



Gülsün Karamustafa,  
*Prison Paintings 14*,  
1972, mixed media  
on paper, 40 x 42cm.  
Courtesy the artist  
and BüroSarıgedik

# Around the Tree: Notes on Gülsün Karamustafa's Jail Experience and Its Resonances with Argentinian Cultural Production

- Ana Longoni

*I am inside time and time is inside me*  
- Gülsün Karamustafa<sup>1</sup>

The following text draws parallels between some works by Argentinian cultural producers active during the last military junta (1976–83) and Turkish artist Gülsün Karamustafa, whose works on trauma, nation-building and civil rights witnessed the 1960, '71 and '80 military coups in the country. These and other more recent works discussed give accounts of imprisonment and disappearance of people under dictatorship. They touch upon

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## Ana Longoni approaches Gülsün Karamustafa's work in light of artistic parallels in Argentina and shared experiences of imprisonment, disappearance and dictatorship.

distinct approaches to these experiences. In bringing political scientist Pilar Calveiro, photographer Adriana Lestido and architect Gustavo Contepomi into dialogue with the installations, films and paintings of Karamustafa, the aim is to offer a glimpse into their shared will to survive, sisterhood and solidarity despite terror.

While hesitantly digging into Karamustafa's archive, I received a generous message from the artist. In it, she suggested that there were a series of connections between her story and that of Latin America, my birthplace and often my research subject: the dictatorships during the 1970s and 80s and Latin American cinematographic, musical and literary references that then resonated in her own context. She finds echoes of her own history – and that of her generation – in the protest songs of Chilean teacher, director, singer and song writer Victor Jara who was mutilated and

assassinated by Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship in 1973. The Turkish artist is no stranger to personal stories that come out of military dictatorship, including those relayed in the Argentinian film *Sur* (*The South*, 1988) directed by Pino Solanas or Carlos María Domínguez's *La Casa de Papel* (2002). In Domínguez's novel, an old solitary bibliophile builds the house he intends to die in on a remote beach, using his books as bricks, exposing the survival tactics during dictatorship that extended to peoples' libraries:

*During the last military coup in Argentina many people burned their books in their bathrooms and toilets or buried them in their gardens. Some books with certain names began to create danger for the people. The Argentinians began to make a choice between their lives and the books and they became the executioner of their own books.*<sup>2</sup>

Repressive processes instigated by military dictatorships and vicious prosecutions of political dissidents who were incarcerated, tortured, murdered, missing or exiled proliferated in both Latin American and Turkish contexts. These references, and those of Turkey detailed below, allow us to see the extent to which seemingly distant scenes on global geopolitics occurred alongside one another. Coincident with this, a rich spectrum of resonances, modes of resistance and creative antagonisms flourished.

The military dictatorship started in Turkey in 1971. A number of politicians, intellectuals, students and artists were incarcerated on the grounds of forming urban guerrillas. Karamustafa and her husband were prosecuted by a military court and imprisoned for years. Three decades later, once released, the artists

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1 Title of a 1982 work by the artist, mixed media on paper.

2 Carlos María Domínguez, *The Paper House*, London: Harvill Secker, 2005. Quoted by Karamustafa in our email exchange, 4 August 2018.

# 1 MAYIS



Adriana Lestido,  
from the series  
*Imprisoned Women*,  
1991-93, analogue  
photograph, silver  
gelatin. Courtesy the  
artist

Opposite:  
Gülsün Karamustafa,  
*Painting for Poster*  
- 1977 *First of May*  
(*In that Bloody*  
*Celebration 36 People*  
*Lost Their Lives with*  
*Gun Fire from the*  
*Police*), 1977, mixed  
media on paper, 70  
× 50cm. Courtesy  
the artist and  
BüroSarigedik



travelled to Cuba to participate in the 8<sup>th</sup> Havana Biennale (2003), where Karamustafa presented her video installation *Making of the Wall* (2003). The video shows testimonies of three former political prisoners in Turkey. The three women spent years in jail around the same time as the artist, and in the video narrate their traumatic experiences from the safety and intimacy of their current homes. They look directly into the camera, without signs of hesitation. The exercise of remembrance is simple yet moving. During her stay in Cuba, Karamustafa encountered a girl around the same age as her own daughters who came to view her film over and over. The artist explained: ‘It captured my interest, so I asked her why she was interested in the film. She said: “I am from Chile. That might be the clear answer to your question.”’<sup>3</sup> The connection felt by this girl, through experiences even if not directly felt of dictatorship and fierce repression against opposition, also manifests in Karamustafa’s evocative work on her own experience of imprisonment. The artist who holds the camera and asks the questions, knows how to lend an ear to these women relating their memories. Karamustafa does not directly appear in the film, nor does she speak herself; only the women’s voices are heard. The artist’s voice is manifest in their stories. Women remember, they become silent, they breathe. The traumatic experience is neither heard in court nor in public, but within

an intimate environment and by someone sympathetic to their suffering. The singular form of the first person – often used in testimonials – is here a plural form of the first person. The experience is inscribed within a polyphonic framework rather than negating it or letting it escape, opening up the possibility for a chorus of testimony. *Making of the Wall* opens with a key image: the movement of leaves and the crackling noise produced by wind hitting a tree trunk. This reference is later anchored in the stories told by one of the women, Jülide. The film also includes some cutaways, as when she approaches a peach tree that represents the tree around which prisoners used to gather in the yard of the Adana jail. While their kids were running around while accompanying them in prison, the women used the tree to measure time by observing the signs of seasonal change. The tree is a place of encounter and solidarity amongst prisoners. It is also a precise metaphor for the bond to life amid seclusion and deprivation and the insistence to tell one’s story.

### Little Challenges

Similar gestures to Karamustafa’s are activated by Pilar Calveiro, a political scientist who survived three concentration camps during the last Argentinian dictatorship. She is the author of the most lucid and systematic analysis of Argentina’s repressive regime *Poder y Desaparición* (Power and Disappearance, 1998). In this

3 Email from the artist, 4 August 2018.









book, a variety of survivors' testimonies (hers included) thoroughly unravel the illegal repressive machinery that was mainly supported by the sinister role of the enforced, systematic disappearance of people. The disappeared are thrown into a condition of complete uncertainty, into a hazy limbo filled with negation. Calveiro confronts such haziness by reconstructing the disappearance of one individual – the sequence of their kidnapping, torture and clandestine imprisonment. In most cases, the disappearances ended in murder and the disposal of bodies – dead or alive. Bodies were burnt or subject to *vuelos de la muerte* (flights of death); at night military planes would throw prisoners into the sea, dosed with a strong sedative, their limbs bound. Such *terror concentracionario* ('concentrationary terror'), as Calveiro calls it, was not only in effect at the over 500 concentration camps in operation in Argentina from 1976–83, where nearly 30,000 people disappeared, it also spread terror throughout society, freezing it in a state between knowing and not knowing. Everybody could sense something was happening. Everyone knew someone who had disappeared or found in the newspaper a *habeas corpus* claim or witnessed a kidnapping at their school or workplace. However, given that everything happened in the shadows, at the time no one grasped the full extent of the state's terrorism. Solidarity gestures among prisoners mentioned in

Calveiro's writing might seem small – the touch of a hand, comforting words and tips provided to camp newcomers about to face torture – but they were significant means that led to defying *concentrationary* power. A gesture that would become even more significant later, was the exercises they did together so as not to forget names, dates, and messages related to other prisoners. Years later, such a gesture was presented before a court as testimony.

Karamustafa and Calveiro showed immense strength in surviving, narrating and conveying their jail/*concentrationary* experiences. Both aim to vindicate and recuperate the solidarity and humanitarian gestures they took part in the midst of horror – key to deactivating the capacity of the lived experiences to raze the will to live or to see the good in people. *Making of the Wall* and *Poder y Desaparición* resistance tactics are reclaimed, small vital acts that confront authoritarian power and circumvent its rigidity and arbitrary rule designed to bend the will of its victims. Karamustafa and Calveiro articulated not only the denunciation and witnessing of pain, humiliation and torture, they shed light on a collective system of support, a politico-affective plot weaved through risky but small gestures of care. Such gestures celebrate affective commitments and life despite everything. Acts of resistance help to develop codes of communication between prisoners, always at risk of discovery. In the Turkish context, prisoners began a hunger strike so they could read and see their children. Argentinian poet Liliana Cabrera, who spent eight years in prison (2006–14) tells of a hunger strike that unravelled when she arrived in jail. Prisoners were demanding house arrest instead of institutional incarceration for mothers with children under the age of five. Cabrera, who doesn't have children, actively participated in the protest.<sup>4</sup>

### Women without Men

Karamustafa began her series *Prison Paintings* in 1972, just before getting out of prison. She only started exhibiting them in 1985. Colourful and vibrant, they depict scenes of everyday life in prison: the moment when food is distributed, the sorrow and embracement that shelter a fellow prisoner, women breastfeeding, reading and smoking.

Gülsün Karamustafa, *I am inside time and time is inside me*, 1982, mixed media on paper, 53 × 41cm. Photograph: Cem Berk Ekini. Courtesy the artist and BüroSarigedik

<sup>4</sup> See Ana Cacopardo, interview with Liliana Cabrera, in 'Historias debidas VIII', *Canal Encuentro*, Buenos Aires, 2017.



Gülsün Karamustafa, *Prison Paintings 8*, 1972, mixed media on paper, 40 x 42cm. Courtesy the artist and Büro Sarıgedik

Previous spread: Adriana Lestido, from the series *Imprisoned Women*, 1991-93, analogue photograph, silver gelatin. Courtesy the artist

In several paintings, one can see various prisoners sleeping together, sharing beds in which their bodies and those of their children blend. Adriana Lestido's series of photographs *Mujeres Presas* (*Women Imprisoned*, 1991-93) also depict women and their children, this time living in Ezeiza, a female prison in Buenos Aires. Edited in two editions as a book and also having circulated with an exhibition format, the series of black and white photographs made over two years capture daily life in prison: cooking, eating, washing clothes, sleeping, embracing each other, consoling each other and saying goodbye to one's children as they are taken to school and missing them. *Mujeres Presas* captures the experience of motherhood from confinement.

Anthropologist Mariana Tello Weiss reflects on maternity issues within clandestine militancy (militant activity in illegal political organisations) in particular among young mothers who are political prisoners. Their experiences make visible how 'a conflict with traditional gender models, where the representation of a "mother" is incompatible with that of the "guerillera".' And further, that in 'this context, the intent before the prison authorities to humanise births, childcare, solidarity, and love for their children only serve to legitimise a discourse in which women would fulfil their main role within the private sphere and as responsible for childcare.'<sup>5</sup> The tensions between motherhood and militancy are often due to traditional roles assigned by patriarchy, with women dedicated to the reproductive tasks of raising the family and confined to the private space. This disrupts the image of the feminist militant, dedicated to public life and political activity. The experiences of Karamustafa and Calveiro potentially reconcile these two roles. The filial bond, for them, is a liberating refuge in the face of disciplinary sanctions on their bodies. Being a mother in jail is more than a fight against dictatorship and patriarchy, it is the fight for emancipation within confinement.

Analysing Lestido's photographs in which prisoners always appear alone in raising their children, writer Guillermo Saccomanno proposes the concept 'mujeres sin hombres' (women



without men),<sup>6</sup> inverting the title of Ernest Hemingway's *Men Without Women* (1927). The women Lestido depicts did not choose to live without men. State violence caused this absence. However, they reconstruct themselves within sisterhood and solidarity, taking care of each other collectively. Lestido and Karamustafa's portrayals of prison do not show women as individuals, but as elements of a collective body, a community of women without men. Imprisonment does not undermine the potential of collective life. On the contrary, shared experience and the articulation of survival strategies bring them together, as captured in Michel de Certeau's concept 'estratagème du faible' (stratagems of the weak), that refers to the deviated paths or unauthorised uses of concepts that an average reader can propose to confront a dominant interpretation.<sup>7</sup> In Karamustafa's case, the only image in which a woman is alone refers to procedural photography

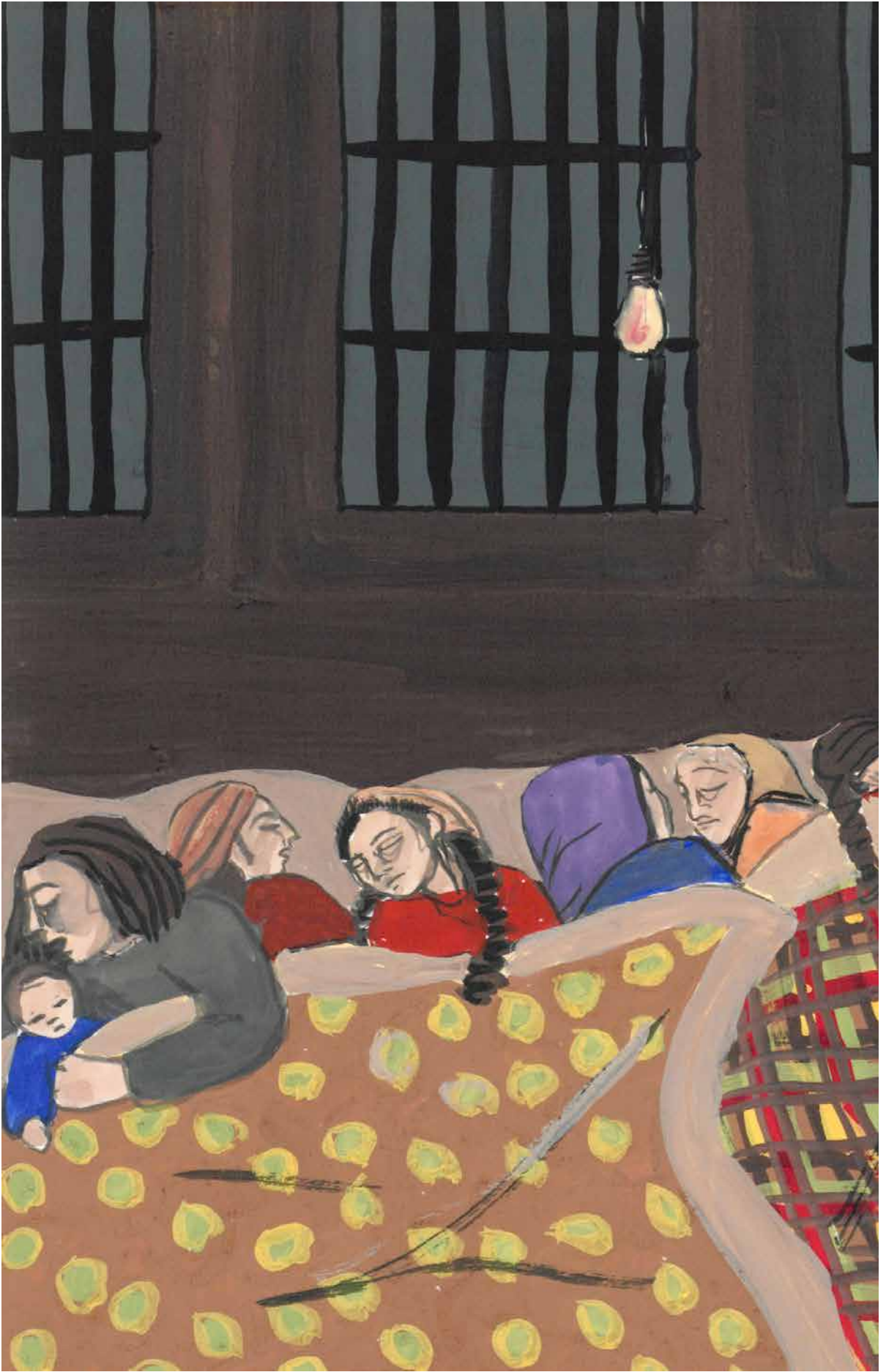
5 Mariana Tello Weiss, 'La ex cárcel del Buen Pastor en Córdoba: un territorio de memorias en disputa', *Iberoamericana: América Latina - España - Portugal*, vol. X, no.40, December 2010.

6 Guillermo Saccomanno, 'Mujeres sin hombres: Las presas de Adriana Lestido' (Women without men: Adriana Lestido's prisoners), in Adriana Lestido, *Mujeres Presas*, 2nd edn., Buenos Aires: Colección Fotógrafos Argentinos, 2008.

7 See Michel de Certeau, *La invención de lo cotidiano*, Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1999.

8 Putting Karamustafa's and Lestido's works in dialogue has inevitably brought to my memory a song







Opposite:  
Gülsün Karamustafa,  
*Prison Paintings 4*,  
1972, mixed media  
on paper, 40 x 42cm.  
Courtesy the artist  
and BüroSarigedik

Above:  
Gülsün Karamustafa,  
*Making of the Wall*,  
2003, video, 13 mins,  
41 secs. Courtesy  
the artist and  
BüroSarigedik

for the purposes of prisoner identification, showing a portrait of the individual with an identification number below. In the context of isolation and repressive bureaucracy, one's identity (name, biography) is substituted with a number.<sup>8</sup> Karamustafa's film *Memory of a Square* (2005) could also be read within the context of 'women without men'. Two screens juxtapose public and private space. The first registers the day-to-day transit of people through a crowded square where a protest is taking place. The protest dissipates due to the use of police force. The second screen shows an intimate interior space dedicated to women in a family setting with a mother, grandmother and daughters. With the exception of a little boy, there are no men. Surrounded by domestic tasks associated with the female universe - sewing, ironing, setting the table - the boy peeks into the family's history via a photo album. I see this as a memory exercise to invoke the absent (perhaps the prisoner, the murdered, the exiled, the hidden?). In another scene, the women and boy get ready to go outside into what seems like a dangerous and

threatening escape.

*Memory of a Square* demands explanation: where is the *pater familias*? The viewer wonders what's happening. There is an absence, probably in relation to political participation in the square, the public forum. Between scenes is a disruption: if the first screen appeals to a documentary register, the second has a hint of theatrical representation, of staging and being over-acted. The movement between document and fictional representation in this work suggests distinct textures in Karamustafa's oeuvre. Such texture illustrates for the jail experience that fluctuates between these two zones (documentary and theatrical) and unravels differently in each of them.

### Get Out of There

The choice of black-and-white in the filming of *Memory of a Square* brings the work closer to *Bühne* (Stage), the 1971 installation discussed above that captures the artist and her husband before military court. We only see their bodies, standing beneath the judges' punishing gaze. We cannot see the judges, but we can see the soldiers that invigilate

that we used to dance to in Argentina at the end of the 1980s, which claims: 'Todo preso es político' ('all prisoners are political'). Patricio Rey y sus Redonditos de Ricota, 'Todo preso es político', 1987.

9 Michel Foucault, *Genealogía del racismo*, La Plata: Editorial Altamira, 1981.

10 Mariana Tello, 'Narrar lo "inenarrable", imaginar lo "inimaginable", comprender lo



Gülsün Karamustafa,  
*Memory of a Square*,  
 2005, video, 17 mins,  
 7 secs. Courtesy  
 the artist and  
 BüroSarıgedik

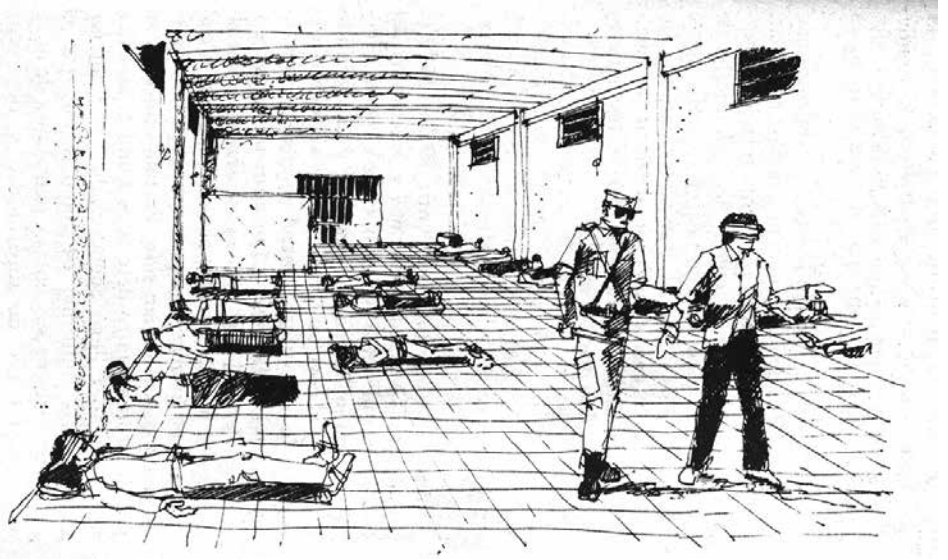


the defendants. Like a bureaucratic seal, four words in German invite a Foucauldian reading, inscribing the prison as an all-encompassing institution of a disciplinary society.<sup>9</sup> When Karamustafa uses painting as her medium, her chronicles find a different register. They are full of vibrant and joyful colours similar to her 1970s ‘Workers’ Day’ posters. In spite of the discernible darkness of the subject matter, the artist inscribes the works within the realm of beauty.

Gustavo Contepomi’s drawings do something similar. Illegally imprisoned for

two years (1976–78) with his partner in ‘La Perla’, one of the concentration camps that were active in Argentina, the architect made the most of his technical drawing skills in recording his *concentrationary* experience. His construction drawings allow the viewer to imagine the secret centre for arrest and extermination, including the measurements and distribution of space. One can see the locations of prisoners, guards and torture. Contepomi’s drawings are, as Weiss suggests ‘a stage where memories are situated’.<sup>10</sup> The motivation to produce

Right:  
Gustavo Contempomi,  
*La cuadra de La Perla*,  
circa 1981, black  
ballpen on white A4  
paper. Courtesy the  
artist



them was to accurately account for his, and others' experiences that had been denied by military authorities. The drawings are witnesses: 'while showing, they also demonstrate a truth that is backed up by the

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***Karamustafa and Calveiro articulate not only the denunciation of abuse, not mere witnesses to pain, humiliation and torture, they shed light on a collective system of support, a politico-affective plot weaved through risky but small gestures of care.***

same legitimate voice of the witness'. These works do not circulate within an art world, serving as crucial public testimonies even in judicial proceedings: 'These drawings confront us with real interpretative challenges: they are not photographs, but this doesn't mean that they cease to be very real. They don't inscribe themselves under the parameters of 'art' but they draw from it and behave in such a way that enables "imagination"'.<sup>11</sup>

Contepomi's drawings and Karamustafa's paintings are testimonies and

convey the memory of a limited experience. While the drawings of the former renegade on any form of aesthetic function, positioning themselves as evidentiary, the latter seek traces of beauty. This appeal to beauty recalls the initial scene in Karamustafa's film: a tree, the sound of its leaves in the breeze, the voices of children playing. Images such as these are precise traces of the intensities of life - a life that continues to be vibrant and deals with its surroundings despite confinement, pain and fear.

Translated from Spanish by Ana Bilbao.

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<sup>11</sup> "incomprensible". Aproximaciones las memorias sobre la experiencia concentracionaria desde una perspectiva antropológica', *Eadem Ultraque Europa: Revista Semestral de Historia Cultural E Intelectual*, vol.9, no. 14, 2013, p.26.  
*Ibid.*