I do a comic strip, there is a narrative intent, usually linear, to progress sequentially from drawing to drawing. But when I do my section *Postales* (Postcards), each drawing in itself tells a story. They are narrative interruptions. Time comes and goes and is not linear. They are disruptive and anticlimactic. When I do murals like *Treinta* or *Twelve*, I use the same process that I do in the postcards. It is not necessary to tell a story in a sequence, since I use neither text nor empathic characters. Each picture dramatizes a particular memory. It is all there. If I needed to develop a message, I would use a sequence, with text and characters that repeated from drawing to drawing. In the Bicentennial mural, I used a different process. It is neither a comic strip nor a postcard. It isn't a drawing of a frozen moment. They are different visual alternatives to tell a story and transmit an idea.

The mural *Twelve, Human Rights* that I did at the University of Minnesota is clearly the work of an Argentine, with scenes from the last dictatorship (such as the death flights). But I expanded on these scenes in some of the drawings to include human rights in a current and universal way, one that goes beyond the tyranny of that period and is made current. Thus the themes of torture, injustice, genocide, human trafficking. The mural consists of two canvases stretched over frames, independent yet complementary. Moreover, it is colorful, reminiscent of comics in composition but without a sequential narrative, except in one case. Each drawing tells its own story. There are twelve paintings. One panel is dominated by cold colors, the other by warm colors. Black repeats in both. It is intended to be an indoor piece.



*Twelve, Human Rights* (2012)

There isn't a premeditated sequence or narrative progression. Rather, the composition has been guided by visual preference and an aesthetic decision. The spaces between the drawings and the order are the whim of the eye upon designing the whole composition. The mural speaks of repression, of trafficking and prostitution, of disappearances, of death flights, of cultural battles, of the complicity of silence and the end of silence, of the struggle of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, of justice, of state violence, of the businessmen who pulled the strings, and of the stealing of babies.





*Twelve, Human Rights (2012) [detail]*



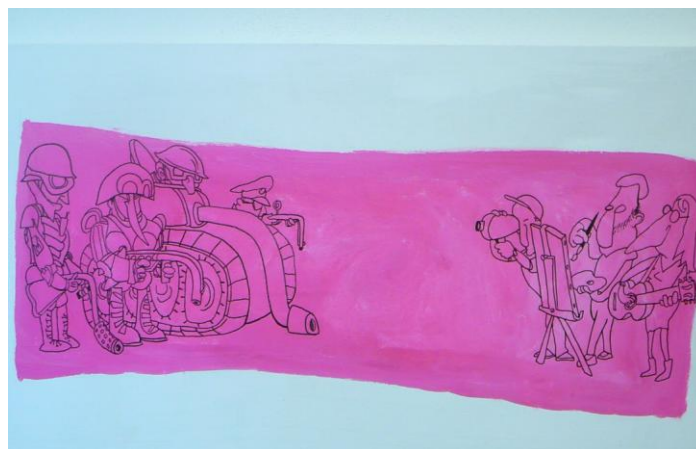
*Twelve, Human Rights (2012) [detail]*

There is an artistic process stemming from the grotesque, a place near humor, very distant from a realist aesthetic. What this work expresses leads to a distance that mitigates pain and ominous themes. For example, in the case of torture, in the dictatorships, it's necessary for people to be mute, and to turn a deaf ear to the abduction of their neighbors. Authoritarianism depends on silence.



*Twelve, Human Rights (2012) [detail]*

Another painting from *Twelve* makes reference to cultural battles as a form of resistance. During times when defeat was everywhere, culture carried the torch, the flag of resistance. When laws of impunity devastated the country, a collective of militants, organizations, intellectuals, and artists continued to demand an end to impunity. There were two decades of defeat until a confluence of factors led to the reexamination of all this, and that is what is happening today in Argentina: justice has returned to pass judgment; the laws of impunity have been repealed. The struggle of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo has borne fruit, as over a hundred missing grandchildren have been found.

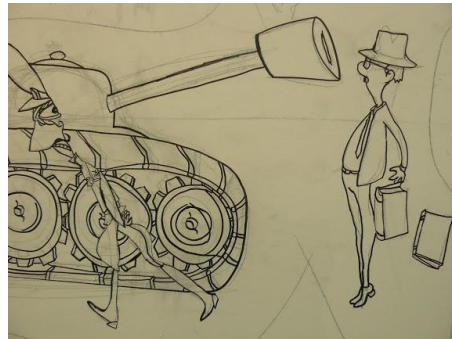


*Twelve, Human Rights (2012) [detail]*

Art has filled its resistance quota. It's not my job to study exactly how much. What I can say is that from the perspective of humor, little has been done. Certainly, in the battle between the conservative powers that supported impunity and genocide and the progressive critique, the role of culture was indispensable.



*Mural del Bicentenario [detail]*



*Mural del Bicentenario [detail]*



*Treinta [detail]*

Literature is an essential component in my creative work. I use it through the metaphor of speaking books. Art is the least of it, as the superimposition of images would be redundant. Literary material is both stranger and friend. It brings what is lacking; it accompanies, teaches, and displaces. It nourishes, opens doors, and channels. It is anchored in the word, an absence that tells other stories. The book as shelter, where memory has taken refuge. What remains. Liberty, imprisoned there. The distillery of ideas. Danger. Literature.

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