

EN

QUINTERO

MASSSES

OSCAR MURILLO

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ELS WIELS WIE

INTRODUCTION

In this exhibition, Oscar Murillo establishes a cartography of mass – liquid, material and sonic – across a large-scale installation that points to traces of time and its cyclical movement of creation and destruction. This process of conceiving and undoing is integral to Murillo's multidisciplinary practice, demonstrated by his bold attitude towards painting, or mark-making as he calls it, and a deep commitment to materiality. His canvases are violently streaked and folded, stitched together, smudged with dirt and debris, acting as 'permanent archives' that both expose and negate memories of previous events.

Masses is the outcome of the current juncture where Murillo finds himself: a pivotal moment, ten years after initiating the project *Frecuencias* in 2013 and following the pandemic which allowed him to retreat back to his village La Paila in Colombia. During Murillo's 'decade of geographical research', he spent countless hours on flights and other modes of travel, often working site-specifically in remote parts of the world. What grounds him is an unwavering drawing practice and his ability to create a 'sacred studio space' on an aeroplane tray table, a hotel desk or a train car.

Recently, after his prolonged stay in Colombia, he has returned his focus to nature and to understanding – or rather digesting – some of the guiding principles that have identified his works: the markings of time, the weight of history, the murmur of dissonant voices. Using a list of words referencing geological formations proposed by Murillo, we begin to understand the forces of nature: how water and soil collide, setting

landmasses in motion across time. The lexicon on the following pages proposes a subjective, non-hierarchical framework for engaging with the exhibition, pointing to affinities and entanglements between the works and our natural environment. It is this fertile ground, the 'life-giving blackest soil', that informs Murillo's work and thinking.

Curated by: Helena Kritis

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Oscar Murillo (b. 1986, La Paila, Colombia) lives and works in various locations. After his memorable intervention in the 2017 thematic exhibition *The Absent Museum*, WIELS is proud to invite him back with *Masses*. Murillo earned a BA in Fine Arts at the University of Westminster in 2007 and an MA from the Royal College of Art, London in 2012. In 2019, he was one of four artists to collectively be awarded the prestigious Turner Prize. Selected solo exhibitions include: Fundação de Serralves, Porto, Portugal (2023–24); Saint Louis Art Museum, US (2022); KM21, The Hague, Netherlands; Fondazione Memmo, Rome, Italy; Museum of Art of the National University of Colombia, Bogotá (all 2021–22); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan (2021); Aspen Art Museum, US; Kunstverein in Hamburg, Germany (both 2019–20); K11 Art Museum, Shanghai, China (2019); Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2017–18); Yarat Contemporary Art Centre, Baku, Azerbaijan (2016–17); Performa 15, New York, US

(2015); The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, US (2014) and South London Gallery, UK (2013).



Oscar Murillo, *meet me! Mr. Superman*, 2013–2015. Video still: Courtesy the artist. Copyright © Oscar Murillo.

older field, butte, cirque, cove, crater, crevice, chas
nyon, mesa, arroyo, barrow, bog, fen, bedrock, fault
ne, **blockfield**, fault scarp, fold mountain, hill, hillo

A blockfield or 'sea of rock' is a sloped surface covered by boulder-sized rocks usually found in regions with a subpolar climate. Subsequent freezing and thawing has broken up the top layer of rock, resulting in a mass of smaller angular boulders.

Murillo's installations place visitors in a precisely choreographed field of tension, defined by the energetic interaction of supposed opposites such as work and leisure, production and consumption, matter and transcendence. Such is the case when happening upon the mass-produced **plastic garden chairs** and the imposing church pews scattered around the two galleries. Also known as Monobloc chairs – due to the fact they are produced by a single sheet of plastic – these vernacular furniture items appear in many of Murillo's works. Cheap to produce and to acquire, they are the ultimate democratic chair, as its widespread use attests to. Their irregular placement suggests a kind of informal, transient social gathering, and the empty chairs are an invitation to the visitor to join in.

Placed on and around the chairs are **rock-like sculpture formations** made from ground corn and cement. Murillo states that "corn is a staple food representing everyday existence, to cut through society and eradicate classes. Like grits, udon or polenta." Food is another constant in Murillo's work, from references in his early paintings to his family often cooking Colombian dishes at openings. It is a way for him

to reflect on community and culture whilst also addressing systems of production and labour.

Nestled among the plastic chairs are several 19th century antique church pews sourced from the Netherlands, some of which are precariously balanced on one end, supported by solid blocks of partially oxidised iron. Their weighed down presence defies the ad hoc quality of the chairs. Instead they lead us to consider the magnitude of religion and its power structure, still holding sway in most parts of the world and maintaining a system of subjugation and control.

A fault plane is the surface along which rock masses have moved past each other. They are formed as a result of tectonic forces, which can cause fissures and breakage in the rocks.

Upon entering the first gallery, we are met with ***disrupted frequencies (2013–2023)***, a panorama of six expansive gestural paintings attached to routinely used scaffolding. The works are heavily marked in varying shades of blue, resembling a dark tide washing over the space. Closer inspection reveals that each painting is made from stitched-together smaller canvases, containing all sorts of tags and scribbles that are erased or exposed by the paint strokes. These new works draw upon the long-term collaborative project *Frequencies (2013–ongoing)* through which Murillo – together with

members of his studio, his parents and various collaborators – distributed raw canvases to more than 450 schools across the world. Affixed to school desks, they were drawn upon, tagged and illustrated by school children for over six months and sent back to the artist afterwards.

Murillo treats these canvases as analogue recording devices that represent an accumulation of information transmitted across geographies in times of turmoil. The sheer volume allows him to tap into a collective consciousness – a cultural and social frequency – away from the anecdotal intricacies of where and by whom the drawings were created. Drawing on a tradition of abstraction, they are grounded by a deep understanding of the material and socio-political realities at present. The impetus for *Frequencies* can be located at the trauma felt, and a sense of uprootedness Murillo experienced when migrating from two cultural extremes as an adolescent – would a young Mango tree continue to grow if uprooted from the Democratic Republic of Congo and replanted in Sampont in the south of Belgium?

The exhibition at WIELS ushers in a new phase that sees the collection of canvases and the memories they hold flattened into raw material mass, to be stitched together and used as a resource for new works, provocatively disrupting the intellectual project of an archive.

ara, veld, veldt, subtropics, tropics, tropical forest, est, bed, **karst**, monsoon forest, taiga, permafrost, ic

Karst is a unique geological terrain characterised by the dissolution of soluble bedrock by rainwater. Over millennia, this process sculpts the landscape into a distinct subterranean labyrinth that includes: sinkholes, caves, underground rivers and caverns.

Murillo has long held a fascination with the darkness inherent in nature, particularly the organic decay of biological processes. They find expression in the haunting **black canvases** – part of Murillo’s ongoing installation *The Institute of Reconciliation* (2014-ongoing) – that are suspended from the ceiling, created by saturating linen canvases in thick layers of oil paint, stitching together fragments of different paintings and allowing dirt and debris to accumulate over time. The resulting surfaces, reminiscent of weathered flags or shrouds, evoke a sense of mourning, grief, and loss. Murillo describes these monolithic expanses of black as “symbolic vessels” holding the potential for meaning. They offer a space for reflection, for mourning and for transformation: life is borne out of darkness.

insula, savanna, savannah, fjord, archipelago, cape, sa, oasis, peninsula, mangrove swamp, arroyo, grab, eau, escarpment, horst, cliff, bay, reef, stack, sea c, lera, barrow, continent, fault, fault plane, fault scar, t, dike, **sea stack**, ocean floor, ocean basin, ocean t

A sea stack is a vertical column of rock that stands isolated in the sea near a coastline. They generally have steep sides that rise high above the surrounding coast before plunging into the

ern, pothole, sinkhole, pothole, fen, bog, blanket bo, or heath, moorland, marsh, prairie, steppe, arctic

water. They are most common in areas with strong currents and high tides.

Murillo's *flight* (2018–2019) drawings capture the creative energy of travel, born from his practice of drawing while in transit. “This evolved out of the necessity to rid the body of physical energy and, through symbols and words, create a space of familiarity for myself. The drawings made on board aeroplanes, in hotels, and in any space of transition have a similar function: they feed a sickness, a relentless labouring,” Murillo stated in 2018. The *flight* works originate from an initial drawing on copper plate, transferred onto paper. Throughout his travels, Murillo continues to refine his spontaneous compositions by layering on ink, graphite or crayon, often obsessively writing down the same words, creating both a sense of movement and homogeneity. At times, the *flight* drawings have served as performance scores, repurposing the repetition of words and phrases to create an impression of rhythm and cadence. Following the fragmentary process of creation, the performance uses the layering of sounds to compose a chorus that is equally harmonious and discordant.

Documenting an aerial perspective, these dense works on paper reflect the particular compression of time and space you experience when in flight. They embody a fluidity of place spurred on by Murillo's desire to navigate notions of migration and displacement.

River rapids are sections of a river where the water flows quickly and turbulently over rocks, creating a spectacle of whitewater and excitement. They are formed when the riverbed changes abruptly, causing the water to accelerate and churn.

Many of Murillo's motifs that are peppered throughout the exhibition converge in the immersive film installation ***meet me! Mr. Superman (2013–2015)***: leisure, ritual and belonging, but also the feeling of losing yourself in the crowd, or floating in the water. Shot on the streets of Murillo's hometown La Paila, during the early hours of new year's day, the film envelops you in scenes of celebration and conviviality. Party-goers are dancing, chatting, drinking and joking, having just taken the plunge from one year into the next. Weaving in and out of focus, and moving from within the heart of the crowd to observing it from a distance, a profound sense of dislocation seeps in. This is only further enhanced by the commissioned score that blends ambient street sounds with ominous, bell-like harmonies. A new element to this installation is the scaffolded projection screen made from sutured pieces of linen disrupted by Murillo's bold strokes. It paints an uncanny picture that nevertheless feels familiar in the context of Murillo's work, pushing us face forward in the maelstrom of the *disrupted frequencies (2013–2023)* panorama once more.

EVENTS

Look Who's Talking – Helena Kritis ^(NL)

Wed. 07.02, 19:00

Look Who's Talking – María Inés Rodríguez ^(FR)

Thu. 15.02, 19:00

Look Who's Talking – Emma Enderby ^(EN)

Thu. 22.02, 19:00

Performance – Echoing Spirits

Sat. 02.03, Sat 06.04, Sat. 27.04

ongoing between 12:00–16:00

Lecture – Material witnesses:

Oscar Murillo's *Masses*

Anna Pigott on Oscar Murillo ^(EN)

Sat. 02.03, 16:00

Look Who's Talking – Oscar Murillo & Zoë Gray ^(EN)

Wed. 06.03, 19:00

More events & registrations:

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THANKS FOR YOUR VISIT!

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Oscar Murillo, disrupted frequencies (detail), 2013–2023 © Oscar Murillo.
Photo: Tim Bowditch & Reinis Lismanis

