



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Rubén Ortiz
Torres, 2020 August 17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Rubén Ortiz-Torres on August 17, 2020. The interview took place at Ortiz-Torres's home in Los Angeles, California 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

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Rubén Ortiz-Torres at his home in Los Angeles, California, on August 17, 2020, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Rubén, could you tell me a little bit about what 2020 has been like for you and your life and your work?

RUBÉN ORTIZ-TORRES: Oh, wow, well, yeah. I mean, I guess like for everyone else, it's been a disaster, right. It's a disaster. I don't complain, though, because I'm very lucky in a way. I mean, I'm healthy, and I have a steady job, which most people do not have. I'm a professor at the University of California. So in certain ways, I probably have it better than most people, but it's been very difficult. I mean, it's been—I mean, as you can imagine, everything is closed—when the universities closed, my studios in San Diego where I produce are closed. My assistant had to go back home. And the most worrisome part is that I was having very important exhibitions this year, right. I was having very important exhibitions. I had a retrospective exhibition that opened at the end of last year in Mexico City, and this exhibition was supposed to come to the San Diego Museum of Contemporary.

It was supposed to travel, to go to Monterey, Mexico, and later on to the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. I also have another exhibition that opened at the beginning of the year here in Los Angeles at the gallery called Royale Projects. So as we speak, both exhibitions are up in limbo [laughs.] I mean they are hanging on walls that nobody can see. And we're trying to refigure everything, right. Because you know, like, I don't know, I don't know where our world is going to go from here, where the market is going to be, if there's going to be a market, what's going to happen, right. And this is going to have, I mean, already, there were certain problems with the way the artwork was sort of operating and working. But I don't know. I mean, this is going to have consequences that we can't foresee right now, but it seems to me that, you know, the international exhibitions that travel, all that is going to become more expensive and much more difficult, we'll see how that goes. But I would like to think that every crisis is an opportunity and that these problems would also make us think about the purpose and what we do, right. The purpose of what we do, yes.

BEN GILLESPIE: So as an artist who is so interested in cross-cultural exchange and the ways in which different cultures adapt ideas and images, could you tell me a little bit about how this rootedness, like you, can't travel, the shows can't travel, how is it influencing your work with without access to your studio and with your assistant being at home?

RUBÉN ORTIZ-TORRES: Yeah, well, I mean, again, I mean, I know, I guess I would like to think that the way we work or the way it worked, it also depends, obviously, on the context, right, and where do we show—how do we show—how do we think about things? And as it stands right now, we cannot see things—we cannot travel, we cannot be in places where there are lots of people, and it's difficult to look at objects, but that doesn't mean that we cannot communicate. I mean, we're communicating, right? I mean, this interview might be actually—I mean, I would think it's related to the work of making art. So we're doing other things.

I mean, I'm writing, I'm designing, I'm drawing, I'm working with computers some digital stuff, and I'm rethinking, right, about all these things. So we are—I think, again, these are opportunities to rethink about how do we access, you know, an audience and how do we produce art and the things that we produce. For me, it's interesting because the work that I, as you mentioned, the work that I do obviously has to do a lot with culture and cultural production and cultural exchange and misrepresentation and communication and miscommunication, you know, so on and so forth. Um, so, like, you know, I'm surprised that—for my surprise, actually some of

the work, I think, in certain ways, has become more relevant because some of the issues like, for example, the show that I have at Royale Projects, which, I guess, like a couple of the pieces that I have in the background, sort of come from there.

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It's a show that I started working with, you know, it using parts of patrols that I found in Tijuana, right, of cars that somehow were burnt and then I also worked with a lot of customizing materials that car customizers use like such as, you know, candy paints and metallic flakes and all these things, and it turns out that in some—there were these protests originally in Mexico where women were protesting about police brutality, and they were protesting using actually glitter, right.

Right now, here were protesting. I mean here in the United States, we're also seeing protests that have to do with police brutality. And so the work for me it's interesting because it becomes relevant and the causes of the of these problems where, I mean, in the case of Mexico and Latin America, this police brutality has to do with gender—with power abusing relation to gender; here it has to do with race, but I think that at the end, they both have the same roots and they are similar and so the work for me is interesting because it's becomes relevant. I mean, the work that I've been—that I have in this other show in the retrospective is obviously work that I've been producing for the last 30 years.

And yet, you know, when I came to the United States in California in the '90s, you know, there was this, like—you know, I saw the LA riots, and there were all these incidents and also all these problems, like, you know, at the time there was a proposition 187 and all these—how the landscape changed politically here in California because of the politics that had to do with xenophobia and the fear of the other. And you know, we're like, whatever, 30 years afterwards, and we're still debating those things, right. So the work, it seems to me that it's—I mean, it's still relevant and these issues still haven't been solved. Anyway, so, there is—yeah, we're still dealing with these things. So I think the work is still—somehow or the other maybe right now we'll work on different platforms, but it's continuing.

BEN GILLESPIE: And have there been any subjects that have been particularly relevant to you working these past few months? What's drawing your attention and keeping your focus?

RUBÉN ORTIZ-TORRES: Of course, they are. I mean, I'm actually quite amazed. I mean, for example, I don't know for me it's really interesting. How do we value things? I mean, what thing—I mean, for example, you guys in the Smithsonian. I mean, for you guys, how do you guys—what represents America, right? I mean, this is a question that I, you know, we think a lot, right?

And, for example, I've been—since I came here, you know, I remember that there's this very important piece that—there's a story, this situation happened in Los Angeles in the 30s, right? You know, a Mexican artist that comes here, you know, David Alfaro Siqueiros and creates this mural that is his version of America and calls it Tropical America. In this mural, he portrays these Native Americans as being crucified. And the mural gets censored, you know, the woman that commissioned the mural who, like you know, they were developing a Olvera Street. She censors the mural and paints—and covers it, paints it white. So now, years afterwards, now, the Getty Center—I mean we're spending a lot of money trying to recover that mural. But at the same time, we're destroying other monuments, right, it's like the—all of us saw them—and here the case of California and the monuments to Junipero Serra, for example, of you know, have been considered problematic, and they've been removed, right?

In other parts of the country, those monuments have to do with the Confederacy, right. And they bring back a legacy and a series of problems that are affecting people directly, right. I mean, people have—I mean, you know, there's issues of police brutality, racism, violence, and so on and so forth. So, we have to reconsider what kind of—I mean what monuments do we want to have? Do we want to have monuments at all or not? I mean, and then there's this kind of iconoclasm, right, like certain things go up, we destroy certain things, and we reconstruct some modern ones, right.

And that's something that I've always been sort of interested, right. It's like, you know, what, I mean, the relationship between abstraction and figuration, the politics of abstraction, the politics of—the destruction of art or creation. I mean, these are issues that are contested and relevant, and we're trying to redefine them, right. And right now, you know, obviously, that has become history that's something that has become very, very important and it's been debated a lot right

now.

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BEN GILLESPIE: So do you find—what are some strategies that you have been deploying? So talking about iconoclasm, how do we deal with history if it's not just destroying the records that we have and getting rid of the monuments? Is it the detournement like defacing and adapting to history? How do we grapple with it? And how are you feeling those effects and consequences in your art, in your teaching?

RUBÉN ORTIZ-TORRES: Well, I need to be honest with you because, obviously, it's a complicated question, right? I mean, is it about just substituting certain kind of icons by others and just be constantly playing with the substitutions and having these rotation of iconographies. I would like to think that the problem is not—it shouldn't be—the problem, I don't think, it should be trying to define, you know, trying to select certain iconography, like, you know, to define iconography, because it's, again, what defines, right? I mean, what's going to be iconography that defines America? And I personally don't think that it has to do with that. I would like to think that, if anything, it should be to find mechanisms of negotiation and reconciliation that would—that should allow the freedom of the people that participate of all of us, right, so that all of us can participate into these discussions and these mechanisms. It's not about substituting ones for others.

I mean, I don't think it's about substituting one kind of intolerance for another one. In fact, to create certain mechanisms that allow for these processes of negotiations and reconciliation. I don't think for me the problem, I mean, we're in a very interesting moment, because, you know, for the longest time we have had this idea of art and history as the sequence of events where one thing substitutes the other and then there's this kind of parasite, like, you know, we've killed what was before us and come with something else and then that eventually will be killed.

And I think at this point, we're getting to this moment where we have tried everything, and none of it worked perfectly, right. And, so, you know, we talk about the end of art or the end of history. I mean, it's not that it's the end of art or the end of history, but I think there's a moment to figure out that it's not necessarily about abstraction or figuration that both—there's politics involved in both languages or in many languages that we use, but it's more about hopefully creating these kinds of mechanisms that can allow for this process to be negotiated peacefully, I don't know what to tell you.

I mean, you know, in a way, I'm still probably—I mean, it's interesting to me, because it seems to me that we have two contested versions of what America is, right. On the one hand, we have this model, this abstract model. America is a set of ideas, right, you know, democracy, freedom, and then we have this other, but of course, that model is always a paradox because, at the end of freedom, there was never freedom for everyone. It was supposed to be this, you know, freedom of religion, freedom of this, freedom of that, but at the end, it was, okay, everybody will have to assimilate to this, you know, Anglo-Protestant model. So that was a contradiction in itself, right. Well, do we really have it, or do we have to assimilate them?

On another hand we have this—it seems to me that there's this other notion of America that exists a sort of in opposition to Europe or Asia or Africa, right? And this idea of this new world where things collide and combine makes, you know, the nation of immigrants and, I mean this notion of America, I'm using America in a broad sense, right, in an American sense, actually. And both are interesting ideas to me actually. If we consider the first one as an abstraction as this idea where there's this place where we have these models of freedom and democracy and negotiation, it could be actually quite universal and appealing for everyone if we apply it as it's supposed to be without this other idea because of having to assimilate to a particular religion or ethnicity or whatever.

I mean the other model, I think there's some of lesson because it's also this idea of miscegenation, or this deception, right, that involves the possibilities that you know, to incorporate up to really be America is this other project that is actually not Europe, that involves say, like, you know, an African presence or an Asian presence and I would say an Asian presence through Native American presence. I think both—I don't see both in opposition, actually. I think both models actually, perhaps, could be complementary, and culturally interesting. So hopefully, I don't know. I mean, it's hard to say right now [laughs]. All of this is being contested, but I would like to feel optimistic and think that hopefully, out of this mess we will advance towards this—better situation.

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BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah, I guess, and I realize now, belatedly, I should have asked you to tell me a little bit about the art that is forming your background right now.

RUBÉN ORTIZ-TORRES: Well, here, yeah, it's, as I said, you know, the show, the exhibition, it was called *Plomo, plata, o glitter*, right. It's like lead, silver, or glitter, right? And this, you know, we have the hood of a patrol and it's painted with silver and glitter and lead. Lead and silver, you know, become the sort of our signifiers of power, right. Lead as in bullets and silver as money. But I like them as materials. I like the physicality of silver and the physicality of lead like, you know, and these metals are very malleable and you can use them, you know, there's the silver leaf, there's melted lead and also glitter, which is again, I think glitter for me is like a different kind of power. It doesn't give you the power—like you know, it's the power of aesthetics because it's appealing, it's pretty, it's like, again, customized cars, like you know, just glitter, and my daughter's love glitter. So, anyway, I use these materials, and I created this playful—the panel on the—the monochrome pink panel, that's a little bit like—it's supposed to be the pinkest pink, you know, this is painted with this pigment that claims to be the pinkest pink of all them. And it also has a little bit of glitter. You have to see it, but if you look at it like, you know, it's a sparkle that you know.

So, again, these are like—they're abstract, but they also reflect or relate to the—they have particular histories because that hood actually belonged to a patrol and he was shot. So it actually could be—I assume there's some forensic evidence there. Supposedly, this were shot around the border, like you know, some years ago presumably by the cartels. Some of them were burned too. I finally collected all these objects, and I created these art pieces with them. So, again they're kind of abstract and seductive, but they also have these other histories and symbolisms, and we want to read them, acknowledge them. Yeah. I don't know what else to tell you. You got to—you should see the show. There's more art pieces, yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: As you were talking about them, the narrative of America and how we think about the formation of identity. I was very much struck by the pink monochrome and the conceptual sense of identity, and then the sort of collision of materiality over your other, kind of that sort of like, materialist realist approach to identity formation. And so we're getting close to the end of time here, and I guess I'm going—what are you looking forward to as things change? I mean, there's sort of—there's no horizon at the moment, but what sorts of lessons or memories feel the most urgent for you moving forward out of 2020?

RUBÉN ORTIZ-TORRES: Well, I think there are several ones. One of them is that you know the role of institutions, right, and culture and audience. We're getting to a moment where, you know, there was a lot of money being—moving, you know, in relation to art. And then you have these international art fairs, and a few galleries that have a lot of, like you know, that were consolidating a very big market, and then a lot of other galleries that were struggling actually. And then, again, like these small galleries would go around the world, there was a lot of money — this model, I think, it wasn't functional. It was expensive. It was complicated. It was centralized. There was not enough space for a lot of stuff.

So I would like to think that it gave the institution, right, I mean, what's the audience of this institution? Right now, there's a lot of talk about reaching, you know, having a different kind of base, like, you know, reaching, talking about the community, you know, the museum in relation to a community, what's the role of the museum have? And I'm just thinking that these are, like, because a lot of these, I mean, it's obviously, it's very difficult, but it seems to me that we really need to think about the, you know, the galleries, the audience, the cultural institutions and museums, and the schools, that the function that we have is actually—we have to be more pragmatical and more immediate, right. It's like, the people that we got close to us. I mean museums have to pay attention to their neighborhoods and their local audiences, the schools and universities. We have to pay attention again to the places where we are, and serve the students, our students that are close to — that's how you know—as artists do.

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I mean, where are our audiences? Our audiences are, like, you know, in the biennial, who knows where, and the fair, who knows where, or in the people that we live, that we serve. So I think all of these needs to be rethought, right. Like, you know, we have to rethink about who do we serve, and how do we get access to it? And, I mean, everybody, the whole society has to, I mean, not just the cultural institutions. I mean, if the police have to rethink that, imagine, I mean, us as

doctors, us as artists, we have to rethink what type of role and how can we serve better. How can we do this better and more immediate to the people that we have [are? close with]? You know, I just think that my role as a teacher, I have to take it seriously, right. You know, it's like, where we stand as an artist and as a teacher, and yeah, I don't know.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yes, I think that's a wonderful place to leave it with looking for the future in the ways in which we can all just sort of learn to look around a little bit and commit ourselves to a better future. So thank you very much for speaking with me today.

RUBÉN ORTIZ-TORRES: Hey, thanks a lot, man. Yeah, all right. [Laughs.]

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