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Oral history interview with Arturo Rodríguez,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Arturo Rodríguez on August 26, 2020. The interview took place at Rodríguez's home and studio in Miami, Florida, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

ARTURO RODRÍGUEZ: Continue.

BEN GILLESPIE: So, this is Ben Gillespie interviewing Arturo Rodríguez at his home and studio in Miami. It is August 26, 2020, and this is the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Arturo, could you tell me about how your life and work have changed since March of this year?

ARTURO RODRÍGUEZ: Well, uh, either started, uh, like, a big surprise. It really is, like, for everybody else and then I just start seeing that the whole world was affected by this virus, you know, in my case, uh, I'm a high-risk person. I have high blood pressure, and I'm 64 years old. My wife is also very high. She is asthmatic, and she's a cancer survivor. My other two people that I see is my sister that is a 69 and my mother is 96. So, I have to be very careful when I go out, when I do things, like, bringing her food, bring her supplies or whatever and have a life that is very contained, you know, try not to go out.

I see very little of my friends only a continuation of the—through emails and phones, you know. So, when, when this started, everybody was very, you know, this is going to last very little time. Everybody send you what they were eating, the food and what they're working and people start to realize that this is for the long haul. So, you, you have to adapt to that. My work, luckily, I work at home at my house. My house is my studio and is my—also one of my themes that I work about so.

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What I do is take every day, try to make very, like, a routine. Otherwise, you feel, like, this in a summer back at play. You know, when there is lines—invisible lines, invisible, you know, things that you want to do and can't do, you know, in right in front of you, and it—and that's very, very difficult, but in other ways it's your own sanity that is at work here and the work is helps a lot, you know, to be every day, force yourself to work for the—for an amount of time being very disciplined what you do. I also am very, in many ways, I do the same thing at the same time. I start working, like, 10:00 a.m. I eat at 2:00 p.m. I see my mother sometimes at 7:00 p.m.

When—sometimes when it's 7:15 p.m., my mother tells me, what happened to you, you know, I try to be there at 7:00 p.m. Try to make, like, a routine, you know, that day, is in many ways it liberate, frees you from the—being very ordinary in your work, you know, the work is what is important to me and all of this, you know, to keep it going, keep it with the same quality, the same um continuation. You know, I don't want this virus to be my work. Maybe eventually will be, but not now. I am doing it, for example, the series is called *Terra Incognitas*. It's about more or less fantastic landscapes.

Very suggestive, very trying to be very more or less poetic. So, that's what I'm working on. I've been working on that for a year and a half. So, I keep the work and also about that, I did, like, a—I did a series about five or six years ago. It's called the *School of Night*. It's a series of drawings and paintings that everything was inside my house, you know, my house is full of objects, mask, the patio, you know. So everything, it was around me, my wife. We deal with the paranoia, with, you know, being together, the things that are fear, rage, you know, all of that is in those works. So, in many ways, I already painted what I'm feeling now. It's like causalities, something, like, it's very, I don't know, but I felt that I already painted what I'm doing now.

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So then I change. There'll be another series. One is about Arcimboldo, and my own take on Arcimboldo. It's called *Arcimboldo's Goats*. And now, I'm doing this *Terra Incognitas* which each one of these um series takes me, like, two or three years or four to paint, you know. So—then they start, like, fading off organically, you know. They just already painted yet that, you know, I'm tired that I want to change and I want to do something different, and so everything comes to a natural, you know, natural way. So—and uh—but still every day, the—it's that effort, you know, it becomes, like, you have to work at it, you know.

[00:06:38]

BEN GILLESPIE: Right. What was um—what really struck me in how you're describing your life is how the routine is also a way of caring for yourself because now you're a caretaker for so many people that you have to—you have the responsibility to keep yourself well so you can also tend to everyone else —

ARTURO RODRÍGUEZ: Right.

BEN GILLESPIE: Um and the freedom that routine allows you. Um, it's, like, if you're just at—you set everything else in your life on one track and that inertia carries you so your mind can be freer and I was wondering if that's—is that routine different for you? Has your routine changed quite a bit since March, or is this something that's been consistent in your work for a while?

ARTURO RODRÍGUEZ: I'm a very routine person, you know, I like to do things at the same time. I always start working more or less the same time. I first—I wake up, breakfast. I read for a while then I start working until from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Then we have lunch together, me and my wife, then I start reading again, maybe sleep a little bit, a siesta, you know, and then start working again. Then I walk for an hour. Then I go see my mother and then come back and keep working until 10:00 p.m. or 11:00 p.m. then I see a movie or whatever. That's every day, you know, but that liberates you from working, for really taking chances when you work with changes and you work, you know, and I—my—I really take those chances, try to be as different from the other as possible, but it's always my own view of the world. It doesn't change.

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It just—you see different parts, you know, it's what I like so much the movie *Rashomon*, you know, everybody is the same thing but beautiful different points of view, you know. So—and I see that art—I see, you know, painting and a lot of art like that. Everybody has his own view, his own take on things, and that's what makes it interesting also, and that takes great moments and great failures also. Sometimes you—that's not good, you know, so you have to destroy, but you have to keep going and that is struggle every day within your daily life, but also with your work, you know, what you working on, what is happening, you know, it's how can I make this new? How can I, you know, change this, and that's basically it—pretty healthy.

But you have, like, a whole at the end. You have these routines and then you have this [inaudible] a great few things that you do in your painting, you know, use a very—you take chances, you explore, experiment and then when the whole thing is, I see it as a whole. So, that's what my existence, and in many ways, this has helped me to deal with this virus because I meant—because of my work, I'm a very—it's a lonely work, right, I'm by myself, I'm not a social person. Usually I always working, I'm always thinking about work and even when the years as I go grow older, it's more and more, the only interested, what I—is my work, my vision of the world, and that's what I try to keep going.

[00:10:36]

BEN GILLESPIE: So, to come back to the *School of Night*, how are you—so that series of drawings, exploring your everyday life in your home, the, sort of, not just the sinister, but what could be mysterious and transformative within the home if it's just you and your wife, how are you—are you thinking about that differently now or do you feel like you had already prepared yourself for this time through that exploration of quarantine?

ARTURO RODRÍGUEZ: Let's call it permission, you know—I was doing it without knowing it, you know, and then I was surprised how this was going to see like the work. You know, *School of Night*—because I wake up sometimes at night and I—it's a very special hour, you know, they call it the hour of the wolf, the Romans, and it's a lot of connotations at night. That's also another part of my routine, you know, and I don't sleep well, but—and how you feel, you know, when you are, the silence, how you feel the hour when the everything comes out and you know, people die,

people who are born, the—usually the devils are—is when they come out there whatever.

[00:12:06]

So, the thing fascinated me. So, uh, that's when I started to get all this together. My—I have a big collection of masks and objects. And to me, they're more, like, props. You know, I'm not interested in the whatever the meaning they have. I have a lot of African and Mexican and Balinese stuff and—but it's not for anthropologic view. It's—they are, like, props so they come out on the paint, you know, I put them big. They are people, they become people, you know, all of these, that's—that's things that come out in the work. So, I did this, some of like 40 or 50 drawings and then like 25 triptychs based on the same thing through two or three years.

And, uh, that premonition is when this all started to happen, you know, it's starting to make me think, you know. But I don't ask why or, you know, this is—I wasn't a missionary or anything. You—it just happened.

BEN GILLESPIE: I mean, so interesting to have that, sort of, the alienation but also the theatrical and the fantastical in these domestic nocturnes, you know, celebrating how or exploring the ways in which night can change our views of the everyday of the things we experience and are so familiar with and then I'm wondering how is that shaping your thinking at all with the *Terra Incognitas* and thinking about fantastic landscapes. So, looking going from the domestic and the very intimate to the wider world.

[00:14:13]

ARTURO RODRÍGUEZ: Exactly, and that's what happened, and in the middle was the Arcimboldo's ghost that he was art about art because Arcimboldo make figures with fruits, but I, apart from fruit, I put, like, Diane Arbus. I put Jericho. I put the Corvette in the same painting pieces. So, when you see one of those paintings, it's a lot of pieces from other paintings and that—I spent, also, like, three years doing that and then the *Terra Incognitas* is different because it's more about landscape. It's more about a—it's also personal because a lot of the figures—me and my wife, you know, like, involved with brushes and with the—it's about art also, but in another way with easels and boats and the—it's based on three books also, *Moby-Dick*, *Journey to the End of the Night* by Céline, and *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad. So, I'm mixing them together.

It's, kind of, very complicated and crazy, but it makes sense. So each—a lot of them are triptychs. Each triptych is based on the *School of Night*. I mean, the *Journey to the End of the Night*, *Moby Dick* and *Heart of Darkness*. So, that's what I'm mixing, all the things, but each one have, like, a certain style, certain way of being painted. And that's very far away from all the others, you know, so. And I bet it—going with time, more and more interested in just the *Terra Incognita* itself, no books, nothing. That's where I'm coming from. That's where I go, you know, the—to create that, that vision of the world, you know, this could be very terrible, poetic or, you know, whatever you want to call it.

It's always painting, you know, that's personal, you know, the way it's painted, but it gives you—it's like poetry. I love poetry. I—one of those readings in the mornings, always I do two or three poems, different people and that helps me to create images, to be suggestive, not being obvious. The book, *School of Night*, is also with poets. I have—I asked, like, 10 poets, friend of mine, to do each one poem for the book. So, that came out very nice. I always illustrated other people poems. So why not they should illustrate my drawings? So, we need that book and that come out great, very proud of the book.

[00:17:25]

BEN GILLESPIE: I guess, since you're, you're reading every day, can I ask which books, which authors, which poems—what's felt most compelling to you in 2020, or what is your—what's drawing your attention?

[00:17:43]

ARTURO RODRÍGUEZ: I'm very eclectic to what I read, but usually I love Haiku. I love Rimbaud. I love Beckett. So, it's one of my main influence through my life because the way—his vision of the world. I feel very close to it, you know, like Conrad, like Céline, it's very pessimistic. *Moby Dick* is one of my favorite books—always been obsessed by it. The other day, I was talking to a friend. He told me that Frank Stella did a painting of each chapter of *Moby Dick*, you know, that's—so—and I keep reading, you know, for example, what I'm reading right now is Patrick Modiano, you

know, it's a French—I didn't know him that well, but I start reading him and then I become obsessive, start buying books in Amazon by him.

And uh right now, it's all I want to read is Modiano's book, and uh like that, you know, I see a lot of movies. I love movies. I have, like, 5,000 DVDs. I had the whole *Criterion*, almost, collection. I love—I think film is very important in my work because the image, the power of the image, you know power, like, somebody, like Kurosawa, Fellini of Burma, you know, it's Tarkovsky. By the way, there is a movie that I, talking about all of this that we do every day, you know, the same thing. He has a book—movie called *Sacrifice*. It's a—I highly recommended it. There is a part that the father is talking to his son, and they just planted a tree in his—watering the tree and he tells the son. There is a legend a monk from a monastery. Every day at the same time, the same amount of water—he put it on the tree and if he did not—something had to change in the universe, you know, that thing that you do every day, you know, that—that's a lot of wisdom there and that influence me also a lot, that thing.

I saw the movie when it came out about 20 years ago. So—and that always stayed with me. Of course, I have it in DVD. I've seen it, like, 20 times [laughs]. So—and a lot of influence also. I listen to a lot of music. I have a huge collection of music, classical, jazz, Cuban music, Flamenco, and keep going every day, you know, when I work, I listen to music, you know. To me, it's very important also. Not only when I'm working. Sometimes you want to be very quiet and listen to a piece of music and that helps, you know, like I said all power—you're taking all of this to your work, you know, the poetry, the music, the literature, film.

It's, like, an unconscious—you put your unconscious really to work because painting is not conscious. When you paint—so what I think, I go to paint it and something else is what it comes out in the painting, usually totally different. It's why you keep painting and you try to fix this and that and then the painting takes a life of—on its own, you know, it's—because separate from you. Until you finish whatever you finish, you know, it's hard to finish paint. Somebody said that you abandon them. I think that's very truthful.

[00:22:14]

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, I think that's an amazing point to wrap up here, to abandon this, and I'll let you get back to your routine. Thank you very much for speaking with me today.

ARTURO RODRÍGUEZ: Okay. It's been a pleasure.

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