untitled: from the series *tierratories*, 2000

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In these times of an increasingly assailed and surveilled republic, what will come to constitute the public? I would like to offer tierratories as one possibility. The title of the series is a synthesis of the Spanish word “tierra” and the English word “territory”.

tierra  earth, soil, world, country, land, ground

territory 1. The land and waters under the jurisdiction of a state, nation, or sovereign.  
2. A part of a nation not accorded full status.  
3. The area to which one is assigned as an agent or representative.  
4. A field of interest or activity.

Tierra is often used affectionately and with much political weight, as in the rallying cry of the Mexican Revolution, “tierra y libertad” (“land and liberty”). This term can also be used in a nostalgic sense that flattens political realities and romanticizes cultural roots. Territory often connotes a state-sanctioned demarcation of a geographic or conceptual space. I have been photographing spaces within and between these two notions in an effort to engage, and perhaps know, the urban landscape of southern California. I am a recent arrival to this land, having come here four years ago by way of the San Francisco Bay Area, the Pacific Northwest, and Panamá. In my desire to make home anew, I struggle through the absurd and necessary act of trying to wrap my arms around the enormity that is Los Angeles.
Hebert

tierratories is concerned with spaces peculiar to L.A., spaces which are intelligent and evocative in their visual anarchy, spaces which seem to me to be quite Third World in their aesthetic sensibilities. tierratories pokes fun at the omnipresence of the state and the ways it creates and codifies territory through signage, boundaries, and transportation arteries. Los Angeles has a reputation for being a highly policed and regulated terrain. There is also a common perception that L.A. has no public space at all, a notion that perhaps stems from the proliferation of car culture, imagined and real criminal violence, and the sheer vastness of the built environment.

As I journey through this sprawling metropolis, however, I am deeply moved by the public and by the kinds of spaces that seldom appear in the narrow simulacra generated by the entertainment industry, on our highly sensationalized local newscasts, or as postcards in the tourist boutiques of Hollywood Boulevard. I see and sense something else, something more than places that might ordinarily be ignored, devalued, or seen simply as the insignificant backdrops of mini urban dramas. For me these places are spaces, and they are filled with memories and beauties that demand recognition. I hear these spaces speaking, sometimes in whispers, sometimes in laughter or loud shrieks, but always with a powerful spiritual presence.

For the most part I have intentionally not photographed people in these spaces. This creates a kind of narrative tension. Although the spaces are marked with the creative residue of many human hands, few bodies actually appear in these scenes from the second most populated city in the country. tierratories instead acknowledges these (often immigrant) bodies through their physical absence. The work views land and space as our collective body, thereby honoring our constant spiritual presence in the soulscape of Los Angeles with its historically layered architecture, seemingly endless concrete and graffiti, and organic growth against all smoggy odds.

In October 2000 five of these images were shown at El Museo de Las Artes in Guadalajara, Mexico as part of the international exhibition America Foto Latina. The following is my Spanglish description of the work included in that exhibition:

"Wherever I am, I'm from somewhere else." — Laurette Hamilton

These are tierratories, sacred and unsanctioned, incomplete and sweet. Veo los espíritus de muchas manos making magic amidst the madness. Por aca I hear a kind of broken Spanglish, la única quebradita I can dance to. Nothing in these images is taken, captured or documented. Simplemente son postmodern petroglyphs, piropos and prayers, funny fantasies shared. Me enseñan these sitios in the city. Estoy listening.
Introduction

I once drove from Switzerland to the Netherlands—a nine hour trip through six countries—and I never left the road. From the moment I got into my car, I dealt only with bank machines, gas stations, and a few restaurant chains. Although I crossed many borders, the roads, the width of the reflection lines, the signs, and the intensity of the taillights of the cars all remained unremittingly uniform. Even the cars were similar. All the gas stations I stopped at seemed familiar, like I had already been there before. The endless repetition of their logos and canopies all along the road gave me a reassuring “feeling of recognition.” When I called my family to say I was halfway there, I almost felt like I was already home because practically everything I saw along the road could also be found back home. In fact, the only things I had to use were generic infrastructures: the highway and its services, my mobile phone, my credit card. These infrastructures were so well integrated and intertwined with one another that I was hardly aware of my use of and reliance upon them. But the feeling of recognition and familiarity that came from being immersed in these generic infrastructures coincided with another feeling, that of being continuously observed and controlled. As I withdrew cash from a bank machine, it occurred to me that my credit was being checked while video cameras filmed each of my movements. Everywhere I went, small stickers on gas pumps, cash machines, and shop windows warned...