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Acropolis Cinema and MUBI present  
the Los Angeles premiere of

# la SOLEDAD

a film by  
JORGE THIELEN ARMAND

March 20 — 8pm  
Downtown Independent





## LA SOLEDAD

89 min // Venezuela // 2016

La Soledad is a dilapidated villa located in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of Caracas. It used to be the home of director Jorge Thielen Armand's great-grandparents, but when the owners passed away fifteen years ago, the property was unofficially inherited by their lifelong maid, Rosina, now 72, who remained to care for the house and raise her grandson, José, now 27, Jorge's childhood friend. José works as a handyman, dreaming of a better life for his six-year-old daughter Adrializ, amidst Venezuela's economic crisis. Waiting in long queues for food and the medicine Rosina so desperately needs is part of José's routine. When he learns that the legal inheritors of the house plan to sell the estate, José struggles to try to find a solution that will keep his family away from the crime-ridden slums. Yet the house holds a secret that could save



them all: a treasure that is rumored to be buried in its walls. Set in the beautiful derelict eponymous mansion and played by the real inhabitants, La soledad (The Solitude) poetically depicts Venezuela's socio-economic crisis through José's struggle to save his family from homelessness.

## Shelter and Sanctuary: Close-Up on Jorge Thielen Armand's "La Soledad"

By Matt Turner

*The following is an excerpt from an article originally published in MUBI's Notebook*

*"One might regard architecture as history arrested in stone."*

—A. L. Rowse, *The Use of History*

### I. End of Home. End of History.

In Jorge Thielen Armand's *La Soledad*, the home holds many histories. Belonging to the filmmaker's great-grandparents, this home, dubbed 'The Solitude' by its original owners, is an ancient mansion that, in its dereliction, displays its years like folds in the skin. Each crack creeping down the wall, straggling weed searching up through the paving, or unidentifiable stain spreading across the wallpaper layers the building with historical information; each tiny mark made tells a small part of a larger, continuing story. From the start of his film about this place, Armand conveys this sense of time passed (and equally, time passing) in the texture of his film, building upon the weightiness of intergenerational memory and experience that seeps out from the foundations of the home and fills the atmosphere of the filmed space.

Armand opens with home movies, a selection of Super 8 tapes found on the site of the home

that detail the activities within. Narrating over the top of these minute, momentary documents of his own past and that of the place, he introduces the building and its past inhabitants by framing everything immediately within a context of nostalgia, moments marked with the fondness of recollection and (mis)remembrance. As children run around the gardens whilst adults mill around the home—all bathed in sun-bleached yellows and greens—the crackling, faded blemish of amateur celluloid blankets everything in sentimentality. "I liked rummaging through the rooms, and seeing the faces of my ancestors," Armand notes wistfully, with a matching shot spliced in of portraits of his predecessors that hang from the walls. Place and past become interspersed and indistinguishable.

Then, a heavy light leak, scratched film incisions, a collapse of the image and a dissolve. Cut to the present day. The same building in a very different shape. Situated in the city of Caracas, in an area that was formerly one of Venezuela's most prosperous neighborhoods but is now defined by its crime and political instability, 'The Solitude' sits as a sort of emblem of the country's decline, deprived but defiant, still standing despite a lack of attention.

Time has passed, the property has changed hands. Now informally in the care of Rosina, the family's maid who continues to live there alongside her grandson, José, and his family, the space has changed, as has the class of its ownership.

For the family, and evidently for Armand too, despite its decrepitude this place is a sanctuary. Even in disrepair, the structure retains its majesty, a small labyrinth of high ceilings, wide rooms and spiraling staircases, every self-contained space layered with an cross-generational narrative of amassed and discarded objects, each new resident adding to the family museum. The organic decay, too, lends grandeur as surrounding overgrowth penetrates the interior. Vines creep in through the cracks, moss grows up in empty pockets and vegetation climbs in through windows. Nature's invaders lend the earthy brown clay a living green texture, animating the inanimate and breathing life into a dying space. But not everyone sees it this way. With no formalized right to the building and none of the economic status or social advantage required to fight for one, the family faces eviction and the building is due for demolition. End of home, end of history.

## II. An Archaeological Process

Armand has described the creation of *La Soledad* as an "archeological process," a way of exploring the emotional sensations produced by moving through the building, sifting through the objects inside and interpreting the space through the camera. It seems from the tone of the film that this was not entirely a pleasant experience, that the place he returned to was not the one uncovered in the home movies, or the same as that in his memory. Times have changed, Venezuela has entered a state of sustained, ever more disastrous decline, as has this building that acts as a slightly blunt metaphor for it. Oil prices have plummeted, inflation is skyrocketing, unemployment equally so. Food, medicine and other essentials are in critical shortage. Violence is commonplace, poverty is widespread. A once prosperous, altruistic petroleum producer, now the world's fastest contracting economy. A once grand and impressive manor, now a crumbling ruin. Venezuela sits in peril, and 'The Solitude' mirrors it microcosmically.

Employing those involved directly to play themselves, Armand mounts something of an exorcism of the mansion, a send-off for the ghosts of the countless generations passed that haunt the building's current inhabitants, and more obliquely, for a country in crisis. In a manner that is increasingly prevalent

within contemporary non-fiction filmmaking, the director uses a stylistic approach more recognizable in fiction (gliding, long duration and often elaborately staged camerawork; written or recreated scenarios; poetic visual digressions and a collaborative process shared between participants and creator) and applies them to a framework that is familiar to documentary: the examination of a real situation of direct relation to the filmmaker, and the sense of real, almost invasive, intimacy that can come with this. Armand's film features the actors of the actual event performing their own truths, and though presumably arranged, the activities they undergo are mostly free from any sense of performance, their written dialogues as ordinary, grounded and free of self-consciousness as genuine ones would be. Participants sit and shoot beers, talk idly of the desperation of their relative situations and equally casually of extreme solutions. "We'll do a couple of express kidnappings and you'll have dollars in your account."

## III. Crumbled Masonry, Peeling Paint, and Encroaching Rust

Armand's observances are patient, his scenarios gentle and ordinary, and *La Soledad* is, for the most part, fairly straight in its depiction of its situation and the matters it portrays decidedly domestic. Rosina tends gently to the household, José works on the yard, the children potter about, and the home feels like a solace compared to the hostility of the society around. Everything occurs with a rhythm that is gently entrancing, cycles of labor and leisure all under one roof. Indeed, far from solitary, 'The Solitude' is instead a deeply communal space, all open doors and passing bodies. Yet, what elevates the film are the ways in which it digresses, where it manages to be suggestive of something greater than that being directly depicted, where the past slips through or the future reveals itself as a menace.

These deviations come in various forms. A night sequence that sees José lie wide awake, staring into the night sky while his family sleep. His face is riddled with angst, the dark corners of the room around him animated by the invisible ghosts of those who've struggled before, while his mind is occupied by the impossibility of sustaining a future. Or by day, shots of him combing the gardens with a metal detector, searching for a treasure rumored to be buried in the grounds that will lift his family miraculously from poverty and create that future. Bleaker still, his brother peeling back the wallpaper of the home, clouds of dust parting to reveal razorblades embedded in the bricks, the anamnesis of a past just as dark as this present.

In some films, these moments of poetic interference, where realism slips into something nearer to fantasy, can be terribly mishandled, either too aloof and resting on easy ambiguity, or consciously and overtly strange, too loaded and heavy handed. Armand manages the balance, in part because of the location. The rich, luminous greens of the surrounding plant-life, the moody, necrotic browns of the shadowy crevices of the building's interior, all fit into the poetic potential of ruin. Analyzing the idea of 'ruin lust,' McLain Clutter writes that sites of visible decay, "crumbled masonry, peeling paint, and encroaching rust" all serve to "vividly signify bygone events and past wholes," and also to "register and re-present time." This is very much the case in *La Soledad*, where place and past are intertwined, where the ruin is not just aesthetic, but in a way historic.

Beyond the pure aesthetic appeal of these environments—and behind cinematographer Rodrigo Michelangeli's talent for exploiting the evocative tendencies of natural light and for framing architectural spaces in a manner that highlights their picturesque qualities—is something else. By emphasizing the importance of the home as site of memory, familial histories that are continually being rewritten and reregistered, Armand loads his representation of decay with a significance that is more than purely visual. His ruins are not just nostalgic, but loaded with meaning that his film both directly registers, and indirectly hints towards. John Patrick Leary, in an essay on Detroit, remarks that, "so much ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city." Fortunately, the same cannot be said for Armand's approach to his Venezuelan ruins.

Visit [mubi.com/notebook](http://mubi.com/notebook) to read the rest of this feature on *La Soledad*.

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