Relic Aesthetics:

Human Remains in the Work of Teresa Margolles

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Birds, plants, astronomical symbols, and miniaturized figures decorate the surface of *Tela Bordada* (2012), a colorful textile embroidered by a collective of Indigenous artists in Guatemala using an ancient Maya technique (Fig. 1). The lively yet contained imagery is centered on the square piece of fabric, surrounded by a thick undecorated border. What at first glance looks like an animated design with a youthful innocence is haunted by a bodily presence. Blood, of a woman murdered in Guatemala City, stains the fabric in scattered blotches all over the surface. Some of these red-brown marks are visible in the border that frames the embroidered section, while the rest of the stains are less noticeable buried underneath the colorfully sewn additions. This decision to center the crowded square design on the fabric but still leave enough room on the edges not to obscure the blood stains mediates the viewer's encounter with the remnants a violent event. In effect, the design reveals the artistic desire to contain the devastating details of the past with the hopeful tone of the present.

Figure 1: Teresa Margolles, *Tela bordada (Embroidered fabric)*, 2012, traditional Maya embroidery on fabric; made by indigenous activist women from Guatemala (Lucy Andrea López, Silvia Menchú, Bonifacia Cocom Tambriz, María Josefina Tuy Churunel, Marcelina Cumes, Rosamelia Cocolajay, Yury Cocolajay, Alba Cocolajay and Cristina López). Previously, in the morgue, the fabric absorbed the fluids of a woman's body that was murdered in Guatemala City. Unique, 200 x 200 cm (78 3/4 x 78 3/4 in.). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich. Photo: NGC. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zurich/Paris.

This textile is representative of a broader series of textile-based works addressing femicide in Latin America. The murdered woman's blood was collected and used by contemporary Mexican artist, Teresa Margolles (b. 1963), who worked as a forensic pathologist in the Mexico City morgue in the early 1990s before she became an artist. In this role, she prepared corpses for autopsy, performed scrupulous investigations looking for each cause of death, and consulted with family members of identified bodies. Her professional background might at first seem unusual for an artist, but her previous career continues to deeply inform her practice. Making use of various materials derived from the morgue or crime site, Margolles continually aims to transgress institutional boundaries. *Tela Bordada,* for instance, transports blood from the site of a murder into the supposedly antiseptic space of the white-walled art gallery. While Margolles stages provocations through her unexpected treatment of the crime

scene, her interventions do more than just increase the visibility of violence in society. *Tela Bordada* and similar works possess the conceptual thrust that drives Margolles's practice. She continually challenges notions of site specificity and evidence and puts these concepts to use in non-judicial settings. Her past experience working in the morgue allows her to straddle the analysis-driven realm of the examiner's office and the aesthetically-driven politics of the artist's studio. Her work addresses drug wars, border violence, immigration, transgender rights, and femicide by using material traces connected with real events. Additionally, art's unobstructed movement between museums, art fairs, and galleries questions what it means to move safely across borders made possible by institutional funding and protection.[1]

These textiles are complicated objects that integrate evidence of violence into works presented as art in gallery and museum circuits. This article investigates how the human potency of these textiles and their designs affect collaborators and viewers in communal and institutional spaces. Given their corporeal nature, are they better described as relics than artworks and to what extent are such terms useful in describing their agency in the world? How do they present or frame violence in their sourcing, production, and presentation?

Although Margolles works in a wide array of mediums including photography, sculpture, ceramics, and installation, this article focuses on a selection of her textile works to argue that they function like religious relics. As Margolles attempts to show in her practice, and as recent studies in art history by Julia Skelly, Mechthild Fend, and Susan Sidlauskas focused on human skin have also shown, the delicate and sometimes translucent qualities of textiles make possible

[1] Margolles's work is especially attuned to the US/Mexico border given her previous and continued work in northern Mexican cities like Ciudad Juárez and Culiacán. For more discussion on Margolles and borderlands, see Pastor Mellado, Justo. "Teresa Margolles And the Boundaries of the Artistic Intuition." *Art Nexus* 9, no. 77 (April 2010): 54-8.

fruitful comparisons between the epidermis and fabric-based crafts.[2] Similarly, needle-based crafts like embroidery approximate the stitching involved in suturing bodies after autopsy. In one iteration of a textile titled *Sutura* (or "Suture"), for example, Margolles sought the help of migrants along the Colombian-Venezuelan border (Fig. 2). The textile was stained with blood from murders that occurred in the nearby border town of Cúcuta.[3] She supplied materials for her collaborators to stitch long horizontal registers of thread across a large sheet of fabric. This process of stitching the cloth closely resembles the suturing that takes place in the morgue when the postmortem technician sews up the body after conducting a careful medical examination of the internal organs. Lines repeat and reappear across numerous works like scars across various yet linked surfaces—fabric, flesh, and land.

The connections become most viscerally apparent in *Línea Fronteriza* (2005-present). In this series, Margolles photographs the long suture mark left on bodies in the morgue following autopsies. These photographs contribute to a growing archive that is enlarged and cropped to zoom in on the scar, drawing further connections between body/land and scar/border. Each photograph centers on a different sutured stomach. Seeing these works in person is disturbing, alarming, and disorienting, especially because they show the coroner's seam from above.[4] These

[2] For textile and skin connections see Julia Skelly, *Skin Crafts: Affect, Violence and Materiality in Global Contemporary Art* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022) and Mechthild Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1650–1850*, 1st ed.(Manchester University Press, 2017). For skin and painting connections see Susan Sidlauskas, "Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent's Madame X." *American Art* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 8–33. Performance Studies scholar, Petra Kuppers, furthers the idea of the "scar" as a location for meaning-making that parallels this discussion, Petra Kuppers, *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[3] See Corey Loftus, "Bloodstained: Teresa Margolles and the Venezuelan Migration Crisis," *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 4, no. 3 (July 1, 2022): 44–53. Margolles has collaborated on bloodstained textiles with civilians without artistic backgrounds. In these cases, she controls the design and asks her collaborators to add to the bloodstained textiles according to her instructions. Margolles has exhibited different iterations of *Sutura* in Colombia, Croatia, and Germany.

[4] Many of the photographs included in *Linea Fronteriza* include tattoos as evidence of mark-making on the body in relation to mark-making on the land as borders. Julia Banwell writes on the significance of tattoos in connection to the US/Mexican border, see Banwell, Julia. "Ink and Identities: The Politics of Bodies and Borders in *Sin Nombre*." *Hispanic Research Journal* 19, no. 1 (February 2018): 3–13.

associations between textile and skin, border and scar, body and land appear continuously in Margolles's work in reference to each other. Even though these explicitly linear marks are absent from the figural imagery that dominates *Tela Bordada*, this work and the other examples discussed in this essay are still involved in the larger project aimed at connecting people, places, medical examinations in the morgue through iterative means.

The textiles examined in the following represent a stylistic departure from Margolles's post-minimalist style, as characterized by the sparse geometric design, limited range of color, and large-scale installation of *Sutura*. Post-minimalists are known to refer to the body through not-figurative means. For instance, Eva Hesse's use of latex and fiberglass exemplify the ways that sculptural materials can acquire biomorphic connotations and, over time, turn brittle and evermore fragile like the aging human body. Margolles conjures this bodily presence with blood. Three textiles discussed here, including *Tela Bordada* (2012)*, Gerlaine GG Om Pão Com Molho: Identidade desconhecida / Gerlaine GG Om Pão Com Molho: Unknown Identities* (2014) and *Dylegued (Entierro) / Dylegued (Burial)* (2013) exhibit a range of stylistic approaches and embrace explicitly figural elements, craft-based materials, and narrative themes. They were fashioned by the skilled labor of textile-based artists who either live or work locally to the scene of the murder evinced in the bloodstains specific to each textile. Margolles provided her collaborators with the bloodstained textile but gave them full freedom to design it to their liking. Though many of these textiles exhibit color and figural elements usually absent from Margolles's work, they share a material similarity with the rest of her oeuvre, which consistently addresses violence and death through the incorporation of bodily remains. Looking closely at the broad range of designs that resulted from the confrontation with bloodstains suggests a corresponding diversity of reactions to violence and death. Bodily remains elevate Margolles's

work to a relic-like status, thus increasing their power to effect political change and affect viewers.

In the following analysis I examine the connection between Margolles's art and sacrality by describing the relationship between relics and the law of contagion, relics and politics, and relics and violence. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework from art history, psychology, and religious studies, I argue that viewing Margolles's textile collaborations as relics transforms sacred traces of violence into catalysts for political action. Simultaneously, this transformation functions to expand religious studies scholars' understanding of relics and to challenge art historians to reconsider sacrality in contemporary secular art.

Relics and Contagion

Due to the wide use of human remains in Margolles's artistic practice, her artworks are often described as relics.[5] Relics are, by definition, venerated objects derived from or connected

[5] Sharon Larisch, for example, notes their "relic-like potency…Margolles's work resembles the transfer of remains (translationes) or of elements placed in saints' graves (for example, vials of oil, wine, or water, samples of stone or plaster: materials called brandea, pallioa, and sancuria) that occurred in response to a shortage of saints' relics in particular areas." See Sharon Larisch, "Space and Potentiality: The Crime Scenes of Roberto Bolaño and Teresa Margolles." *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 4 (2016): 445. Rebecca Scott Bray describes Margolles's work as "relics," see "Uneasy Evidence The Medico-Legal Portraits of Teresa Margolles and Libia Posada." *Griffith Law Review* 22, no. 1 (April 2013): 40. In her book on Margolles, Julia Banwell describes the "obvious parallel" between bodily remains in Margolles's work and the aesthetics of relics and display in the Catholic Church. Banwell argues this connection speaks to the prevalence of Catholicism in Mexico. See Banwell, *Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), 17. Many online articles, ranging from blogs to arts magazines, include descriptions of Margolles's art as or in relation to relics. A few notable examples include: a 2009 exhibition review in *ArtForum* by Valérie Knoll that describes Margolles's bloodstained canvases as "cloth-relics," on the online art magazine *02*, Ilan Michel add that the display of a related textile called *Wila Patjharu/Sobre la Sangre* (2016) projected the "divine aura of the relics of saints," and in *The Courtauldian*, a student-run arts and culture magazine at the Courtauld, the author also claims Margolles's artworks "participate in the visual tradition of vanitas and… relics." In one comment by Patrice Giasson, curator of the 2015 exhibition *Teresa Margolles: We Have a Common Thread*, he argued against the notion that Margolles's textile are relics. According to Giasson, "Margolles's work cannot be reduced to the idea of religious relic. Traditionally, the relic is related to miracles and unearthly powers, while on the contrary, all the elements here are rooted in reality. The fact that the stain can be 'any body' means that anyone can relate to it" (14-15). While Giasson provides numerous insights in thinking about Margolles's textiles, his understanding of religious relics is limited from the perspective of the field of Religious Studies and Material Religion, and he is missing a crucial opportunity for understanding the meaning and agency of

to a person or event of significance. While religious relics preserve the remnants of saints and holy figures, Margolles seeks to commemorate tha forgotten and anonymous victims of extreme violence. Margolles has previously integrated fragments of human corpses directly into her displays, including a miscarried fetus she encased in a concrete block called *Entierro* (1999) and a tongue belonging to a victim of the drug wars that she preserved after his funeral *Lengua* (2000). In addition to displaying the corpse, she has also exhibited apparel worn by refugees and murder victims, finding potency generated by the physical relationship between the body and the clothes we wear. In the 2019 exhibition *Estorbo*, for example, clothes were used to make visible the large scale of the refugee crisis in Venezuela amid the economic crisis and long-term effects that developed under Hugo Chavez's administration. Margolles collected clothing from refugees and displayed these either in plastic Ziploc bags labeled with names and origins (recalling bags of evidence from a crime scene) or encased in cement cubes, perfectly geometric and dispersed around the gallery floor.[6]

More commonly, she collects liquid corporeal remnants like blood, fat, and forensic runoff to incorporate into her art. Margolles frequently uses absorbent materials like textiles or clay, but in other circumstances she explores methods of diffusing remnants of the morgue into the air. To offer a few examples from different periods of her career: for her work *En el Aire* (2003) Margolles filled a bubble machine with water from the morgue that was used to clean dead bodies before autopsy. In *Vaporización* (2003), Margolles ran a fog machine with water

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the objects that Margolles presents. It is misleading, I believe, to think of relics and the miracles they might incur as strictly related to the "unearthly powers" when relics are objects that originate from, remain in, and impact the real world. The mistake here, is to describe relics as not part of or relating to felt and experienced reality. See Patrice Giasson, ed. *Teresa Margolles: We Have a Common Thread* (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, 2015), 14-15.

[6] Edward Sullivan discusses the use of clothing in Margolles's work in *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Phaidon, 2000). Also, in 2019 during her exhibition *Estorbo,* focused on the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis that made millions of refugees overnight, the museum windows of the Museum of Modern Art Bogota (MAMBO) were rubbed daily with sweat extracted from clothes collected from Venezuelan refugees.

from the morgue that had been used to wash bodies murdered by drug cartels in Mexico City. Though the water had been disinfected, viewers must have approached the mist in the gallery with reservation. Walking through the gallery means making physical contact with the violent aftermath and its institutional processing. Likewise, Margolles' installation *De que Otra Cosa Podríamos Hablar?* at the 2009 Venice Biennale confronted viewers with the morgue by involving a daily mopping of the palace floors with blood of the victims of narco violence in Mexico.[7] These three examples of *Vaporization*, *En el Aire,* and *De que Otra Cosa Podríamos Hablar?* all eschew a concrete sense of location or medium. They are installations that disperse biomedical materials into the air or rub it onto the floors. She refuses to provide viewers with the perceived protection of containment. This is the morgue seeping into everything else. The textiles discussed here function differently, yet adjacently, to these uncontained gaseous performances in their concreteness. Although their objecthood remains conceptually complex as each stain plunges through time and tragedy.

While Margolles uses human remains to relocate violence, the material parallels with religious relics expand the meaning of her work.[8] Even though Margolles claims her art is empty of religious meaning or intent, she still recognizes many of her viewers and collaborators interpret them differently and does not discourage these readings.[9] For example, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, Margolles collaborated with women from the Indigenous community of Rarámuri (or Tarahumara). Curator Patrice Giasson notes how Maroglles' collaborators received

[7] For the catalog accompanying Margolles' Biennale installation see Cuauhtémoc Medina, ed., *¿De Que Otra Cosa Podríamos Hablar?* (Barcelona: RM Verlag, 2009).
[8] In terms of relocation of violence, see Jamie Ratliff, "'Where' Else Could We Talk About?: The Border as Nomadic Site." *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 3, no. 2/3 (June 2014): 346–69. Ratliff describes Margolles's art as "nomadic" as it moves critically across borders, and Sharon Larisch explains that Margolles's strategy of relocating crime scenes exposes the false and dangerous perception of crime scenes as enclosed or frozen spaces, unaffected by the world around them. See also "Space and Potentiality," 427-49.
[9] Teresa Margolles, in conversation with the author, October 12, 2022.

the textile with a ritual performance. While working on the textile titled *Boee Chocami/ Black Path* (2014) "they took the cloth out with extreme respect and laid it out on the top of the table… to expose the cloth to smoke so that the soul of the deceased woman could be released."[10] Both the careful handling of the cloth and the quiet ceremony with smoke demonstrate a tremendous amount of respect paid to the fabric in recognition of its material connection to a violently killed person. Further, this intervention suggests the embroiderers were moved by the material presence of the object and wished to prepare both the textile and themselves for the execution of their thoughtfully planned design. This series of textiles encouraged embroiderers to reflect on the state of society and to share personal experiences of violence.[11] Communally practiced fabric and thread-based crafts, like sewing or quilting circles, have strong gendered associations that invite further conversation. Many feminists like Margolles continue to reclaim craft-based practices like in this example, where the sewing circle remains a venue for a variety of expressions to take place in the form of discussion, gossip, mourning, and silence. Through the process, Margolles's collaborators metaphorically hold the trace of a body in their hands as they work, layering their designs with care. Both they and the viewer believe that the textile retains a connection to the deceased, thus functioning like a relic.

The term relic comes from the Latin word for "remains" or *reliquiae*. In both Christian and Buddhist contexts, "the relic is or has virtue, grace, benevolence, and life…in both traditions virtue, grace, benevolence and life are transmittable by touch or through less direct contact."[12] As Niamh Wycherley states,

> In early Christianity the veneration of relics became a key element of the cults of martyrs and saints. Relics…were regarded as extensions of the saint's body and shared its sacred

[10] Giasson, 63.
[11] Giasson, 63.
[12] Gregory Schopen, "Relic." In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1998), 262.

> quality. Many items were venerated as relics. The actual body of the saint, his or her final resting place, was considered the primary location of the saint's posthumous power, but parts of the body, items associated with the saint during his or her lifetime, such as books or clothing, and even small rags that came into contact with the tomb of a saint were all viewed as effective conduits of a saint's essence.[13]

Relics are a material means for promoting and displaying religious belief. As Wycherley describes, their sense of sacredness is secured in the relic's being literally of or an "extension of" the once living body.

Buddhists hold similar definitions of relics to the Catholic Church. In Sanskrit, relics are "*Śarīraḥ*" which means body parts but can be expanded into subcategories like "relics of use" (i.e. the robes, bowl, walking staff, etc. of the Buddha or famous Buddhist nuns and monks), and "relics of place" (i.e. where the Buddha ate, stood, etc.). The fingernails, hair, bones, blood, even feces of famous Buddhists have become venerated throughout the Buddhist world and there are thousands of giant reliquaries (known alternatively in different contexts as "*cetiya*," "*stupa*," "*pagoda*," and other local terms) in Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Japan, Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibet, Vietnam, and other places.[14] They come in a wide variety of architectural styles and are often considered the center points of cities wherein not only Buddhist monastic relics are kept, but also those of queens, kings, emperors, and famous generals.[15] There are also reliquaries that form a type of tomb of the unknown soldier in Buddhist Asia and commemorate soldiers, victims of violence, and epidemics. For example, outside of Phnom Penh, in Cambodia's "Killing

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[13] Niamh Wycherley, "The Notre Dame Fire and the Cult of Relics," *History Ireland* 27, no. 4 (2019): 49.
[14] Gregory Schopen, "Relic" in *Critical Terms in Religious Studies,* 256-268. Even Buddhist manuscripts can be seen as a type or relic called "dharmakāya śarīraḥ" ("the relics of the body of the teaching" – or "embodied words"). Justin McDaniel has shown that the ash from cremated corpses of venerated nuns and monks in Laos are often used to create a type of ink for Buddhist manuscripts and so the physical text is literally made of human remains. See ""Ghostly Aesthetics: Material Culture and the Undead in Thailand," Yale University, January 29, 2020.
[15] See Trainor, Kevin. 1997. *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravāda Tradition*. Cambridge, Eng.; New York: Cambridge University Press and Yael Bentor's "The Content of Stūpas and Images and the Indo-Tibetan Concept of Relics," *The Tibet Journal*, Spring & Summer 2003, Vol. 28, No. 1/2, *Contributions to the History of Tibetan Art* (Spring & Summer 2003), 21-48.

Fields," there are thousands of bones and skulls of the nameless victims of the Cambodian genocide in the late 1970s that are stacked in the form of Buddhist reliquaries. They are honored by thousands today including regular ritual chanting by Buddhist monks.

The definition of relics by Buddhist Studies expert John Strong further expands the integrity of the relic beyond the immediate body to objects with which it has been in contact. Strong writes, "[Relics] should be taken to include not only the bodies, bones, or ashes of saints, heroes, martyrs, founders of religious traditions, and other holy men and women but also objects that they have once owned and, by extension, things that were once in physical contact with them."[16] Therefore, relics are formed from the bodily remains of and artifacts closely associated with holy figures that are preserved and displayed for their veneration. Strong elaborates further, recognizing that relics, when consecrated, literally purify "objects that are normally considered to be impure—dead flesh, bones, and body parts." He continues, "[i]n this very paradox, however, can be seen some of the ways in which relics work to heighten the holiness and purity of the saints; if even their impurities are venerated, how much purer and more venerable they must be themselves!"[17] Indeed, the relic-status has a paradoxical transformative effect. Blood and bones become objects of worship once authenticated as relics and increase the overall sense of holiness attributed to the figure of their origin. What is particularly interesting about the earthly power and use of relics is that, as Patrick Geary argues, unlike other commodities like silk or gold or weapons, relics don't hold inherently rare or useful materials and only have value within a context and the communal acceptance of a set of "shared beliefs that determine its

[16] Strong, John S. "Relics." *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 11, Macmillan Reference USA, 2005, 7686-7692.
[17] Strong, John S. "Relics." In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones, Vol. 11. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005, 7686-7692.

authenticity and efficacy in a particular social and cultural environment.[18] Therefore, "a relic's value is thus not defined by material worth, but is the result of complex social, cultural, and religious interactions."[19] For instance, religious institutions authenticate relics with textual documentation and display strategies. Margolles similarly communicates the details of her sourcing and materials in museum labels and gallery texts. The museum therefore "consecrates" *Tela Bordada* in wall texts and explanations of its significance like the Catholic Church when it claims to have the fragment of the True Cross or the Buddhist temple that attributes the Buddha's finger to him. We might even identify secular relics in sports memorabilia and celebrity possessions which sell for ridiculous prices—the point is the belief that objects can affect other objects they encounter is culturally accepted in both secular and nonsecular contexts.

Once authenticated, both religious relics (like the Buddha's finger) and secular relics (like a baseball from the home run hit at the World Series) are believed to retain a trace of their origin. Consumer psychology and anthropology offer one model for thinking about the phenomenon that occurs when one object is believed to transfer properties to another object through physical contact. The bloodstains permeating Margolles's textiles result from the direct

[18] Patrick Geary, "Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Social Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), 169-91. See also, See Klein, "Eastern Objects," 283-284.

[19] Ibid. Also echoed by Alexander Nagel, "Relics, whether pieces of bodies or the results of human manufacture, such as clothing, are typically unremarkable in and of themselves. One man's bones are very much like another's. What makes the relic unique and valuable is its provenance: one keeps it and reveres it because it is the index or sample of a specific history of an individual's life. This is the basis of efficacy, real or perceived." See "The Afterlife of the Reliquary," in *Treasures of Heaven: Saint, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, eds. Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson (Baltimore: Walters Art Museum, 2010), 215. Nagel has written widely on the status of the relic in contemporary art, beginning with Marcel Duchamp's ready-made. In his article on the relic and Robert Smithson, Nagel argues the material relocation of rocks in Smithson's work *Non-site* recalls the practices of medieval pilgrims carrying relics from holy sites. In this article, Nagel also explains that twentieth-century minimalist artists and collectors sought to emulate the same religious experience as medieval cathedrals and religious practices. Margolles's post minimalist style in the twenty-first century shares these aspirations. See Alexander Nagel, "Robert Smithson Removed from the Source," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 63/64 (2013): 285-88.

exposure with a corpse, or with its blood left at the murder site.[20] Such a process can be understood via the logic of a type of magic embedded in the everyday world of politics and economics. In Margolles's bloodstained textiles, the bodily substance establishes a contiguous link between body and object, which persists after the moment of contact via the "law of contagion."[21] The work is a trace or index of the deceased. Contagious magic "is based on the principle that things or persons once in contact can afterward influence each other. In other words, it is believed that there is a permanent relationship between an individual and any part of his or her body."[22] The power of contagious magic does not depend on a person's faith or their religious affiliation. An authenticated fragment of the True Cross, one of Margolles's bloodstained textiles, and the baseball pitched during the final winning hit of the World Series all share this effect.

The law of contagion originates in nineteenth-century anthropological texts oriented towards the study of so-called "primitive" cultures.[23] However, the law was reframed by psychologists in the 1990s as a principle descriptive of human behavior in United States culture.[24] More recently, the concept has been applied in consumer contexts. Andrea Morales,

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[20] Margolles also absorbs traces of place by absorbing dirt and debris from murder or crime sites in many of her works.

[21] Under the principles of magic according to Frazer: "like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause; and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed." See James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed. (London: MacMillan and co., 1925), 42. Not only have consumer psychologists adopted Frazer's concept while simultaneously rejecting his anthropological practice, but art critic Christopher Braddock's work applies the phenomenon to contemporary performance art in New Zealand. See Christopher Braddock, *Performing Contagious Bodies: Ritual Participation in Contemporary Art*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[22] Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 42.

[23] See E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom,* New York: Gordon (1871/1974), John G. Frazer *The Golden Bough*, and Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brian, New York: Norton.

[24] Paul Rozin, April E. Fallon, and Robin Mandell (1984), "Family Resemblance in Attitudes to Food," Developmental Psychology, 20 (2), 309–14. Rozin, Paul, Maureen Markwith, and Clark McCauley (1994), "Sensitivity to Indirect Contacts with Other Persons: AIDS Aversion as a Composite of Aversion to Strangers, Infection, Moral Taint, and Misfortune," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 103 (3), 496–504. Also, Paul Rozin,

Darren Dahl, and Jennifer Argo added two amendments to the law of contagion. In short, they expanded touch to include metaphysical touch, and they clarified that contagion is by default dormant in objects until activated by a stimulus.[25] They give the example in consumer culture of the experience of purchasing a t-shirt from a store. In this situation, the customer is not concerned or actively aware of the chain of physical touch that occurred (from the factory workers who made, packaged, and shipped the shirt, to the store employees who unwrapped and hung or folded the shirts, to the unknown number of customers who tried on the shirt beforehand) when trying on a shirt. The same principle applies when buying an article of food from the grocery store. Only during the recent Covid pandemic did it occur to consumers to consider wiping down the exterior of their groceries with antibacterial wipes in acknowledgement of all the hands that came and touched beforehand. Without such cues (i.e. acknowledgement of a global pandemic) the contagion element is dormant, which also explains why we can go through our day touching so many surfaces and objects that others have touched before us without experiencing the contagion effect. But contagion is not always cause for alarm, and the properties transferred between objects can be positive as well as negative. These principles reveal the power of contextualization and messaging to "activate" a contagious factor and impact human behavior.

The phenomenon of contagion explains the possibility of encountering one of Margolles's bloodstained textiles in a situation that resembles visiting a relic in a church. When

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Linda Millman, and Carol J. Nemeroff (1986), "Operation of the Laws of Sympathetic Magic in Disgust and Other Domains," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50 (4), 703–12. Paul Rozin, and Carol J. Nemeroff (1990), "The Laws of Sympathetic Magic: A Psychological Analysis of Similarity and Contagion," in Cultural Psychology: Essays on Comparative Human Development, ed. James Stigler, Gilbert H. Herdt, and Richard A. Shweder, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 205–32. Rozin, Paul, Carol J. Nemeroff, Marcia Wane, and Amy Sherrod (1989), "Operation of the Sympathetic Magical Law of Contagion in Interpersonal Attitudes among Americans," *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, 27 (4), 367–70.

[25] Andrea C. Morales, Darren W. Dahl, and Jennifer J. Argo, "Amending the Law of Contagion: A General Theory of Property Transference.," *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* 3, no. 4 (October 2018): 555–65.

the viewer encounters the bloodstains that signify the material trace of a murder, the proximity between object and subject forges a sympathetic connection between the site of the gallery and the site of the murder and between the viewer and the victim. Contagious magic, or even metaphysical touch, as Morales, Dahl, and Argo argue, is enough to enable the affective transmission. This experience is spiritually heightened by Margolles's tendency to display her textile collaborations on illuminated light boxes in dimly lit rooms, thus inviting quiet contemplation. These careful curatorial decisions highlight the visual mixture of bloodstain and decorative embellishment. Even the dark renders the viewer semi-invisible and anonymous in front of the art object.

Margolles expresses a few clear political aims through the law of contagion and relic aesthetics. First, she insists that the morgue enter the public sphere in a more visible way, insisting on morbidity without spectacle. Second, she avoids blanketed narratives of resolution and healing. Although these works have prompted many of Margolles's collaborators to perform rituals honoring the victims of violence, the iterative quality of her textiles signal massive political injustices and even raise the question of what political change artwork can achieve. Clearly, Margolles's work aligns with traditional notions of religious relics just as they challenge and undermine them. Here they importantly depart from relic veneration, which requires the viewer to approach the relic with belief of its power and significance. The beholder activates the law of contagion in the process of recognition.

Relics and *Realpolitik*

Thus far it has been established that Margolles's textiles incorporate human remains and require contextualization for their meaning and contagious effect. However, relics are also

thought to have powers of their own. After embarking on long pilgrimages, practitioners pray to relics for intercession and miracles. Even more, relics have historically served as diplomatic gifts to foreign dignitaries, or they have been the cause of war. For example, King Louis IX received a gift of Christ's Crown of Thorns in 1239 from the court of Constantinople as a form of paying off war debt. The famous Sainte Chapelle in Paris was constructed to hold the precious relic of blood and relic of contact, i.e. the torture device of thorns.[26] The Japanese imperial government received a relic of the bone of the Buddha from the King of Siam in 1901 as part of an entourage thanking the Japanese for funds and expert consultants in building Siam's public education system.[27] Relics often didn't stay in one place and became tools of the state. According to Holger A. Klein,

> Gifts of relics, however, were not restricted to visiting dignitaries and ambassadors to the Byzantine court. Already during the late antique period relics were sent to the West as imperial gifts. One of the earliest such gifts is a relic of the True Cross allegedly given by Emperor Constantine the Great to the church in the Sessorian palace in Rome. Following Constantine's example in the later sixth century, Emperor Justin II sent relics of the True Cross from Constantinople to both Rome and Poitiers in Gaul.[28]

Furthermore, Anne Blackburn has undertaken extensive studies of the ways in which Sri Lankan royalty used gifts of relics of the Buddha as a "core technology of the state" to secure trade relations and display their wealth and power.[29] Viewing relics as "technologies" means to reconceptualize them as dynamic agents capable of influence, attraction and power. These examples reveal that relics can be socially constructed

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[26] Wycherley, "The Notre Dame Fire and the Cult of Relics," 48-50.
[27] See Toshiya Unebe, "Textual Contents of Pāli Samut Khoi-s: In Connection with the Buddha's Abhidhamma Teaching in Tāvatiṃsa Heaven." *Manuscript Studies* 2.2 (2018): 427-444.
[28] Holger Klein, Eastern Objects and Western Desires: Relics and Reliquaries between Byzantium and the West Author(s): Holger A. Klein Source: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 2004, Vol. 58 (2004), 283-314 (287-288).
[29] Blackburn, Anne M. "Buddha-Relics in the Lives of Southern Asian Polities." *Numen* 57, no. 3/4 (2010): 317-40. See also Kevin M. Trainor, "When Is a Theft Not a Theft? Relic Theft and the Cult of the Buddha's Relics in Sri Lanka" *Numen*, Vol. 39, Fasc. 1 (Jun. 1992), 1-26.

objects and carefully distributed diplomatic tools.[30] Viewed as relics or social technologies, Margolles's work subsequently takes on heightened meaning beyond the category of art. The exchange and movement of art objects in the context of the art world resembles the system of gifting relics. Museums, like churches, seek to fill their collections with artworks that will attract the most visitors. Margolles's increasing recognition correlates with the increase of her work in collection-based institutions across the world over the last decade.

Relics and Anonymous Violence

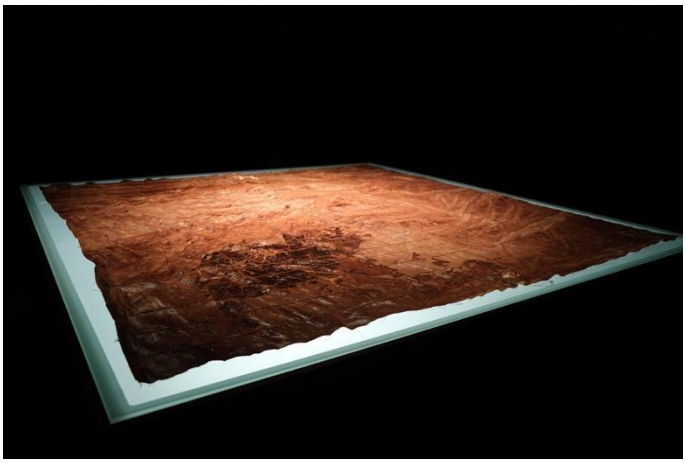

Figure 2: Teresa Margolles, *Sutura,* 2017/2019, mixed media, 200 x 200cm. Photograph provided by author.

Despite the many parallels between relics and Margolles's art, there is also one important difference that should be made clear related to their handling of violence. Margolles is not in the

[30] The point here is to define relics in relation to Margolles's work to explain why so many art critics have compared them to these religious objects in the first place. The author mentions Geary's excellent essay on relics to underline that, "a relic's value … is the result of complex social, cultural, and religious interactions." True for Catholic relics today, and true for relics in the medieval Christian context Geary was writing about. Yet the author here and elsewhere jumps to this equation of Margolles's artworks as *religious* relics without making a case for this connection or for why it is important. Without a solid a clear and cogent platform of reasoning connecting relics and Margolles's works, the long discussion of the politics of canonizations and relic authentications and relics used in Buddhism (15-16), as well as references to relics later in the paper, are tangential and foggy.

business of making martyrs or saints out of human remains. Her victims often remain anonymous. Returning to her textile *Sutura* (2019), Margolles collected the blood from a murder committed at the Venezuelan/Colombian border at the height of the refugee crisis in Venezuela. The blood was absorbed with a blank white cloth the size of a bedsheet and later embroidered with minimalist horizontal lines by other refugees that Margolles collaborated with for the project (Fig. 2). *Sutura* is not attributed to any one murder victim, it speaks to the broader state of violence and the threat to all Venezuelan refugees. Even the horizontal registers of the embroidery and the repetitive performance of each stitch and each successive line indicates an endless and reproducible danger. *Sutura* does not venerate any one individual but inscribes the relentless machine of violence onto the single object. In this way, *Sutura* represents a fundamental difference from the cult of relics. The object makes violence its subject without indulging in or valorizing suffering. In stark contrast, Catholic relics attributed to martyrs, moralize suffering to such a degree that the object is authenticated and purified in the process. In these cases, piety correlates to displays of suffering. Textual references to relic origins engage stories of martyrdom, the more painful the better. The same valorization attributed to stories of suffering explains why tools of torture and murder weapons have become a visual shorthand for identifying saints. In the Catholic tradition, Saint Catherine of Alexandria is depicted with a spiked wheel, Saint Ursula and Saint Sebastian pierced with arrows, and Saint Agatha of Sicily with bare bleeding breasts. Relics are often evidence of violence and martyrdom, but the purpose of Margolles's relic-like textiles most importantly demand that violence be stopped.

Ultimately, Margolles uses the relic form to different ends than the Catholic Church or other religious institutions did in the past or present. This is evident in the importance of migration to Margolles's practice, given that she often must transport her artwork across borders

for exhibitions around the world. Jamie Rattliff argues that the inherent "nomadism" of Margolles's site-specific work symbolically transports the traces of bodies belonging to refugees and migrants across borders normally blocked off to such movement.[31] Where relics often find permanent homes in religious altars or grand cathedrals hoping to attract pilgrims, Margolles's work remains excessively, and intentionally, mobile. Movement is a defining characteristic of Margolles's work. She mobilizes the crime scene and relocates it from its site-specific origins. Scholars including Medina, Larisch, and Ratliff have convincingly argued that through movement and relocation, Margolles disrupts the expected spatial dynamics of the crime scene. As Larisch points out, the roped-off crime scene is conventionally conceived as something securely contained and separate from the here and now.[32] Thus, relocation is the critical intervention through which Margolles breaks down borders; between the morgue and the city, as well as between one nation and another. Of course, the relic status of the object is crucial in this performance. The blood embedded in *Tela Bordada*, tethers the textile to Guatemala City, even though it was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada in Ontario and traversed national borders to arrive there.

Though Margolles risks being challenged for profiting from work that exhibits human bodies, she does not aim for sensationalism. Julia Banwell astutely points out that Margolles makes the morgue approachable because her aesthetics allow and invite us to "look and pay attention" at what we might otherwise turn away from.[33] Her expertise mediates materials for

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[31] Jamie Ratliff, "'Where' Else Could We Talk About?: The Border as Nomadic Site," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 3, no. 2/3 (June 2014): 346-69. On the topic of movement and relics in Mexico, see also Kristin Norget, "Bones, Blood, Wax, and Papal Potencies: Neo-Baroque Relics in Mexico," *Material Religion* 17 no. 3, (2021), 355-80. Norget's article traces the 2011 tour of the wax effigy and relics of Pope John Paul II. In conversation with what Ratliff describes as Margolles's strategy to move and relocate crime scenes as a form of political action, this migratory quality recalls the colonial through contemporary significance of relic tours as discussed by Norget.
[32] Larisch, 427-9.
[33] Banwell, *Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death,* 63.

audiences to view, even though her guiding aesthetics leave us feeling disoriented and enraged. But unlike disgust, these emotions do not necessarily make us turn away. Edward Bacal and Ivan Ramos have argued that Margolles confronts us not only with the dead body but also with the negotiation of our relationship to it and our complicity in its early death.[34] Bacal poses the crucial and encompassing question: "How do we exist alongside the corpse, as something that upsets our received assumptions about the integrity of life, death and the body?"[35] Bacal is particularly interested in the inherently concrete and abstract quality of Margolles's artwork as the central juxtaposition that grounds others (such as the materialized juxtaposition of the playfulness of bubbles against the morbidity of mortuary fluids). And as previously mentioned, Ratliff characterizes Margolles's artwork in terms of its tendency to move across borders. The nomadism allowed to artistic materials strikes a stark contrast with the restricted migration of bodies across the same borders. Many other scholars, such as Edward Bacal, Rebecca Scott Bray, and Ivan Ramos, have drawn attention to the fact that death is no equalizer, but rather an expression of failure upon the state and the law to attend to bodies and violence.

Three Relics, Three Aesthetic Approaches

In this next section, I will examine three textiles in greater detail to analyze their sacred power to affect viewers. Two of these textiles, including *Gerlaine GG Om Pão Com Molho: Identidade desconhecida / Gerlaine GG Om Pão Com Molho: Unknown Identities* and *Dylegued (Entierro) / Dylegued (Burial)* were included in the exhibition *Teresa Margolles: We Have A*

[34] See Iván A. Ramos, "The Viscosity of Grief: Teresa Margolles at the Scene of the Crime," *Women & Performance* 25, no. 3 (November 2015): 298–314. doi:10.1080/0740770X.2015.1124668 and Edward Bacal, "Pervasive Death: Teresa Margolles and the Space of the Corpse." *Human Remains and Violence* 4, no. 1 (April 1, 2018): 25–40. doi:10.7227/HRV.4.1.3.
[35] Bacal, *Pervasive Death*, 28.

Common Thread, organized by the Neuberger Museum of Art in 2015 at Purchase College. The third textile, *Tela Bordada* (2012) was not included in the exhibition (as mentioned previously, it was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada in 2014) but it follows the same cycle of production (bloodstained fabric provided by Margolles, embroidery and design executed by textile-based artists from the same city as the murder). In Margolles's bloodstained textile collaborations, there are a few reasons that explain the variety of approaches to design. The myriad of designs speak both to the creative approach of the participants and to the influence of well-established local decorative styles practiced by the textile-based collaborators Margolles recruited for the projects. Likewise, each represents a different approach to mourning when faced with loss. However, the designs also look different because of the variation in bloodstain patterns and textile shapes that Margolles provided. The differences are further evidence of the site-specificity of each work. Further examination of each design and approach exposes more complex relationships between material (blood) and the embroidered designs and the ritual actions these designs perform in memory of the deceased. For instance, *Tela Bordada* (2012) superimposes the design on top of the stains, but keeps them visible, *Gerlaine GG Om Pão Com Molho: Identidade desconhecida / Gerlaine GG Om Pão Com Molho: Unknown Identities* (2014) incorporates the stains into the design, and *Dylegued (Entierro) / Dylegued (Burial)* (2013) covers the stains with overlaid fabric in layers on top of the original fabric. The last of these three examples seems like an anomaly because the designers layered fabric on the textile hiding some of the bloodstains underneath. However, it is not essential for relics to be visible to be powerful. Contextualization makes explicit the meaning and origins of relics even when they are encased in reliquaries. The differences in design approaches to the textiles in question are

clearly consistent with the individualized adornments of reliquaries–specially designed and often ornate vessels for the protection and display of a relic or relics.

According to Anne Lester, and consistent with Margolles's feminist approach, textiles and fiber arts invoke a historical sense of female labor. Textiles constitute a particular intimate relationship with the body because we wear clothing every day and are accustomed to the familiar feeling of cloth against the body.[36] Of course, textiles represent their own class of religious relics, containing awe-inspiring examples such as Veronica's veil or the clothing of saintly figures, which represent a "material promise of something more: the intimate encounter with God."[37] Margolles has continuously utilized the absorptive qualities of cloth since the beginning of her artistic practice. As a member of a death-metal artist group SEMEFO in the 1990s, she participated in works such as *Dermis/Derm* (1996), which used the corpse and its fluids like a human stamp, making impressions of bodies on otherwise sterile white hospital sheets. SEMEFO also exhibited the clothes of murder victims worn at the time of murder with visible bloodstains in *Estudio de la ropa de cadáver/Study of a corpse's clothes* (1997). Displayed on top of a lightbox, the stains are accentuated and the scientific atmosphere is reminiscent of a laboratory. What these works have in common is their display of the marks that death leaves behind and an interest in the permeability and fluidity of the body. Both earlier works demonstrate that Margolles has long connected skin and textile in her artistic practice, therefore beckoning the viewer to see her textile works as bodily relics. The bloodstained textiles

[36] Anne E. Lester, "Intimacy and Abundance: Textile Relics, the Veronica, and Christian Devotion in the Aftermath of the Fourth Crusade," *Material Religion* 14, no. 4 (March 11, 2019): 536. Margolles appears to emphasize the intimacy of worn clothing, evidenced by her exhibition of more works of wearable fashion including her contribution to the Venice Biennale 2022 show and her series *El Brillo,* comprising three black garments displayed on mannequins in a 2020 installation at James Cohan Gallery embroidered to include shards of glass collected at the Mexican border. https://www.frieze.com/article/teresa-margolles-implicates-art-and-fashion-industries-conditions-along-us-mexico-border.
[37] Lester, "Intimacy and Abundance," 536.

that Margolles presented to her collaborators of more recent works including *Tela Bordada*, *Gerlaine GG Om Pão Com Molho: Identidade desconhecida / Gerlaine GG Om Pão Com Molho: Unknown Identities*, and *Dylegued (Entierro) / Dylegued (Burial)* involve a similar bodily connection to the victims of femicide. For the exhibition *Teresa Margolles: We Have a Common Thread,* both *Gerlaine GG Om Pão Com Molho: Identidade desconhecida / Gerlaine GG Om Pão Com Molho: Unknown Identities* and *Dylegued (Entierro) / Dylegued (Burial)* were displayed horizontally on lightboxes. This curatorial decision to light up the textiles from below, in an otherwise dark room, increases the visibility of the bloodstains and amplifies the juxtaposition of stain and imagery.

In *Tela Bordada* the indigenous female activists from Santa Catarina Palopó, Guatemala, who embroidered the fabric Margolles provided, took a different approach. Whereas the embroiderers of *Gerlaine GG Om Pào Com Molho: Identidade desconhecida* incorporate and encircle the bloodstains, the participants who worked on *Tela Bordada* superimposed their pattern onto the center of the textile but left enough of the border to keep the stains visible. The bloodstains present in *Tela Bordada* are more prominent than the former example, which perhaps influenced the compositional differences. By comparison, in *Gerlaine GG Om Pào Com Molho: Identidade desconhecida* the female embroiderers of the Social Center Dom João Costa in Recife, Brazil incorporated the bloodstains into their design in a striking manner (Fig. 3). The white sheet (89 x 96 inches) was minimally stained with the blood from the body of a woman murdered in Recife, Brazil. There are faint red-brown marks at the top and bottom of the central crease, and in occasional spots along the fabric's perimeter. Each stain is encircled with thick red

embroidery in amorphous shapes that appear to trace the shapes of the stains.[38] The red stitching both contains and accentuates the bloodstains. Around them, the composition is filled with signs of life and nature: flowers, birds, trees, a butterfly, rocks, the sun and stars, all fashioned in joyfully colored thread. A few houses, a church, and a playground suggest something of a vision for a peaceful society that provides shelter as well as spaces for play and worship. In the top left-hand corner of the textile, a bright yellow flower appears to literally grow out of a small, encircled bloodstain. It rings a note of hope for transformation and a suggestion that good can come from bad.

Figure 3: Teresa Margolles, *Gerlaine GG Om Pào Com Molho: Identidade desconhecida / Gerlaine GG Om Pào Com Molho: Unknown Identities* (2014), Embroidery on fabric permeated with blood from the body of a woman assassinated in Recife, Brazil. 226 x 244 cm (89 x 96 1/8 in.). Created with the participation of women from the Social Center Dom João Costa: Marluce Pedro de Araujo, Maria Gracas Guimares de Lima, Ezilda Rodrigues da Silva, Edinai Maria da Silva, Josefa Helena da Silva, Josilene Maria da Silva, Zumeira Deca da Silva, Rositania da Silva Santos, and Jocileide Benedita de Souza. Recife, Brazil. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zurich/Paris.

[38] One stain at bottom center that has a shape suggestive of a figure with outstretched arms, echoed by its embroidered container. However, these patterns are abstract, and it was only by chance that this mark looks this way.

Dylegued / Burial (2013), was embroidered by a family of indigenous Kuna descent near Panama City. The rectangular fabric they received from Margolles was stained with the blood of an unnamed seventeen-year-old female killed there. Its design was inspired by the *mola* (blouse) worn by Kuna Nega women, consisting of layered appliquéd and embroidered textiles panels stitched onto the cloth bearing zoomorphic and geometric forms (Fig. 4).[39] Margolles orchestrated the creation of this textile while in Panama City during the Southern Biennial. She specifically sought out a group of skilled women who could embroider *molas*.[40] Photographs taken by Margolles show the embroiderers wearing the traditional components of Kuna women's dress ensemble including, headscarfs (*muswe*), arm and leg beads (*wini*), colorful blouses (*mola*), and wrap skirts (*sabured*).[41] By coincidence, the women who worked on the piece had recently lost a family member to murder. For the design, they decided to depict a Kuna funeral ceremony where the body is wrapped in a cloth hammock. A central figure lies on the vibrant green hammock surrounded by objects and symbols including two dolls in colorful dresses, a wide-brimmed hat, a pair of paddles, and a white dove. The textile therefore recalls the funeral rite in its localized design and its material echo of the textile hammocks used in burials. In other words, the imagery performs the ritual and fuses the remnants of two murders. In its design, the *mola* technique connects the murder to pre-Columbian textile traditions and traditionally feminized labor. These added layers cover up some of the bloodstains beneath.

[39] Diana Marks describes the link between mola dress and Kuna identity during the 1925 Kuna Revolution and the decades following. The Panamanian government banned the form of dress beginning in 1919 to westernize the Kuna people. See Diana Marks, "The Kuna Mola: Dress Politics, and Cultural Survival," *Dress: The Journal of the Costume Society of America* 40, no. 1 (2014): 17–30.
[40] Giasson, 36.
[41] Marks, 21-22.

Figure 4: Dylegued (Entierro) [Dylegued (Burial)], 2013. Mola on fabric permeated with blood from the body of a woman murdered in Panama City, Panama. Created with the participation of the Rosano family, of Kuna descent, in memory of Jadeth Rosano Lopez, a seventeen-year-old teenager who was assassinated. Panama City, Panama, 100 x 230 cm (39 3/8 x 90 1/2 in.). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zurich/Paris.

All three approaches to the bloodstains reveal a great paradox: despite the wide variety of design-based decisions that simultaneously hide and reveal bloodstains to different degrees, all are equal in their potential to affect viewers. The design functions purely symbolically. Its affective potential is outweighed by the staggering gravity of the bloodstains combined with the textual recognition of the murders. A number of factors still influence the viewer experience of the works, depending on if they read the wall label before or after looking at the textiles and if or at what moment they register the bloodstains. For visitors unfamiliar with Margolles's work, sometimes the moment of recognition is delayed. Still, the type of close looking that Margolles encourages with lightbox displays invites viewers to contemplate the butterfly fluttering above the tree in *Gerlaine GG Om Pào Com Molho: Identidade desconhecida* or to silently consider the candles floating light holy offerings among the constellation of signs in *Tela Bordada.* Just the same, the viewer is enticed by the craftsmanship involved in the facture of the appliqued

doves positioned on opposite ends of *Dylegued / Burial.* To engage the designs and their execution is not to sentimentalize the murder beholden by each textile. These aesthetic decisions elicit emotional impact; however, they remain topical. Unlike Margolles's typically sober post minimalist approach, the colorful designs attract viewers to the object like the sumptuous, bejeweled surface of a reliquary or a vessel used to contain and protect a relic. Reliquaries are often decorated to elevate the visual experience of encounter with the relic. In Margolles's case, the embroidery serves a similar purpose, integrating the relic-like element (bloodstained textile) and reliquary (in the effect of the embroidery) in a singular yet integrated object. The colorful imagery entices the viewer and undermines the potentially repellant history of the bloodstained cloth. Further, the sophistication of the design signals that Margolles's collaborators sustained a haptic engagement with the cloth, transforming it into a funerary object that honors the dead.

Conclusion

When a person dies a violent death, their body is quickly hidden away from public view. It is almost as if corpses do not exist without religious or scientific context, except to the small population of workers in the death care and forensic industries.[42] Though corpses may also populate horror movies or local news reports, they occupy another sphere of existence kept at a safe distance from our daily existence. Outside of such circumstances, Julia Kristeva has famously described the corpse as the "utmost abjection."[43] Specifically, that which signifies "death infecting life," a threatening reminder of our slow decay, our bodily fragility, and our certain end. But as uncomfortable as death and its material residues make us, the lives of corpses

[42] "*The corpse, seen without God and outside of science is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life."* Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
[43] "*The corpse, seen without God and outside of science is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life."*

are reflective of significant social, political, and economic spheres in both local and global terms. The morgue, Margolles continually reminds us, reflects the state of society.[44] In her words, the morgue is *un cuerpo social* (a social body).[45] The relic-like works Margolles exhibits make us witnesses of violence and want us to engage them despite Kristeva's warnings. As witnesses, we are made responsible.

The relic-like quality is consistent throughout Margolles's practice. It is the quality that links her works together and informs her broader artistic mission. Suturing resembles embroidery as a type of stitchwork, though it also bridges things together—like the open edges of a wound. Suturing is a form of mending. Embroidery, by contrast, is superficial and additive. It provides ornamentation. The embroidery present in the three textiles discussed might not have the same structural function as suturing on a torso, but these two projects are still related. In the space of the photograph, Margolles transforms suturing into embroidery. Only in this format is the textural and visual component of the stitching so predominant. Most striking about seeing Margolles at James Cohan Gallery was the fluidity with which her different projects. Even those characterized by different mediums and subjects form a cohesive bond across time and space connecting religion and art, anonymous and saintly bodies. In this way, Margolles's work speaks to both art historians and scholars of religion. These three works show how a supposedly non-religious artist, not connected to any particular religious tradition nor promoting any particular religion's moralistic agenda can use human physical remains, relics, to elevate an object from aesthetic to sacred status; and even make the process of collecting and producing the artwork into a sacred and solemn ritual. Margolles's work thus performs three tasks: it teaches

[44] According to Banwell, the morgue is literally a "microcosm of society." See *Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death*, 33 .
[45] Teresa Margolles, in discussion with the author, October 12, 2022.

contemporary artists to honor communities deeply affected by violence and it elevates the often anonymous victims of that violence to a sacred state, as well as expanding the definition of a relic outside of the confines of specific religious traditions.

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