

Tending to Colombia's Disappeared and Their Final Homes 'Réquiem NN' Portrays a Second Life for Unknown Dead

By NICOLAS RAPOLD | OCT. 7, 2013

The double N in the title of "Réquiem NN" is no misprint: It stands for sadness and, very probably, suffering. In this brief documentary, the Colombian artist Juan Manuel Echavarría chronicles the stacked tombs of anonymous victims from his country's decades of violent internecine conflict. Each is marked with the abbreviation for "no name" in Spanish, but as shown here, the unknown dead enter a kind of second life through the residents of Puerto Berrío, where bodies found in the nearby Magdalena River are buried.



Tombstones from Juan Manuel Echavarría's "Réquiem NN."
Juan Manuel Echavarría

Believers describe a kind of spiritual symbiosis: The square tombs are unofficially tended by self-proclaimed caretakers, who, in turn, feel watched over by the souls they have adopted (and sometimes named). Mr. Echavarría gives perspectives from those involved — these deeply invested "adoptantes," a "soul keeper" who leads prayer rites, a fisherman still shaken over the bodies he has found in the water — and periodically halts the film for serial montages of his tomb photography.

The photos, part of a years-long project, spotlight but also abstract each tomb as a kind of tragic portrait of absence. The minimal decorations often include messages hand-painted on the stone and, at most, a flower, statuette or special border. Their spareness belies horrible stories and unaccounted-for lives. Mr. Echavarría dwells on the rituals of aftermath rather than the causes of death, though one of the film's most striking moments features a bereft mother praying, outlined by moonlight.

More a medium-length gallery piece than a feature, the movie can look a little rudimentary in presentation (compared with, say, another entry in cemetery cinema, "El Velador," directed by Natalia Almada, who is cited in this film's credits). But its subject is eternal.