

‘T.O. (Theater of Operations)’,
by Arnaldo Simón, a plea about our era

BY JANET BATET

In June 1940, facing the imminent Nazi invasion of France, Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti fled the French capital. During his escape, he confronted the horrors of war: severed bodies among the rubble of bombed cities. From this traumatic experience emerged his iconic piece *La Main* (1947). This exploration of bodily fragments is directly linked in his work to an extreme experience where, according to Giacometti himself, there lies “something both alive and dead simultaneously.”

This is also the point of departure for the outstanding solo exhibition *T.O. (Theater of Operations)* by Cuban artist Arnaldo Simón, currently based in Miami. Open to the public at Zapata Gallery and comprising around thirty pieces that combine drawing, sculpture, installation, and video, the exhibition offers a powerful commentary on our era and the post-World War II theater of operations in which we are still immersed, even if we are often unaware of it. The military term that gives the exhibition its title—used to define conflict zones—serves here as a guide for the viewer to navigate the complex and hard-to-define territories of contemporary society into which the artist immerses us.

Le Main d’après Giacometti and *Cerca de San Sebastián* (2023 and 2024, respectively) welcome visitors. The first functions as both a tribute and an extension of the same conflict and humanist concerns that preoccupy both artists. Though both hands are cast in bronze, *La Main d’après Giacometti* reveals a kind of cyborg. The direct contact between the human arm and Giacometti’s imprint on the plaster used to model the piece has disappeared. This mediation prompts a reconsideration of how we approach war today, in an era where drones have evolved into versatile and lethal weapons. In the case of *Cerca de San Sebastián*, it is a video installation in which the water’s ripples distort the geometry of a crowd-control barrier lying at the bottom of a lake. The installation evokes muffled voices beneath the water, while the reverberations allude to the system’s ability to absorb—and thus neutralize—protest.

Untitled, 2024, is a monolith that rises as a monument to contemporary society. The piece, resembling a massive block of concrete with minimalist roots, reveals only half of a loudspeaker. The striking work references social media, which seems to promise us a voice while actually trapping us ever more deeply in echo chambers that accelerate political polarization and undermine the possibility of dialogue.

Taking as a starting point Vitruvius’ Triad (“Firmness, Utility, and Beauty”), *Firmitas, Utilitas, Venustas*, 2025 consists of 14 acrylic templates. Each is dedicated to a building destroyed throughout history by war, terrorism, or regime change. Perforated with elements from original blueprints intended for reconstruction, these designs could become security risks in times of war if they fall into enemy hands.

Behind *Firmitas, Utilitas, Venustas* echoes the Greek principle of *kalokagathia*, combining physical beauty with moral virtue.

The striking graphite drawing series, composed of six diptychs juxtaposing civil and military architectural typologies, explores the mutual feedback between government administration and defense strategy. This confrontation exposes the subterfuge in our daily lives: governments manage civilian and military matters divergently, creating an apparent separation between the two spheres, even though in practice they influence each other—while citizens bear an unconscious burden in the state’s military actions. The contrast between civilian and military structures with similar architectural solutions highlights the tangible interconnectedness of both sectors of society.

The Roaring Twenties, 2024, is a sound installation that draws a compelling analogy between the 1920s of this century and those of the last—the so-called “Roaring Twenties,” a carefree period that preceded the Great Depression. In the piece, two opposing but inaudible sound forces compete for dominance of the space: on one side, world leaders (political, religious, corporate) are laughing; on the other, the cries of protesters, riots, and prisoners can be heard. These forces, seemingly antagonistic but inextricably linked, are held in tension, underscored by four tension rods and a central anthropomorphic structure that maintains a fragile balance. Beneath the surface, a concealed tangle of wires evokes both the impossibility of distinguishing one side from the other and a subterranean network of connections, akin to a mycelium.

At the end of the final gallery, we find *Diubis*, 2025, the first installation in a series focused on sacrifice and its contemporary meaning. *Diubis* is based on the study of various photographs of the lifeless, bullet-riddled body of Diubis Laurencio Tejeda, a 36-year-old man killed during the July 11 protests in Cuba. The artist recreates bone fragments, arranging them in a structure that evokes both a climbing wall and a columbarium. The installation, somber yet playful, functions simultaneously as a monument and a gesture of forgetting.

T.O. (Theater of Operations) by Arnaldo Simón is a remarkably relevant exhibition that stands out for the artist’s undeniable technical mastery, the conceptual strength of the work, and the timeliness of its proposal.

Janet Batet is a writer, curator, and art critic.
She contributes to various publications, galleries, and museums.
janetbatet@gmail.com

