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ART

With a Hammer, Finding Ghosts in the Glass

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BUENOS AIRES

SETH WULSIN'S work began with the shattering of glass. Eighteen stories above the city streets, inside a gutted prison, the young artist from Rockland County, N.Y., was smashing windows to transform one of Argentina's darkest historical sites into a transitory artwork.

It was July 2006. Mr. Wulsin had spent six months fighting for access to the building, the Cárcel de Caseros, and was finally inside. His ambitious plan was to create an 18-story "sculpture": the visual impression of 48 human faces gazing out across the city from the prison's vast window grids. Like dark pixels on a screen, the hollows of empty window frames compose the haunting shadows of jutting cheekbones, furrowed brows and smiles. Yet the title of the work, "16 Tons," after Merle Travis's 1947 labor song, signals that all 16 tons of window glass, along with the faces, will be destroyed in the course of the building's demolition, much as a Tibetan sand mandala is ritually dismantled.

It is the first public piece by Mr. Wulsin, a 26-year-old Yale dropout who moved to Buenos Aires last year. Today it is nearing completion — that is, vanishing, with only 12 of the 48 faces remaining. Soon the piece will exist only in the form of flipbooks, photographs and film that are to be exhibited here and abroad.

"The idea was to make a perceptual creation from the building's destruction," Mr. Wulsin said in an interview. In his conception, he explained, the sculpture is embedded in the prison's demolition and brings "focus to that which people don't want to see."

The Cárcel de Caseros is considered to have been among Argentina's most inhumane prisons under Jorge Rafael Videla's brutal military dictatorship from 1976 to 1981. It was put into service as a temporary holding center for prisoners awaiting trial, yet the courthouse that was to accompany the prison remained unbuilt. The accused were locked away in more than 1,600 cells, stacked to the sky like a fortified high-rise of chicken cages; the political prisoners filled Floors 13 to 17.

What made Caseros worse than many other prisons was the lack of direct sunlight. Prisoners grew sickly from lack of vitamin D. Their skin turned green and flaked off, and their teeth, hair and eyesight deteriorated. The "windows" Mr. Wulsin used for "16 Tons" are composed of opaque blue glass, which once provided dim lighting for recreation rooms where political prisoners spent less than one hour a day.

After Argentina's last military government fell in 1983, Caseros was populated by run-of-the-mill criminals. It was severely overcrowded, and the first of several prison riots occurred in 1984 when inmates bashed holes in the building walls to admit sunlight. The holes, left largely unrepaired, provided the means for constant contact with people in the streets below.

In 2001 the government closed the prison and slated it for demolition. Its past, as well as disrepair and complaints from neighborhood residents, had made its existence untenable.

For a year now military construction workers have been steadily razing the structure, floor by floor. (Implosion was ruled out for safety and other reasons.) Juan Arriegue, a civil engineer overseeing the demolition, declared at the outset that the iron, copper and stone from Caseros should not be saved. "It carries bad memories," he said in an interview. "It has bad energy."

But for Mr. Wulsin, the skyscraper, layered with history, was the ideal medium.

After dropping out of college in 2002, he spent the next few years playing in a band and assisting the sculptor Ray King. In January 2006 Mr. Wulsin moved to Buenos Aires from New York in search of space "to work at a proper scale." While exploring the city during a pounding heat wave, he found what he was looking for. There, in the middle of a derelict city block, hulking over a run-down children's hospital, a drug manufacturing company and small houses, was Caseros: colossal and empty, with its endless windows. Each window grid contained 209 panes that glistened in the sun.

The prison's history and geometries immediately sparked an artistic vision. Yet getting authorization for the project was a different story. To complete the sculpture he would have to gain entrance to the heavily guarded building, then strategically smash a quarter of the prison's windows — roughly four tons of glass. As an unknown American artist with meager Spanish abilities, the odds were against him.

"It probably would have been easier to rob a bank," Mr. Wulsin said. Over the next six months he campaigned incessantly, trudging from one office to the next and seeking out congressmen, former prisoners, demolition experts, officials of penitentiary services, directors of public works and members of human rights groups.

On nights before presenting his artistic plans, he made lists of Spanish words and rehearsed translations of complicated phrases. People sensed his ambition and generally listened politely. Sometimes, however, he was met with blank stares. As his fluency in Spanish improved, he began to attract a following. "The secretaries really started rooting for me," he said. "It was hilarious."

The minister of public works finally granted approval for his project on June 16, 2006. Soon afterward Mr. Wulsin went to work with his hammer. Every day, as the sun rose over Buenos Aires, orange light filtered through the window frames he had already broken, creating glowing, circular patterns across the prison's

drab walls. Through the empty frames he could see rooftops spreading into the distance. Construction workers, meanwhile, chiseled away at other areas of the building, demolishing it blow by blow.

As the towering sculpture took shape, window by window and pixel by pixel, people on the cobblestone streets below were caught off guard by the watchful faces. One passer-by asked Mr. Wulsin whether he was a Sufi, given that he had found life in something ugly and dead. For some onlookers “16 Tons” is simply an interesting technical feat. For others it is a poignant link to former political prisoners, who have not gained as much attention as the “desaparecidos,” or the people who simply disappeared under military dictatorships when they were taken to secret detention centers and killed.

Miguel Mori, 55, a former political prisoner who is now on the board of the Society of Argentine Writers, said he admires “16 Tons” because it brings “light and clarity” into a cube of concrete that was built to seal prisoners off from the sun and the world. “I imagine Spider-Man during the dictatorship climbing up the building and going tak-tak-tak,” he added, making a hammering motion as if he were breaking windows.

One group of former political prisoners proposed a stop-work order to preserve “16 Tons” as a monument. This put Mr. Wulsin in the position of seeking their support for demolishing his own piece. “That was probably the hardest discussion I’ve ever had, trying to tell these men who’ve spent a portion of their lives suffering in Caseros that it isn’t in their best interest or the piece’s best interest to try and preserve the work,” he said.

Gastón Nievas, chief of cultural affairs for the Buenos Aires municipal government, said many other artists who had addressed this painful chapter of history had captured “an image of a victim, and an image of vengeance.” But Mr. Wulsin’s sculpture, he said, also offers the possibility of transcendence.

John Beardsley, a senior lecturer in landscape architecture at [Harvard University](#) who has written extensively on public art, said he was impressed that Mr. Wulsin was able to pull it all off. “The sculpture engages with history in a critical way,” he said.

A few months after he finished chiseling the 48 faces, Mr. Wulsin organized an asado, or barbeque, on the street beside Caseros. About 50 people, including former prisoners, government officials and relatives of the “disappeared,” came to eat and gaze up at the old prison. “That was a unifying moment,” Mr. Wulsin said. “There were all of these people with such direct connections to Caseros right there in front of the prison — and still, the atmosphere was so light.”

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