Diptychs of Insurrection
By Lesdi Goussen

Susan Meiselas’s images documenting the overthrow of the Somoza regime in 1978-1979 have become ubiquitous for visualizing the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. A decade after these photographs were first published and well into the precarious leadership of the Sandinista government, Meiselas returned to the country in 1989 to follow up with the subjects pictured in her work. Crossing temporal coordinates, Meiselas’s photographs emerge as diptychs of insurrection, capturing the ways in which people and places transgress and transform over time.

In June 2018, just days before the inauguration of her exhibition, “Mediations,” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Susan Meiselas returned to Nicaragua. Her decision was prompted by the swelling protests that had swept across the country in a matter of weeks. With little to no media attention in the United States, these recent photographs tell a vital yet disturbingly familiar narrative. The images and their familiar compositions produce a puzzling sensation of déjà vu. Like a photographic negative, Meiselas’s contemporary pictures capture the dark gradient of a failed revolution and a disintegrating social body.

In April 2018, President Daniel Ortega issued a series of social security reforms that included changes like a 5 percent tax on pensions for elderly and disabled citizens. Protestors, primarily college students, took to the streets demanding the overturn of the reforms and protest the deployment of “Operation Clean-Up,” which authorized the use of lethal force on unarmed civilians. Declaring protests illegal, the government has come down hard on those who speak out. Facing torture, disappearance, exile, and death, Nicaraguan citizens have adapted the words of the famous revolutionary figure Augusto Sandino, hanging banners that read: “Ortega Vende Patria,” a phrase that implies the president has betrayed his own country. But not only is the current liberation front accusing Ortega of being a traitor, they are comparing him to the very dictator that the Sandinista party fought so hard to overthrow.

Today, Ortega’s authoritarian government grasps for control as countries around the world, including the United States, begin to impose sanctions on his regime. In July 2018, after several months of arduous resistance and grueling hope, Ortega ordered the deployment of “Operation Clean-Up,” which authorized the use of lethal force on unarmed civilians. Declaring protests illegal, the government has come down hard on those who speak out. Facing torture, disappearance, exile, and death, Nicaraguan citizens have been forced into silence. Since the beginning of the crisis in April 2018, more than 500 people have been killed, with many unconfirmed deaths and thousands disappeared.

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