



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Juan Capistrán,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Juan Capistrán on August 20, 2020. The interview took place from Capistrán's home in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco 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

JOSH T. FRANCO: All right. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Juan Capistrán at his home in Los Angeles on August 20th, 2020 for the Archives of American Arts Pandemic Project.

So Juan, thanks for taking some time to tell us what's going on in your life. Uh, we're trying to kind of paint a picture of the impact on the arts of things that have happened since March. So how have you been since March?

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Thanks for having me here, Josh. It's always a pleasure talking to you.

Um, it's been an interesting time, interesting ride. I was actually installing a piece for a group show back in March that same evening the city of LA announced the first stay at home order. So it was pretty interesting, you know, being in the gallery, installing work. And then as soon as we left and got in the car and turned on the radio, we heard the news.

And we knew like that week leading up to it that people were already talking that the city was going to get shut down. But it was pretty intense, the following days, just how quiet the city was and how this kind of real uncertainty was in the air. It still is right now, I think.

But yeah, it's been intense time. Um, you know, as an artist, it's, it's weird, not going to galleries and museums and events and seeing your peers out and about. Um you know, I still get to go to the studio but not a lot of work is being made [laughs].

There's been a lot—there's a lot of thinking about work, which is not very different from my practice anyways. I spend a lot of time thinking outside of the studio and—but, you know, projects have been placed on hold because—upcoming projects, shows have been postponed. And, you know, who knows if they will happen, if they will be rescheduled. Everything's still up in the air.

[00:02:30]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: So, you know, right now it's just about thinking about future projects and trying to envision if these things will ever get off the ground. You know, it's been weird.

And then it's also at the same time it's kind of weird to think about art, you know, during these times that are just so, you know, mind blowing at times. Where you're just like, I can't believe that this is really happening.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Have you—the other thing that's marking this time is this technology. Like we've never done oral histories virtually. Have you found that like, things that were postponed or canceled, have they been replaced by—have you gotten a lot of requests for Zoom-based events or virtual events?

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Yeah. Which, you know, I'm not the most social person, but I find myself missing these in-person gatherings and events and, you know. So yeah, this virtual world that's been created is—you know, it's—I don't know.

Although, like you know, we all have our phones and we're on our laptops, you know. We do a lot of things online. But I find myself really missing this like in person meetings and conversations. And, you know, bumping into people here and there. So yeah, so like this—even this conversation is still like a little awkward. And, you know [laughs].

[00:04:19]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I was thinking about not just your work, but you. And I was thinking about punk shows and what happens to punk shows now—probably that is not happening, but afterwards because of the real physicality of a punk show. And I thought you might have some thoughts.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Yeah. It's, you know, like I said it's—there is something to be said about these kind of impersonal, personal moments that one shares with like close friends and complete strangers You know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Like our whole way of being has completely been distorted and we've had to really change how we navigate our current situation, our current lives.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: You know, at home, it's just me and my wife, Hazel. And, you know, we were best friends where—we've collaborated on projects. So, you know, we've been really good at home. But still, you know, one of the things that we would do on a weekly, sometimes two, three times a week is go to the movies. We seriously watch films all the time. That's the one thing I think we're really missing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Going to the theater and just like, fully, um, you know, being like into watching this giant projection of something.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: So, yeah. It's—I don't know what's going to happen in the next couple months, next year, if we're still going to be in this situation.

And, you know, that's kind of if you think about the long game, that's really—I don't know how the art world is going to, you know, recover or or how it's going to—what it's going to morph into.

You know, because even right now, like there's a couple of galleries in town reopening for like, by appointment. There's a lot of virtual exhibitions happening. But it's had a tremendous impact on us all.

[00:06:34]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: So I don't know if people are just going to stop, you know. I don't know. A lot of galleries are going to close still. It's kind of really—a lot of things are up in the air.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. It's hard not to be just anxious these days.

[They laugh.]

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: And that's just like in the art world.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: And you know, the rest of the world life is like, even crazier [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that's—yeah, the bigger context happening in 2020 is important. And our secretary, Lonnie Bunch at the Smithsonian, he's clearly identified a dual pandemic of COVID-19 and also surging racism and especially anti-Black racism.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And that's, that's a particular topic in a lot of your past work. So I wonder—and also just as an Angeleno like how have you observed what's happened in LA as a city? Has it made you go back to work you've done before?

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: You know, it's kind of—it's bittersweet, I guess. You know, I've been dealing with these issues in my practice for, you know, 20 years or so. You know, last year I started a series based on the LA—like the '92 LA riots. So um—and it's an ongoing series that I'm still working on now.

[00:08:06]

Uh, so, yeah. You know, when the murder of George Floyd happened, it was shocking, but at the same time it's like you know, again, it's sad that this cycle continues. And, you know, it's—these issues that have been very important in my life and continue to be. And it's hard work. You know, sometimes I felt like a lot of the subject matter that I referenced in the work kind of didn't matter in the art context.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Say like 10 year ago with some of the projects that I was doing. There were stories or issues that some people might not find interesting or, you know, or didn't see the connection between art and social justice. Or talking about racism and—you know.

But here, like you know, again we've reached this point where like, these issues have pushed themselves to the forefront. You know, and people that on their day to day never thought about, you know, how people of color are treated or experienced the world are now—you know, it's really in their face.

And, you know, it's great to see that people are really calling things out and becoming proactive. But I feel—I still think we have a long way to go to resolve and then like really grow as a culture and as a society.

[00:10:00]

So, you know, on one hand, I'm excited to see a lot of people being more vocal and trying to, you know—and this is with artists. I've seen artists, you know, pose these questions about themselves and their practices. Like how can I be more proactive when it comes to these issues? How can I incorporate these issues in my practice? And I think that that's a great place to start now. To be more socially conscious, I think.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Do you think that will find its way into like—at literal curriculum in art school, and you think about how artists have trained a lot?

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: You know, I think that's one of the things that, you know, institutions really have to—really look at their student population and how the outside world is changing. And, you know, as artists we're supposed to be the vanguard. And if you have an institution in school that, you know, the majority of faculty is white that is from a different generation. I don't know how equipped they are to train the younger generation and next generation of artists and designers.

You know, I think, changing curriculum and, you know—I I wonder. I look back at my education, and I think I did most of my learning outside of the Western canon by working in the school library.

That's how I discovered a lot of artists of color. Um that, you know, we weren't learning about in class. You know we did—I think I was fortunate enough to be at Otis at a time where the faculty was very diverse.

And they brought in a lot of artists and talked about a lot of contemporary artists that were of color. But, you know, I think after I left, my year, I don't think other students had the same opportunity. Because, you know, pretty soon the faculty went back to being predominantly white.

[00:12:24]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: So I think I learned—a lot of these artists came in the library finding a catalog for one exhibition and then, you know, doing research. But I think, you know, that's probably not one of the most effective ways. I think, you know, visibility and having an instructor that is of color sometimes really makes a big difference to some students. You know, I personally need it.

I personally, I went to grad school to work with Daniel Joseph Martinez. That was the only program I wanted to go to is because I wanted to work with him specifically. And specifically, because he was Mexican American from LA and the type of work that he was making um, I felt a connection to.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: So, yeah. I think institutions, you know, art schools, schools, even museums, you know, have to start addressing these issues also in becoming really inclusive and really diverse. You know, and I understand it really is going to be a challenge and I think, you know, there is a lot of call out for this change. Um, you know, whether it will happen in the next few years, decade, you know, 25 years from now, who knows? I hope, I hope, you know, that the wheels have been set in motion.

[00:14:13]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Those conversations are definitely happening. They're interesting. I'm almost curious about what isolation is doing to artists. So I'm just—and I guess the best way to frame it is like has your relationship to your home and the place where you live change spending this like quantum leap amount of extra hours there? And with Hazel?

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: You know, it's kind of weird because I thought I was going to be like, insanely productive.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: And it's—not that it's been complete opposite, but it's it's I found it really hard to focus and concentrate on things. So it's made it more difficult [laughs] to work.

You know, like, my book pile of books have gotten larger and larger. I have three books that I've been trying to get through for the past couple of months and it's not happening.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: I start and stop working on these projects. Because, you know, just sometimes I start having this bigger conversation about like, does it even really matter sometimes making art, you know

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Like what is Art with a capital "A" really doing right now and in these times? Like is it more important to focus my energy on other bigger pressing issues? And then, you know, and then, you know, then I find myself like having another conversation where it's like, of course art matters. Like what am I doing? You know, I have to get back in the quote/unquote studio and really figure out, you know, what—what I'm doing as an artist.

[00:16:11]

Again, it's like—I think I do that a lot anyway. It's like every few years I kind of, you know, have these conversations with myself and with Hazel about like, what it means to be a contemporary artist. And what are my responsibilities. And, you know, who am I to the rest of the world? You know, my community. What are the conversations that I, you know, think are important, and we should have?

Yeah, it's, it's—like I said earlier, I don't—I'm not the type of artist that works in the studio all the time, I've always worked at home also. But it's been difficult and, you know, hard to get situated or grounded in these times.

And, I don't know, I keep thinking what are we like—we're already in August. I thought by now I would have, you know, been like acclimated to the situation or—I also was like, you know, maybe we would have already have been kind of jump started back to kind of where we were, you know, before. But, you know, it's—I don't know. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I know. So this is the last question. You're maybe still too in it to answer. But I wonder when you look back what will be the kind of feature that changed or added to your practice that will be a direct result of 2020 with all its events?

[00:18:02]

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: You know, we closed—Hazel and I closed our project space last year.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: And we had talked about reopening or starting like, phase two of it at the end of 2020, like fall 2020 we were going to start up again. And we talked about doing like—and this is before the pandemic. We had talked about like focusing on publishing online, like doing projects online. You know, just collaboratively with other artists, other designers. We talked about this kind of virtual presence. And now personally, I kind of really miss the physical space that we had. The openings and—when we would have friends and artists, designers come and visit us.

So I think, you know, for 2021 I think I'm going to push for mandujano-cell to reopen physically—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Cool.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Another, you know—and we still don't know, I don't know what kind of space that will be. But I think creating again, the nexus or a space that we can all congregate to share ideas. You know, I miss that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: I really—and I think I find it really surprising that I miss it [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Yeah. When you were preparing to go virtual anyway—

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Yeah. Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —this turned you off of it.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, exactly. You know—and for us you know, it's not even that we miss the crowd. I think it's like—even if it's just one person, you know, that we have like a really interesting and meaningful conversation with. I think that for me always, you know, makes it worthwhile.

[00:20:11]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Well, I visited the first one and I'll look forward to visiting the next one [laughs] in person.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Yeah. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Thanks, Juan.

JUAN CAPISTRÁN: Thanks, Josh.

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