



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Esteban Ramoìn
Pérez, 2020 September 2

This interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool,
administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Esteban Ramón Pérez on September 2, 2020. The interview took place in New Haven, Connecticut, and was conducted by Nyssa Chow for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. 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

NYSSA CHOW: Hi. Welcome Esteban Ramón Pérez. Um, I'm happy that you were able to join us today to chat about this current year and all of its many, many iterations of dramas and trials. I thought we could just start right away with just an open-ended question. Just tell us, what foremost on you mind right now?

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Foremost on my mind is this current situation existing during—in the United States during the pandemic, during political turmoil far away from my family.

NYSSA CHOW: So, can you tell us what are you missing? What does it mean to be far from family? Who is there?

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: So, I'm from—I was born in LA., Los Angeles, California and I grew up just outside of LA in the greater Los Angeles area. Um, my family, friends they're all based out of southern California and I am currently in New Haven at—New Haven, Connecticut, NXTHVN, an art project founded by Titus Kaphar.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: I had just graduated, 2019 from Yale, painting and printmaking. And so, I became a studio fellow immediately after. And so, this is my third year in New Haven.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, wow. So, who—what does it mean to be away from your family? I know that seems like a question—but—like anyone should know but, it's different for everyone, no?

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Especially, right now.

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: So, not to get too detailed but, while I was at Yale before the pandemic happened, my mother suffered from a stroke. And so, I had to do that from—deal with that from long distance but before I was able to visit and then when the pandemic hit it kind of, you know, pushed the brakes on everything. So, last time I was able to see my mother, physically, was in February. Um, and, you know, family—home is where family is—you know—home is where the heart is. So, that's kind of—that's where my heart is, my wife and I both live here in New Haven and we have been keeping each other company and we both terribly miss our home and you know, the people who are there.

NYSSA CHOW: Have you found that sort of make its' way into the work that you're doing or have you been able to work during all of this?

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Yeah, um, you know, fortunately, as stressful as it has been to kind of just, you know, live during this time. I have been, you know, fortunate enough to have the studio space here at NXTHVN and access to this space. I live just next door, so, my whole world is just next building and this building right now. And so, yeah, the past six months I've just been really pushing myself to stay focused in my work. It's been a really good distraction for the most part and has been—well, has helped passing time.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] What are some of the ideas that have informed your work? I guess maybe we can—I have a start point at January. I mean, how have they evolved in conversation with all of this or have they?

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Yeah, that's a good question. Um, you know, what I've noticed, is that my work has always been about social politics to some extent. I'm the son of immigrants, I am first generation Chicano and my parents are both from Mexico. And so, I've been, um, I guess, politically active in the sense that I've been—or—politically aware for awhile now, since I was a teenager. And, you know when I was a teen, I participated in walk-outs, protesting anti-immigration laws. And so, I've kind of been interested in U.S. politics in awhile so, my work has always had a little branch in that. And so, when things started to happen with the pandemic, including all the protests, what I was surprised to see was that a lot of—some of my work that I was already working on just became that much more relevant.

NYSSA CHOW: Can you tell us a little bit about that? About the work that became a little more relevant, in what way?

[00:05:06]

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Sure. So, in 2019, around—I think it—almost a year ago now, like August, um, I had came across two articles regarding prison firefighters and that really moved me to make a piece. So, the situation was that I had learned that the majority of prison firefighters—or I'm sorry, the majority of—or California's reliance on prison labor was due to these prison programs where they were trained prisoners into firefighters and then they would pay them about a dollar and hour to put out these fires and you know there is a multitude of issues with that alone but the fact that people are dying because of these fires to pretty much either save private property or to just you know—because our—California's firefighters are kind of underfunded in many ways is an issue in its own.

But that really moved me to make a piece about fire. And so, with that being the kind of fuel behind it. So then, it led to a lot of research around my understanding of fire and since I grew up in SoCal, I kind of grew up around fires. It's very normal for me, you know I have very post-apocalyptic memories of, you know, being surrounded by hills on fires. And, you know—and—so it's kind of normal to me but at the same time, you know, with climate change and everything and with the pandemic hitting the way that it hit, you know, now there is over a dozen—over two dozen fires in California currently that are out of control because prisoner firefighters are not available because of COVID. And that—I think that just highlights our reliance to that prison labor, our reliance to what is potentially slave labor and you know, the kind of backward ethics that we kind of—you know, it's making me think of like a lot of other connections from like, high school to prison systems and so on so forth.

But anyways, that kind of all went into a piece that I started in August. And so—just to back track a little bit, once the pandemic hit and once you know, I had all this research around this piece and then it just—I started seeing it unfold again as soon as the fire season came along. Another thing that I was going to—that was kind of going into the piece was imagery of cop cars on fire. And so now, we can—I was having a hard time at first to find a couple of images. There was protests from 2018 and from even Ferguson that I was able to find some of these cop cars on fire but then—now you know, you search on the internet and they're everywhere because of everything that's going on.

NYSSA CHOW: There seems to be a connection to this idea of prison labor, one dollar a day and the narratives about essential workers that sort of rules out of—from March as being essential is sort of being heroes at the same time, right, there is all these—ignoring sort of their conversations about protesting. The fact that they didn't have agency to do what they did, there is some idea about like essential. Did that stand out to you as well? This idea of—

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Yeah, totally. I had made a piece—let me see also—it was last summer, and so, I brought it up again recently and it's a contorted leather sculpture. But what I had did was, I attached leather, you know, gardener gloves to both sides of it given it kind of like a humanoid presence. And so, once I pulled it out in the context of everything going on with essential workers, that's what I ended up titling the piece because it so happens the majority of essential workers are BIPOC. And, you know, it's a familiar story and one thing that really made my blood boil was the conditions which undocumented workers have always been working under—especially during the pandemic and during the fire season has been, you know, really, you know, I don't know. I don't even know how to express it. It's totally beyond my imagination how we would really treat people.

[00:10:26]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] Yeah, there—there's a way in which—on one hand is a more mainstream narrative about uncertainty being a now thing, right? Something connected to this movement. Where that seems to be an ongoing part of a lot of people's lives all year round, right? Like, this idea of uncertainty and agency as well, I am hearing that sort of, thread in your work, this idea you mentioned, you know—this idea—essentially slave labor in terms of who has to put their lives at risk and what people are risking. And I know that there seems to be, um, a core of that in your work as well, sort of, attention to who is at risk, right? And who's narrative do we hear and when do we get to hear it, right? And who frames that narrative? Have I gotten that right? Does that sound—

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Yeah, that definitely an aspect and it's—you know, that stems from my parents being immigrants. I got to see how people treat them and that has also affected me immediately. I've been in—just to give a little bit of that story, I grew up in my dad's upholstery shop. So, when I was around five years old he started working out of our two-car garage. He started his own upholstery business. And so, I grew up, you know, helping him out—at a very young age. And so, when he finally—when I finally graduated high school, I should say, he finally bought his own shop—professional shop. So, then I started working for him full-time immediately after high school and up and through undergrad when I went to Cal arts. But, you know, since I been helping him for a very long time, I remember so many situations where people would just treat him so unfairly in front of me. And that really, you know, brought a quick awareness of like, how my parents are seen, how I am seen. And so, that has definitely affected the work, mainly because I try to work from a subjective place and not just about my subjectivity but just about my experience as a person. And, you know, because I am politically aware in some way, that's another reason why it shows up in the work.

NYSSA CHOW: Do you mind talking about the collaboration? Is that the right word? That you did with your dad, with your leatherworks, the works with skin?

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Yeah, so, um, when I was at Yale, I went there to paint, which is why I ended up in the painting program. And so, I used to make paintings, you know, like acrylic on canvas or oil on canvas. And so, when I got there, I was surrounded by 40-something other paintings—I mean painters, I should say and it—I was really put off by the painting conversation. I just realized—it was painting church and I realized that it wasn't really a believer, in that sense. So, I decided to put paint medium away for a little bit and I challenged myself to make paintings out of an alternative material. And so, I had found myself trying to utilize upholstery scraps, including leather scraps but also, fabric remnants that came from my dad's upholstery shop. So, I had asked my dad to send me a kind of box, full of random scraps. And so, he sent me fabrics and leather and one of the first pieces that I made was a leather scrap piece. And what I really tried to do was be true to his hand, in the sense that, he had to cut these fabrics for other work and I didn't want to—I tried not to cut the material as best as I could, in order to kind of, respect his cut, I guess. So, I ended up being in collaboration in the sense that, he made the cuts and I put the composition together which made the, you know, what I call, you know, "leather paintings—fabric paintings—sculpture paintings."

[00:15:07]

NYSSA CHOW: Why was it significant not to touch the cuts?

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: It was almost like a "thank you." It was my way of thanking my dad. You know, I still get a lot of materials from my father's shop, but I also source them from other just—upholstery suppliers now. There's a local closer shop that I started—I made a relationship with an upholster here and he's been supplying me as well. So, I cut into all the materials now, but those first few pieces were just my way of thanking him because I had felt like had found my way, in many respects. And—yeah, that was just a, you know, homage.

NYSSA CHOW: Let me see what the other question was. I'm wondering what would be the most dangerous thing you could forget about this moment? I suppose that's where my question is. Maybe the other side of that question is, "What's the most important thing that you should remember right now? Who, what—why, you know, the meanings, the moments. But I'm somehow—for you I want to know what's the most dangerous thing we, and "we" being this or that, could forget about now? Things are happening so quickly, interchanging and evolving every minute. Yeah, what matters most? What should be at the center?

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: I think what is one of the most interesting things that we can forget as a people right now is probably the delicacy of our situation. You know, speaking in a global way,

we're dealing with the pandemic right now but, at our doorstep is climate change. And so, that's kind of been one of my stress—stresses in many ways. I—you know, I know a handful of people who honestly don't—not necessarily they don't believe but, they don't really consider it, you know? And a lot of people think that climate change is attached to politics. And so, they find themselves, kind of not wanting to talk about—you know, or being put off by politics. So, I think one of the most dangerous things right—that we can forget right now is what comes next after the pandemic once—yeah—yeah, I mean, I have a lot of answers to that question. But, you know, it—just another thing. It just—I'm really troubled by as well how, you know, probably the worst of the worst has been highlighted this year. I think so many truths have been brought to the foreground and that we're staring them in the face and people are very numb to it, you know, the way we treat people, the way we treat undocumented workers, prisoners, you know, Black and Brown bodies. And, you know, I think what has been really disturbing for me, is a culture that is very accepting of this treatment, you know? And that's—I think that's another, you know, big, red flag for me.

NYSSA CHOW: It seems almost that it's a necessary part of the way that we organize our lives, right? The suffering, in a way. I'm hearing that in—when I say necessary, I don't mean justified but it just seems it's designed to run so that, prison labor puts out the fires essentially, or does that work, right? Yeah, I—that's—as I—has that struck you as well, or no?

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Yeah, totally. That was that "A-ha!" moment when, as I mentioned before, when I was making the fire piece. I had already thought that was unjustifiable but then, you know, now these fires are uncontrollable and it's due to a lack of resources because we don't have any prisoners. I—it made me laugh in a very, you know, in a way that made my stomach turn at the same time. Just because it's very ironic, you know, California is supposed to be one of the most progressive states in the United States, in many ways, it's so backwards.

[00:20:00]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] Well, we're at that point. Is there anything I didn't think to ask you or any last thing you definitely want to get on here, this is your moment. [Laughs.]

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Yeah, I mean, I would like to just give a shoutout. I'm going to do shoutouts, I'm a little old-school, you know? It's like I'm on the radio. [Laughs.] Well, you know, shoutout to my wife Grace Andrea Pérez. She's been a foundation, like a solid foundation for me because I would honestly go crazy without her, especially during this time. Shoutout to my family, my mother and my dad, my sisters and my brother-in-law and all my friends from back home. On the west and east coast, I should say because I have a lot of beautiful friends here now as well. So, yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Appreciate you being here.

ESTEBAN RAMÓN PÉREZ: Thank you, Nyssa.

[END OF perez20_1of1_digvid.mp4]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]