

KNIGHT, Christopher, The Writing on the Wall, in *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 1996

The Writing on the Wall / Christopher Knight

Conceptual art, which is by now being made by its sixth – or maybe its 16th – generation of practitioners, often gets hung up on mind-numbering games masquerading as profundity. Commonly emphasizing language, both written and visual, Conceptual art can easily devolve into boring, smarty-pants word play that’s supposed to be its own reward, but which in fact merely reshuffles the deck of received ideas.

And then there are the uncommon exceptions.

Not only is Rosângela Rennó’s quietly concise exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art fully aware of Conceptual art’s potentially corrosive dilemma, it is also insightful enough to take it on as central subject. Combining simple, unprepossessing photographs and texts, as countless other artists do today, she manages to create a unique environment in which ephemeral symbols and signs assume a surprisingly eloquent gravity.

Rennó, 33, is an artist new to me. Brazilian, she has had several one person shows in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo since 1991, and more recently her work has begun to turn up in group exhibitions in Europe. The small MOCA show, organized by exhibitions coordinator Alma Ruiz, is part of the museum’s “Focus Series”, and it marks Rennó’s solo debut in the United States. Hers is a young career that plainly bears watching.

Titled “Cicatriz” – a Spanish word that, like the English cicatrix, means “scar” – the show is composed of 18 black-and-white photographs interspersed with a dozen relatively brief texts. The coarse, but elegantly printed photographs are large (as much

as several feet to a side), and they picture crudely tattooed body parts: biceps that display an embracing couple, a chest decorated with a flower or a woman's profile, a forearm on which a rudely sketched Statue of Liberty unfolds. The short texts come from unrelated newspapers stories.

All of the news stories concern worldly events in which photography played a key role. Most are anonymous and commonplace – a shadowy police interrogation, the discovery of a child pornography ring, an episode of religious persecution. A few are famous. One tells the story of the young Vietnamese girl whose naked, napalmed body became an image seared into the collective American consciousness during our awful war in Southeast Asia, while another recall Mexico's heroic Subcommander Marcos, who deftly conducted guerilla warfare in our modern media culture.

These short texts are not placed as captions to the tattoo photographs. Instead, both word and image are deployed as independent equivalents, each with its own exploitable characteristics.

So far Rennó's union of found photographs and found texts might sound like ordinary at any moderately up-to-date art school. However, rather than simply print these news briefs on panels or hang the photographs on the walls, as if their information value as symbols was all that mattered, the artist has instead come up with a far more compelling form.

Rennó's texts have been scratched and cut right into the plaster of the gallery's blindingly white walls; they recall aphorisms or stories conventionally carved into the granite and marble walls of public buildings. Sliced at least a quarter-inch deep, the short stories become visible through the shadows cast by ambient raking light.

The words are startlingly present through their absence. Given all the bright whiteness of the room, you read then haltingly, stumbling over continuity and repeating phrases until the short paragraphs make sense. (The brevity of the texts is important here; frustration doesn't overwhelm the process.) You finally want to stick your finger into the

gaping text, probing like a doubting Thomas to determine its authenticity.

Although wholly reliant on the rapidly disseminated information typical of our media culture, Rennó effortlessly manages to slow down your perception. She gives it tactility.

The 18 unframed photographs, meanwhile, are also embedded in the walls. The surface of each picture is flush with the wall's surface. While they thus become a seamless part of the constructed environment that surrounds you, these embedded pictures also echo the "embedded pictures" they depict – the crude tattoos, which have been painfully inked within human flesh.

"Cicatriz" subtly emphasizes the tensions between the power of material presence and the chimerical authority of ephemeral signs, which get under your skin. Susan Sontag once famously likened the camera to a gun and the act of photographing to pulling the trigger. Making art of the disfiguring residue the photographic gunshot wound leaves behind, Rennó takes a provocative look at the scar that results.