



Alma Leiva, *Celda #11*, digital c-print

## artist biography

**Alma Leiva** was born in Honduras and moved to the United States when she was fourteen. She lives and works in Miami, FL. Leiva received her MFA in photography from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA in 2011 and her BFA in photography from the University of Florida in Miami, FL in 2007. She has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions since 2004, including Space Camp Gallery in Indianapolis, IN, 6th Street Container, Miami, FL, and Centro Espanol-La Nacional in New York, New York. She has participated in several residencies, at locations including the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, VT, The Center for Photography at Woodstock, NY (2012), and the McDowell Colony in Peterborough, NH (2013).

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Alma Leiva, *Celda #6*, digital c-print

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201 E. Davie Street  
Raleigh NC 27601  
919-821-2787  
www.artspacenc.org

email: info@artspacenc.org

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Graham McKinney

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**Alma Leiva, *Celdas***, installation view, Artspace, Raleigh, NC

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Admission is free; donations are appreciated. Guided tours of exhibitions and artists' studios are available for groups of 10 or more. Located in Historic City Market in Raleigh at the corner of Blount and Davie streets, Artspace is supported by the North Carolina Arts Council; by the United Arts Council of Raleigh and Wake County; by the Raleigh Arts Commission; and by individual members, corporate donors, and private foundations.

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**CELDAS**  
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# Celdas

## Alma Leiva

Art about violence most often shows the aftermath. Among the most memorable examples of this is the photo of a field with fallen soldiers taken by Timothy O’Sullivan in 1863. Entitled *The Harvest of Death*, it captures the awful essence of the Battle of Gettysburg. The bodies of Union soldiers lay in blunt numbers and a somehow poetic formation. Most gripping is the soldier closest to the foreground. His chest rises in a post mortem bloat, and his arms stretch across the grass, and his lifeless face is directed toward the sky.

Art about violence also shows the action, such as with Francisco Goya’s painting *Third of May* from 1814–1815. A man in white raises his arms up in a dramatic gesture of surrender before a row of guns pointed at him. The guns are held by French soldiers, a firing squad about to kill a group of Spanish civilians. It is an emotional scene, with the faces of the Spanish people contorted with fear, while the soldiers’ faces are not visible. In this painting, the long barrels of their rifles define them.

These examples respond to the turmoil and terror caused by 19th century conflicts. They are graphic, yet beautiful, and remind us of crucial moments in history. Unfortunately, the need to speak out about conflict still exists in the 21st century.



Alma Leiva, *Celda #1*, digital c-print

Rarely does artwork deal with the long-term psychological damage of violence so well as Alma Leiva’s series, *Celdas* (Prison Cells). Her solo exhibition expresses the steady, persistent stare into the opposite direction of the threat of continued violence due to gang activity, the drug trade, and the Civil Wars of Central America.

When Leiva visited her native country of Honduras as an adult, after having moved to Miami at age 14, Leiva was struck by the fear built into the lifestyles of people she interviewed.

*Their preoccupation with safety measures was evident in the way in which they built their homes; like cages. Everywhere I went and found someone to interview, it was through bars.<sup>1</sup>*

Like intimate portraits of living rooms, or staged photojournalism, Leiva creates rooms that could exist within homes as places of sanctuary and markers of time passed, with rich colors and striking arrangements.

The rooms contain moments of magical realism or exaggeration, such as a hopscotch court or a park bench, to emphasize the idea that people are secluded indoors. She also decorates the rooms with aspects of the culture and home life of Central America.

*“... I often introduce archival/found footage, found objects and assorted other materials, weaving in narratives that combine evidence, biography, parody and tragedy. This is the only way for me to process and assimilate the serious issues I want to introduce to the viewer.”<sup>2</sup>*

Leiva makes decisions about what to include with a combination of childhood memories and research. While televisions are often in the rooms, people are not, except for images of them. Christian iconography and ancient Mayan symbols help locate viewers in Central America.

In *Celda #12*, a bowl of ripe bananas sits at the center of a room, and a basket of mandarin oranges sits nearby on the worn wood floor. The walls of the room are lined with patches of fabric and cardboard. A bright, bare bulb hangs near a framed image of the Virgin Mary. Both the bulb and the Virgin have halos and seem to watch over the nourishment at the center of the room.

Like O’Sullivan and Goya, Leiva creates her artwork art as activism. She makes these scenes, and photographs these scenes, as we see in this solo exhibition at Artspace, as a way to memorialize people who have been lost, and to mourn the freedom — both physical and psychological — that comes of living in the midst of ongoing drug and gang violence.

*...In many of the installations I present either a photo of a victim of violence, or a “playscape” that alludes to a tragedy on the news. Celdas #2 ... is a memorial to my uncle murdered in front of his family in 2005, after coming home from a soccer game.<sup>3</sup>*

Leiva’s uncle lived in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, considered the most violent city in the world.

In addition to these installations and photos, Leiva creates videos to share the reality of the violence. In her *Through the Looking Glass* series, videos show altered footage of a group beating a man. Leiva broke the footage into small squares, creating an effect like peeking through fingers to watch a horrific film scene. The small squares of action appear, disappear, and appear in rhythmic repetition, to the accompaniment of sounds created with metal, like white noise that can get under your skin after hearing it for a few minutes. Viewers



Alma Leiva, *Celda #12*, digital c-print

must acknowledge that with every thud, with every shift of the cubes, another punch has landed, another kick delivered to someone’s ribs. In one video, near the end, a voice says, “Ok, now help him up.” The fights are part of the culture, and for those who do venture out of doors, a necessary thing to bear.

**Shana Dumont Garr**  
*Director of Programs & Exhibitions*

## viewer’s guide

What are some hints within the rooms that let you know the scenes are staged, rather than truly lived in?

Under what conditions do you think photography is art, and when is photography not art? If Leiva had found these rooms as a photojournalist, rather than created them herself, would they be more or less interesting to you? Why?

Must a work have a social message? Do you feel that these photos offer room for multiple opinions about the outcomes of gang violence?

<sup>1</sup> Video: Carlos Suarez De Jesus, “Alma Leiva’s Prison Cell at 6th Street Container Evokes Honduran Crime Terrors, Cultist, Friday August 19, 2011. [http://blogs.miaminewtimes.com/cultist/2011/08/final\\_alma\\_leivas\\_prison\\_cell.php](http://blogs.miaminewtimes.com/cultist/2011/08/final_alma_leivas_prison_cell.php)

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Moya Ford, “Exploring Latino Identities: Alma Leiva,” *Glasstire* (Texas Visual Art), July 3, 2013. <http://glasstire.com/2013/07/03/exploring-latino-identities-alma-leiva/>

<sup>3</sup> De Jesus, *Ibid.*