

FROM THE SEPTEMBER 2006 ISSUE OF *MODERN PAINTERS*



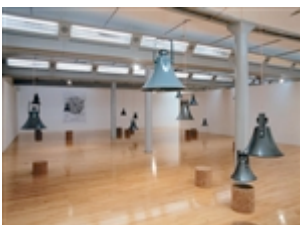
Oswaldo Maciá
Portrait by Leon Chew

Artists: Oswaldo Maciá

by Sally O'Reilly



Oswaldo Maciá
Portrait by Leon Chew



"Surrounded in Tears" (2004) Installation view, London Biennial, Tate Liverpool, 2004
Oswaldo Maciá (with Jasper Morrison and Michael Nyman)

—

Since the Enlightenment humans have positioned themselves at the center of information structures, applying the quantifiable yardsticks of language and measurement to epistemology. But the truth of the matter is that we are biologically ill equipped to come anywhere close to understanding the universe.

As Colombian artist **Oswaldo Maciá** points out, we are limited not only by such intellectual implements as language—which, although enabling us to communicate verbally, closes down other, more abstract modes of comprehension—but also simple physical incapacities, such as being unable to hear any sound that falls outside the range of 2–20 MHz.

This surely means, Maciá reminds us, that we have no real right to claim superiority over other species. His work with animal sounds is not simply an aestheticized appropriation of natural forms but a calling card for the overlooked forces that lurk in the sonic landscape of nature.

The sound sculpture *Diversion End* (2005), made for the **Zoo Art Fair** in London, comprised a scaffolding tower that supported megaphones through which 21 audio channels of animal calls played. ___Of the 4,859 animals in **London Zoo**, Maciá selected 100 and acquired audio recordings of them from the **British Library** sound archive, orchestrating them within a three-dimensional arrangement, the pitch rising and falling as the audio traveled up and down the tower. Intimations of human cultural power resonate throughout the piece—through its vertical architectural structure, the connotations of the despotic megaphones, and a banner printed with the image of Eve handing Adam a banana, replacing the apple of knowledge with the suggestion of our simian origins and brute survival instincts.

The “diversion” of the title is typical of Maciá’s manipulation of the multiplicity of language. He encourages antagonistic interpretations, offering us more than one route to the realm of meaning. Here, “diversion” might refer to innocent leisure pursuits or an inconvenient detour, while the title of another sound piece, *Vesper* (2000), evokes a tangle of associations, from evensong to the generic idea of a beautiful woman to the weavers of Greek myth who had the power to reverse

time by unraveling their work.

Maciá embarked on the project as a response to a psychologist's claim that women's oral-history archives were made up almost entirely of accounts of rape, abuse and other abjectly negative experiences. As a rejoinder Maciá collected optimistic stories, anecdotes and memories recounted by women around the world, from China to the Caribbean to London, and sculpted them into an impenetrable wall of voices that occasionally subsides to reveal a clear, individual account.

A related but atmospherically different piece, *Symphony, Something Going on Above My Head* (1999), is a soundscape made up of the songs of 2000 birds from Africa, Europe, America, and the Far East. Although the piece is reconfigured for each space in which it is shown, the basic format is a number of speakers arranged high up on gallery walls or in outdoor locations—a public square in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, for example—that relay a treetop cacophony through which singular voices occasionally break.

Analogies might be drawn with the endless variability of societies and individuals, or we can consider this piece in less anthropomorphic terms: not only do we not understand any of these avian messages, we are unlikely to hear a vast number of them ever again, as *Symphony* represents an entirely imaginary ecosystem that could never occur in the wild. Maciá has used birdsong as a geometrical unit with which to sculpt a synthesis of natural beauty and human, mathematical structure—but it is difficult to decide if the result is awesome or absurd, a triumph of technology or a symptom of our often-devastating meddlesome impulses.

Maciá's projects often have a global reach, using samples taken from audio archives around the world, and occasionally he collaborates with practitioners from other disciplines to reflect his broad sensory and anthropological scope in the form of the work.

Surrounded in Tears (2004), at **Tate Liverpool**, was a soundscape of 100 voices crying, taken from international sources. Preexisting

samples—of ululation from Palestine, morose singing in Romania, and the first recording of Australian Aboriginal death wails, made on a wax cylinder in 1898—as well as babies' cries recorded by midwives especially for the artist, were embedded in a background score written by **Michael Nyman** for two pianos and two organs. Industrial designer **Jasper Morrison's** installation, with megaphones hanging from the ceiling above stools that look like giant corks, brought a strangely restrained, public-lounge inflection to the sound of profoundly personal activity.

Provoked/Evoke (2002) brought together Morrison's contemporary aesthetic and the work of 17th-century natural philosopher **John Wilkinson**, who listed the 57 animals that entered Noah's Ark and categorized them as clean or unclean. In defiance of this patrician act so typical of the Enlightenment, Maciá collected the feces of all the listed animals from private zoos and wildlife parks around the UK and had them blended by a perfumer into a single composite scent. Morrison's diffuser stands in the gallery echoing the form of a quadruped, gently wafting its chimerical odor about the environment as if claiming the territory.

In Maciá's multisensory installations, which might be any combination of visual, auditory and olfactory, he performs a sort of pincer movement on the viewer: if the linguistic or associative intention passes them by, the knockout smell will surely get them.

The installation of *Vesper* in the 2004 **Shanghai Biennale**, for example, was augmented by 2,000 roses hung from the ceiling, filling the room with their scent. Maciá explains his decision to lure the viewers with a romantic undertow as a reaction to the speed and apparent impatience with which they passed through the gallery. The floral wafts were inescapable, even if the audio was unnoticed.

Memory Skip (1995) was less pincer than frontal assault on visitors to the **Lisson Gallery** in London. A large yellow metal dumpster, like those used in the construction industry, was filled with four tons of pine-scented cleaning fluid so that the air was entirely saturated with the smell. Here the olfactory response was overwhelming, but there was a secondary, sculptural element to the encounter that relates to

Minimalism: the hard bulk of the form and the harsh reek of the pine a somewhat macho bid for theatricality.

Memory Skip's title describes the associative mechanism of smell, transporting us to another time and place, with the pine scent triggering any number of domestic memories and the inference of cleanliness. (This association with sanitation is apparently international, even though pine trees aren't indigenous to South America; not only is pine-scented cleaning fluid available there, it can be four times stronger than in it is Europe.)

Maciá's accompanying CD, *The Sound of Smell* (2005), is a recording of a room in which pine needles had been pureed in a blender, their aromatic sap saturating the atmosphere.

His intention is to offer a synesthetic alternative to what is essentially an acrid pollutant when used in great proportions. Yet synesthesia—the confusion between the senses and their conceptual associations, manifest, say, as the texture of a day of the week or the smell of the sound of a door closing—is a literal substitution that could at first appear to be metaphoric. The difference between synesthesia and metaphor, however, is that whereas the latter is a function of communication, the former is an idiosyncratic construction of the individual's brain.

Unlike literature, which employs metaphor to discuss the abstract in a mode that offers the potential—ideally at least—of universal understanding, Maciá's synesthetic endeavors are far from a clarification of the world at large. Rather, they surround us with crumbling edifices of miscommunication, contradiction and willful confusion.

MODERN PAINTERS, the preeminent visual and performing arts magazine, is available at finer newsstands everywhere. [Click here for subscription information.](#)

Portraits of Oswaldo Maciá by Leon Chew. Image of "Surrounded in Tears" courtesy of the artist.