



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ed Bereal, 2020
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ed Bereal on July 8, 2020. The interview took place at Bereal's home in Bellingham, Washington, and was conducted by Matthew Simms 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

ED BEREAL: Ah, you're just—just came up. "This meeting is being recorded."

MATTHEW SIMMS: Good. Great. Um, now, yes, it says it's recording. So I'm going to start with my. This is Matthew Simms interviewing Ed Bereal in Bellingham, Washington, at his home on July 8th, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art's Pandemic Project, which is the kind of little name we gave—Hi Barbara.

BARBARA STERNBERGER: How are you doing?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Good, yourself?

BARBARA STERNBERGER: Good. Good.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, uh, very nice to see you. All right, Ed, you want to start over? Or do you want to—

ED BEREAL: No, I'm fine.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay. Excellent. It was delightful to see Barbara. Um, Ed, we just wanted to check in with you. I wanted to check in with you. See how you're doing. What's going on, you know?

ED BEREAL: Well, what's going on is, particularly with me, is, uh, the beginning of summer 2020. Uh, which is, like, some new looks at racism and sexism, at, um, the terrifying image of the other. All of it's being raised to a higher visual level, or to a higher profile, as a result of a pandemic. And the inequities and all that that are going on. And for me, okay, my way of addressing some of that, it has to do with, "okay, how do I look at that through the eyes of an artist?" And there are things that the arts can do at a time like this that maybe other sectors can't do.

And it's going to have to do with—and it's going to be some kind of involvement with the way we put our heads together. Obviously because of this pandemic, we're starting to look at things and we're going, "whoa, a lot of this has been really badly conceived." And our biases, and our critical issues, are not necessarily addressing where the reality of what we are.

The pandemic, I think, is giving us a lot of "okay good guys. You've had a chance to play around with your little systems and so forth. Oh, by the way, that doesn't mean shit to me because I'm going to bite you anyway and you're going to have to deal with me. You can't not do what you generally do, which is deny, deny, deny, deny. You've got a problem. And if it's not a problem that you want to deal with because it's too revealing, you just deny it's there. Try that with me." Says the pandemic, and "you ain't gonna make it okay?" Right out.

What I'm thinking about, Matthew, has been something that I was saying this morning, that my head has been available to my environment. In this sense, I'm not in New York. I'm not in L.A. I have a certain amount of quiet, a certain amount of contemplative opportunities. And whether I'm going to Compton, played or not, ideas are coming that are hitting me on the head, pretty hard. And, um—.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Tell me about some of that, some of those ideas.

ED BEREAL: Well, here you go, because I'm trying to put together this new body of work. I kind of have an idea of how I'm going to do it. The other big question is, what are you going to do and

how are you going to do that? Let me start, in what looks like left field and try to bring it home.

When you, and I, and our other homo sapiens, were born we were born egocentric. We were born narcissistic. Why? Because that's part of our protection mechanism. We had debate. We cry if we're hungry. We cry if our pants are full of poopoo. We cry if we want to be held. And so forth. We are hollering out, because at that point in time we were the only thing in the universe. And everyone's going to have to understand that. At least that's our position.

[00:05:19]

And that's going to go on for a while until there's a point at which we discover that, and belatedly for some, there are other people in the universe. And we learn later that they were egocentric and narcissistic when they were born too. And nature seems to be telling us, "yeah, you could be that. But at one point, you got to leave that and you got to go from me to we. You're going to have to live cooperatively if you're going to live at all. And on one level, if you as a member of the species and others like you, if you don't learn how to live cooperatively, that's your ass. You're out of here, man."

Okay? Now, I'm saying all that to say that there's a whole bunch of people who don't make the transition. They're still into "me, me, me and oh, by the way, let's talk about me." Right? And there are models for that. Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Napoleon, Donald Trump, they're all in to—they didn't make the transition. They're still seeing—they're living in a box that is them. And everything, all kind of incoming information, has to be filtered through "me." Okay? So it's all masturbation. All of it for them.

Um, unfortunately, to say that is, and this is where my ideas really start to penetrate my, what I've just said, if indeed we are coming from that egocentric, narcissistic center, that means we are basically being motivated by our fears.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: Bottom line, our fears. And in fact, for some, our rage. Fear so terrifying that it manifests itself in rage. What happens, and what I'm thinking about, is that racism, sexism, fear of the other, fear of the immigrants, anything outside of that personality's way of seeing things, itself, himself, anything outside of that is a reason for terror. Absolute terror.

Therefore, when we're dealing with racism, sexism, the fear of other, we're dealing with a veneer.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: That's the way that real basic deep terror manifests itself. Um yeah, you could say "I hate the Blacks, I hate the Browns. I hate the blah blah blah." Well, yeah, except that's not what I'm—that's not what's underneath that. What's underneath that is, you are terrified. You are absolutely terrified. And part of that terror is, you don't know who you are. You really don't.

So the other comes along and it's going to be threatening because it has no relationship to you, not that anything does, but you are going to manifest that terror, which might manifest itself as hate, which might manifest itself as greed. Which means if you got \$50 billion, I'm talking let's say, to Bill Gates, I go, "Bill. Bill, you really don't need all that money." It is armor that's around some deep seated insecurity, fear. I'm not sure it's rage in his case, but it's certainly—that much money is how terrified you are.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: We can see Donald Trump do his number using racism, sexism, whatever he's got to use to feed some kind of comfort that is only dealt with, and really can't ever be dealt with, but temporarily gives a little solace to that ego that narcissistic place that says, "well, we told them there and we won that one." Except there's another one coming up. And it's the Mexicans, or it's women.

[00:10:29]

I think the fear and the terror that I'm talking about, happens with people that you and I know.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: It happens on our level. I'm thoroughly convinced that deep down there are some men who are absolutely terrified of women, and sexism is a comfortable veneer that lays over that. But your terror of women is a terror of the other. It just happens to be manifesting in women. It could be anything.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: You follow where I'm going and where I'm setting up?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Right.

ED BEREAL: Okay. Um, I think at one point, let's say you are uh, well, Columbus, we kind of know Columbus came over and he met a bunch of naked, beautiful Brown people who came to him with hands open saying, "hey, baby, come on in. This is really mellow. We got plenty to eat. We got plenty to—place for you to live. And if you dance at all, we got you covered, man. You can dance. You could celebrate being, okay, Columbus, all right." Columbus brought his, that was their thing. Columbus' thing was to shoot the motherfucker first, to rape his old lady, to kill his kids and destroy all of them. And you got to go, "why did he do that? Where is that coming from? That his native place is to go there and push for some kind of domination, I guess, control?"

Well, I'm—my theory is that goes way back to a kind of terror. The same terror or fear, in the case of the infant, terror when the infant never grows up but gets to be 30 years old.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: And becomes a very, very dangerous homo sapien. I believe that when you go—you come to a new world and you look at the possibilities of cotton and tobacco and you go, I need a workforce here. So you go against certain nibblings at your conscience, and you bring over a bunch of Blacks from Africa, and you've got to operate on your own head. Because they don't want to be here, and they don't want to do the work, and you got to make them do that, and you got to use some very extreme measures, and those measures have to be dealt with in your head because you've also got God, and the Bible, and all that in there, and you've got to balance a whole lot of shit.

Okay? A whole lot of brutal stuff verses the word. And after 400 years of that, maybe what was an intellectual job that you had to do on yourself to hold those two contradictions, have now become on the level or have entered into the level of genetics.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: Maybe, and I believe scientifically there are people who will say that repeated action over a long period of time now starts to become a part of the organism, not an activity of the organism. Now, I'm taking you on this trip mostly because I'm on this trip going, "okay, if I want to take and use the power of the art, and my art, even though many of the arts could do the same thing, how do I want to address some of the problems or some of the difficulties that we're having on this planet today and really get to the core of that?" And yes, I can talk about racism, but I now know, feel I know, that I'm dealing with something deeper than that. Deeper than that. And how do I address that? Obviously, one of the things I always say about Bob in my head, by the way, I talked to him the other day, he called me.

[00:15:22]

MATTHEW SIMMS: Robert Irwin?

ED BEREAL: I was doing. Yeah. But I think about Bob because he's in a really different place than me. But he is an archetype for me, in the sense that he doesn't have to make sure that he's dragging his audience along with him. He can do what he does. And mystify and, um, just, you know, shock and awe, and the whole thing with his audience, without having to bring them inch by inch, philosophic point by philosophic point along with him. I have to go, "okay. I'm talking about you, talking to you guys about some very particular shit. And this is some kind of deep shit that maybe everybody isn't talking about. So I can't give you a short cut. I've got to take you to what I'm talking about and make sure you get there. So that I'm not just talking about," and right now I'm thinking about my next body of work, "I'm not just talking about poverty. What's under poverty?"

Well, there tends to be a feeling of dehumanization in the sense that "I don't have to care about

who you are, whether you're going to eat or not, whether your kids can eat or not." Poverty means, and it might go to my greed. We talk about greed. You know, greed is that armor that protects a certain personalities. And poverty is also kind of like, um, you know, maybe unintended results, maybe what I call casualties that are—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Collateral damage?

ED BEREAL: Collateral damage. Maybe is not only that, maybe I got my money and I like to stand on my pile of money and look at you and go, "Fuck you." You know?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: "Let them eat cake," you know? But how do I say that visually?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Right?

ED BEREAL: How do I tell that story? That's what I'm wrestling with.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah. You've been involved with telling stories that are not, I mean, are kind of overlapping in this territory for decades and decades and decades. How do you see this as—do you see this as a unique moment? Or is it a kind of one of those coming things are coming back to the surface again? How do you see that?

ED BEREAL: What happens is, I think myself as well as others, um, have gotten maybe even trapped in the veneer. Okay, I could talk about racism and I can give you images of that. But that doesn't tell, that doesn't talk about real racism, because I've got to get to the roots of that. Well, when I go to the roots of racism, I end up being, "well why does that guy feel like that?"

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: And I have, my information as well as my personal experiences, have said, um, that, "yeah, he doesn't like me." But that's not really the whole story. In fact, that's just the surface story. Number one, I understand that he doesn't like himself.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: Okay? And he has a terror of the other because he has really a terror of self. Can't go there, can't deal with self. I have to be the puppet that wears the guilt of racism because that psyche can't deal with it straight up in his own head. He's got to involve me. But I could be talking about sexism, too. I don't know about you, Matthew, but I know a lot of men who are absolutely terrified of women. They don't let themselves know that.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: But they have an automatic adversarial relationship to women. I think it goes back in many cases too, maybe power struggles of one kind or another. And it makes me feel good, makes me feel better, and that I am executing something that should, that is supposed to happen, when I knock the shit out of her.

[00:20:30]

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: You know? I feel better.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah.

ED BEREAL: Well, how do you talk about something insidious like that?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah.

ED BEREAL: Or at least imply, and maybe you can't talk about it straight up, maybe you just imply certain things that maybe something inside them will, uh, click. Now we're talking about shit that folks do not want to go to and do not want to deal with.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Right.

ED BEREAL: All right? They'll deal even with racism and they'll go [inaudible] blah, blah, blah. Or

you're you, and that goes that way. Blame the victim. "You're going on a trip, you're tripping and you're accusing me of some stuff that I'm not." All right? They'll do whatever. Do not talk and get into "what are you really afraid of?"

"Well, I'm not afraid I'm pissed off." Well, you're more than pissed off, you're enraged. Wow, that's pretty extreme. What's underneath that?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah. You're doing some deep probing and we've only got a couple of minutes left, but I was just going to ask you, is there, how so far as it started to work its way or started to percolate into the work you're doing now?

ED BEREAL: Well, I'm like a film director now. I have to find the right actors—

MATTHEW SIMMS : Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: To act out the story. And obviously, the actors will have to be, you know, symbols for, and I think in part we're talking class—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: But this terror that I'm talking about is not limited to one class, it could be anybody. I think it's predominantly white men.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: Not only did Columbus do what he did when he entered this continent, some Europeans did the same thing in Australia. Over and over and over again in Africa, South America. So I think we're talking about something pretty big and trying to get the right characters to represent certain ideas, and a clash of ideas, and the contradictions of various points of view. I'm still working on.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ED BEREAL: You know, I had started some of this before my thinking had gotten even deeper. Um, I wanted to use Vogue and Esquire models, that group of people that they're, um, kind of the pinnacle of what you should look like, how you should carry yourself all of that. Um, and I wanted a juxtaposition. Juxtapose that with poverty, hunger, children and so forth. It's a little bit literal. But I got to start someplace.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah. And literal sometimes is very necessary.

ED BEREAL: Sometimes that's all you got.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Ed, this has been great. We're running out of time. But I wanted to say thank you.

ED BEREAL: Well, you got it, buddy.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Go ahead and I'm going to sign off when you're ready. Any last words?

ED BEREAL: Well, we'll talk some more.

MATTHEW SIMMS: All right. Bye Ed.

ED BEREAL: Bye.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]