

Alberto Baraya BFA MFA
[Bogotá, 1968. Lives and works in Bogotá and Madrid]

If there is a word that describes the work of Alberto Baraya, it is fiction. In fact the very foundation of art maybe understood as man's most gifted fiction: If Art then is a cultural artifact, rather than the opposite, it is a construct that generates meaning in a visual space of self created fiction. However fiction is not exclusive to the Arts but to culture itself and above of all to science. In fact it is production of scientific knowledge, and natural science in specific, the institution that paradoxically has constructed reality based in its inner fiction.

Insisting with fiction being the main pathway of Alberto Baraya's work, his project *Artificial Mythification of a Painting* [1998] consisted of an oil on canvas of John the Baptist's head laying on a silver plate, painted by Baraya himself but being the head in the painting his own head. The painting was never framed and it traveled as a roll through different places of the world, seeking cultural backup to become a myth in history. The project was once again the use of photography as a medium that constructs reality/fiction, in order to sustain that his painting, his face or himself was in every single place that we see at the background of each image, like the Pyramids at Egypt or the twin towers at Manhattan.

In the case of *The Herbarium for Artificial Plants* it is an ongoing project that re-elaborates royal scientific journeys of the 18th and 19th Century to the Americas, such as *The Spanish Royal Botanical Expedition in Nueva Granada*, which recollected, dissected, classified and framed non-European nature. The names and images given to each plant in this colonial campaigns, constructed the scientific reality in which today we still rely on. In his project, Baraya appropriates "scientific" forms and functions of representation/construction in order to create taxonomies for artificial plastic plants that he has personally found our gained from friends and colleagues. When photographed, these taxonomies double their fiction but paradoxically seem closer to reality, resulting with an ironical comment on scientific paradigm but as well on our everyday cultural aesthetic behaviors and uses with these type of plants.

By the end of 2005 he was invited to be an artist in-residence for the 27th Sao Paulo Biennial, where he produced a "site-specific" work that gave new meaning to *The Herbarium for Artificial Plants*. The project resulted with the production of a life-size rubber tree made from natural latex. Using whatever transportation means are available today, the artificial structure (a now huge but soft thin tree) was then taken to Sao Paulo for the Biennial. Baraya's own problems in its transportation echoed one of the primary problems of Rubber trade in the 19th century: how to get the product out for the market. Within that sense the project also commented on Acre's continuing isolation within Brazil's inner politics.

ALBERTO BARAYA

Bogotá, Colombia, 1968

Vive y trabaja en Bogotá, Colombia

ESTUDIOS

1987 – 1992

Licenciatura en Bellas Artes, especialidad en pintura. Universidad Nacional de Colombia

1995

Master en Estética y Arte Contemporáneo.

Instituto de Estética y Teoría de las Artes.

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Cursos de Doctorado. Departamento de Estética, Facultad de Filosofía. Impartidos por el

Instituto de Estética y Teoría de las Artes,

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, España

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2006

“Expedition” Premio Luis Caballero Award, Galeria Santa Fe IDCT. Bogotá, Colombia.

2005

“Mimosas” Fotología, Fundación cu4arto Nivel. Bogotá.

“Ramo Salvaje” Vitrina. Universidad de Los Andes, Bogota, Colombia

“Global Tour”, WI39, Amsterdam

2004

“1204 tr/h”, (Together with Jonathan Hernandez) Alianza Colombo Francesa. Bogotá.

“Herbario de plantas artificiales”, Museo de Arte La Tertulia”. Cali, Colombia.

2003

“Herbario de plantas artificiales”, Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá.

2000

“Mira que teas de morir, Mira que no sabes quando”, Sala Oriente. Sevilla. Spain

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2008

“Sin remedio”, Galería Alcuadrado, Bogotá, Colombia

“Paraísos indómitos”, MARCO, Vigo, C.A.A.C. Sevilla, España

2007

“Greenhouse”, Art Projects, Art Basel Miami Beach. Collins Park, Galería Alcuadrado, Miami Beach, USA.

“Displaced”, Glynn Vivian Gallery. Swansea, Gales.

“Positions in Context” CIFO. Miami, USA

2006

“How to live together” 27th Sao Paulo Biennial, Sao Paulo, Brasil.

2005

“Global Tour”, WI39. Amsterdam, Holland.

Salón Regional de Artistas, intervención “Hacienda” en la Casa de Juan de Vargas. Tunja, Colombia.

“Del otro Mundo”, Museo Universidad. Nacional & Convenio Andrés Bello, Bogotá, Colombia.

“Juego Doble”, 1204 tr/h Jonathan Hernández & Alberto Baraya en el Centro de experimentación e investigación de arte electrónico, CONACULTA en colaboración con el Centro cultural de España. Mexico City, Mexico.

2004

Vacation, projection series 7, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. New Plymouth, New Zealand.

39 Salón Nacional de artistas. Bogotá, Colombia.

“Ciudad de Una” Arte Actual Bogotano. Museo Universitario Ciencias y Arte.

Mexico City, Mexico.

“Jornadas de video”. Laboratorio de las Artes. Mexico City, Mexico.

2003

Bienal del Caribe. Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

“Traces of Friday”, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, USA.

“Naturália”, Museo de Arte Universidad Nacional. Bogotá, Colombia.

“Doble Seducción” INJUVE, Sala Amadis, Madrid, Spain.

“Ciencia Arte y Naturaleza”. IDCT, Goethe Institut & the Bogotá Botanical Garden. Bogotá, Colombia.

2002

“Quinzaine de la photographie”, Lyon, France.

2001

“Espedition Europeen” individual intervention en el Musee Guimet des Arts Orientaux.

Un Tokyorama para el Palais de Tokyo. París, France.

2001

Bienal de Fotografía de Tenerife. CF. Islas Canarias, Spain.

2000

“Le Colombien” at Espacio abierto. Espai 13, Fundació Joan Miro. Barcelona, Spain.

1999

“Legitimación al oleo” en “El Fantasma y el Esqueleto” a Project by Pedro G. Romero. Hondarribia y Fuenteherridos, Spain.

“Arte y Violencia en Colombia”. Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, Colombia.

“Utopías”: *Dormición* en el Centro de Arte Ego. Canal Isabel II. Madrid, Spain.

1998

“Muestra de Arte Joven” Sala Julio Gonzáles, INJUVE. Madrid, Spain.

“Circuitos X” Comunidad de Madrid. Madrid, Spain.

“Cuatro Objetivos, cuatro miradas”. Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, Colombia.

1997

I Bienal Internacional de Arte Ciudad de Medellín, Colombia.

1994

IV Bienal de Arte de Bogotá. Museo de Arte Moderno. Bogotá, Colombia.

1993

South American Artist & Printers. Tamarind Institute, New Mexico. Albuquerque.

1993

La joven Estampa. Colectivo Martes. Casa de las Américas. La Habana, Cuba.

DISTINCIONES

- Positions in Context . CIFO Grants Program, Miami FL, 2007.
- Selección Artist in Context, Estancia artística, 27 Bienal de arte de Sao Paulo, Río Branco, Estado Do Acre, Brasil, marzo-junio 2006.
- Estancia en Nueva York, septiembre 1998. Injuve, Ministerio Español de Asuntos Sociales.
- II Bienal de joven Fotografía en Colombia: Trecer Premio. Alianza Francesa y Fotoclub Interamericano, 1994.
- Beca Reina Sofía para estudios de Postgrado 1993-94. Embajada de España.
- Primer Premio Concurso Instituto Tamarind de Litografía de la U. de New Mexico y United States Information Agency. Albuquerque, junio 1993.
- Segunda Mención Honorífica, I Bienal de joven Fotografía. Alianza Francesa y Fotoclub Interamericano, 1992.
- Beca Universidad Nacional - Icetex “Mejores Egresados”, 1992.
- Matriculas de honor y exención de matricula años 1988 a 1990, Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

COLECCIONES

- **Collection Pierre Huber Video and Films**, Geneva, Switzerland
- **Tamarind Institute**, Alburquerque, USA
- **United States Information Agency** USA
- **Museo de Arte del Banco de la República**, Bogotá, Colombia.
- **IJUVE, Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales**, Madrid, Spain.
- **Fotobiennial, Santacruz de Tenerife**, Islas Canarias, Spain.
- **Museo de Artes. Universidad Nacional de Colombia**, Bogotá, Colombia

MITIFICACIÓN ARTIFICIAL DE UNA PINTURA 1997 - 2000

Serie fotográfica de una pintura en diferentes lugares turísticos y museos.

El auto-retrato de la cabeza cortada intentando legitimarse viajando y visitando lugares míticos.

Proyección de 80 diapositivas

30 Fotografías a color
70 x 50 cm.

10 Fotografías a color
Dimensiones variables

Edición de 3 + 2 P/A

















HERBARIUM OF ARTIFICIAL PLANTS 2002-2006

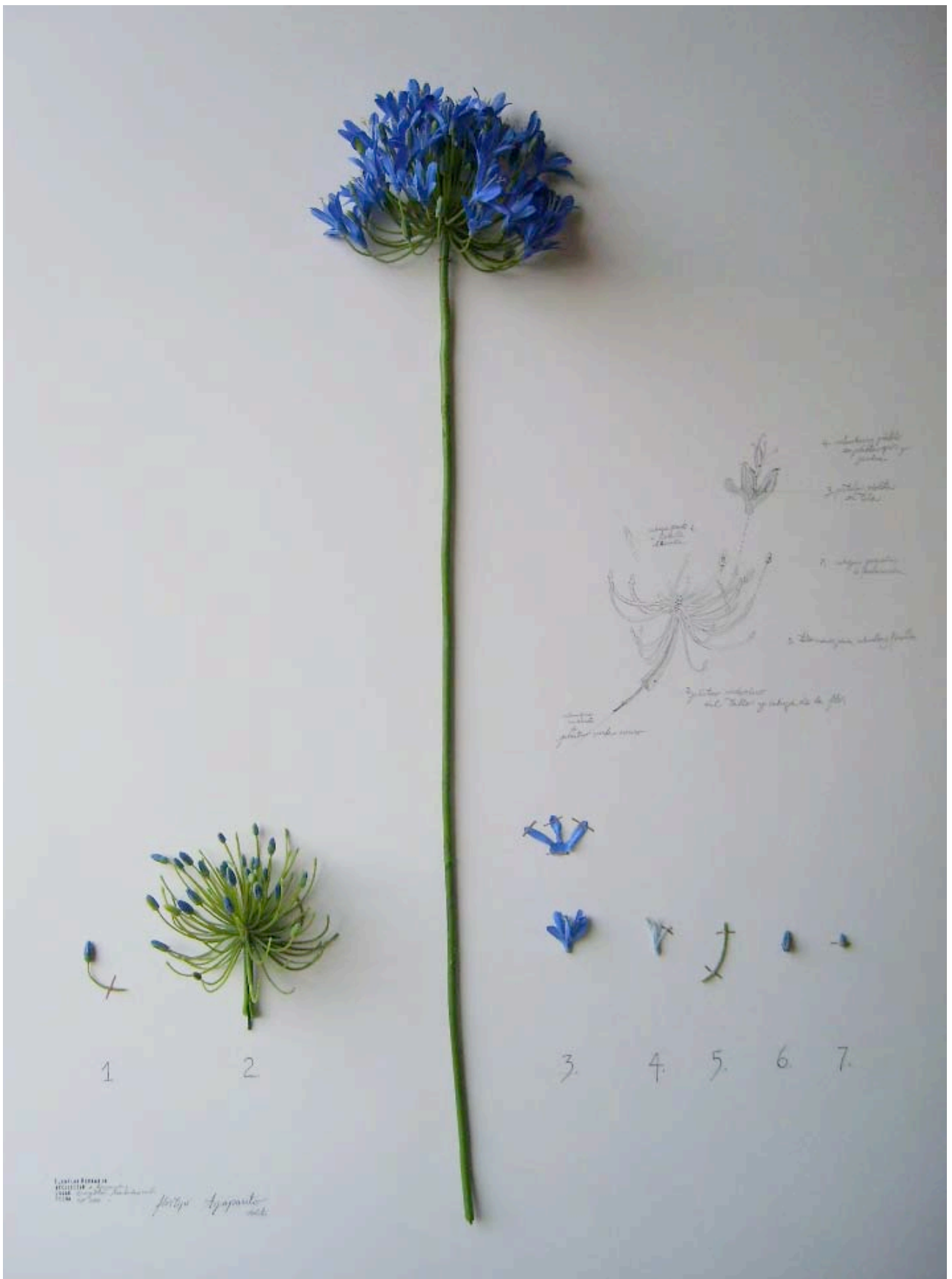
Artificial plants made of plastic and wire (the “made in China” ones) are collected as herbarium exemplars.

A re-elaboration of XVIII century scientific travels such as The Spanish Royal Botanical Expedition in Nueva Granada managed by José Celestino Mutis, the herbarium is an ironical comment on the scientific paradigm as well as a reflection on our everyday cultural aesthetic behaviors.

Photographic images and hundred of plastic plants samples, documents about different collections, mail, literary references, craft instruments and botanical instruments make up this herbarium.



Alberto Baraya



L. GARCÍA RIBERA IN
COLLECCIÓN N.º 2
1974 *Agapanthus*
Agapanthus

Agapanto
Object + drawing
116 x 85 x 9 cm
2006



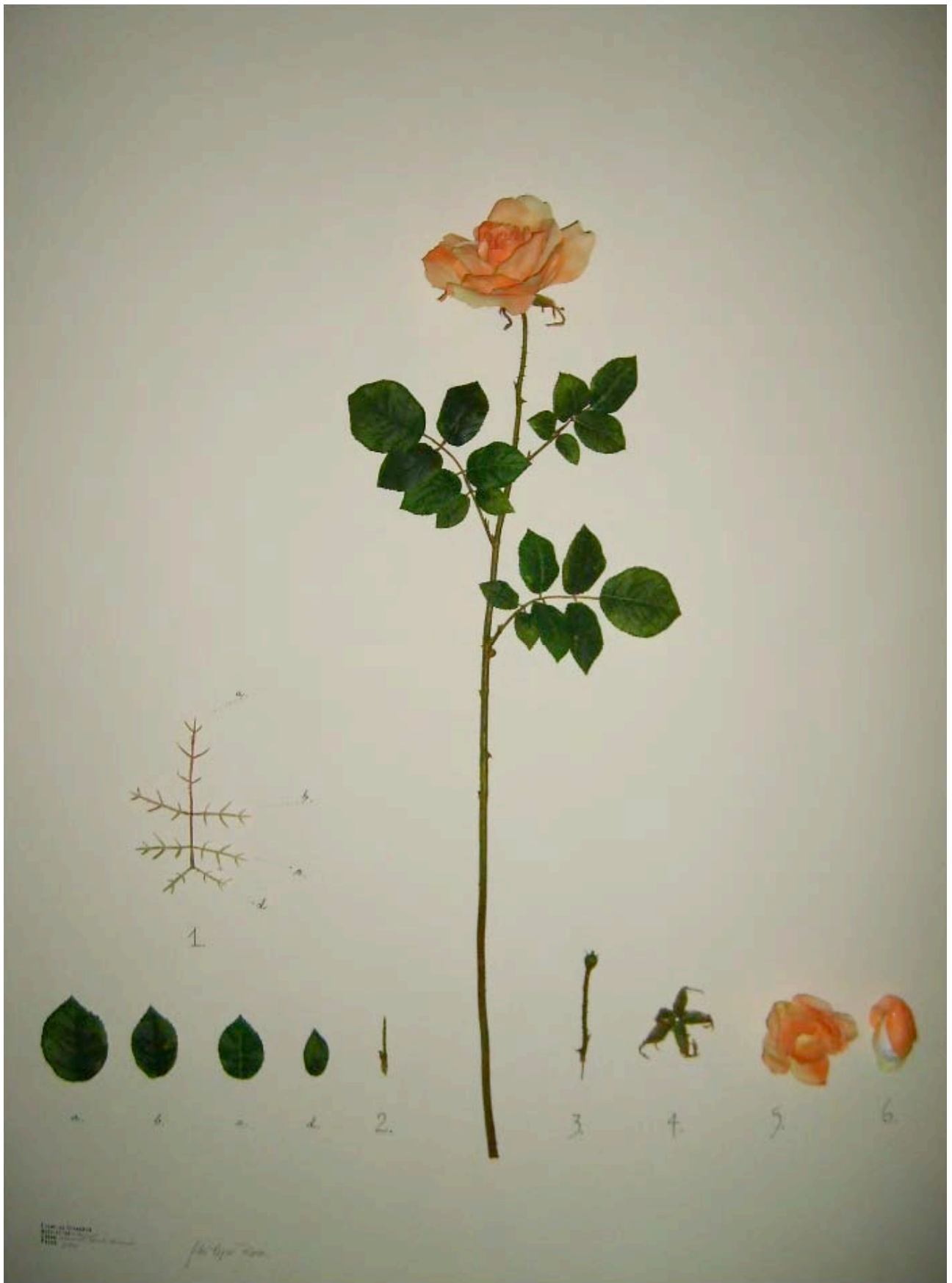
Magnolia 4
Object + drawing
116 x 85 x 9 cm
2006



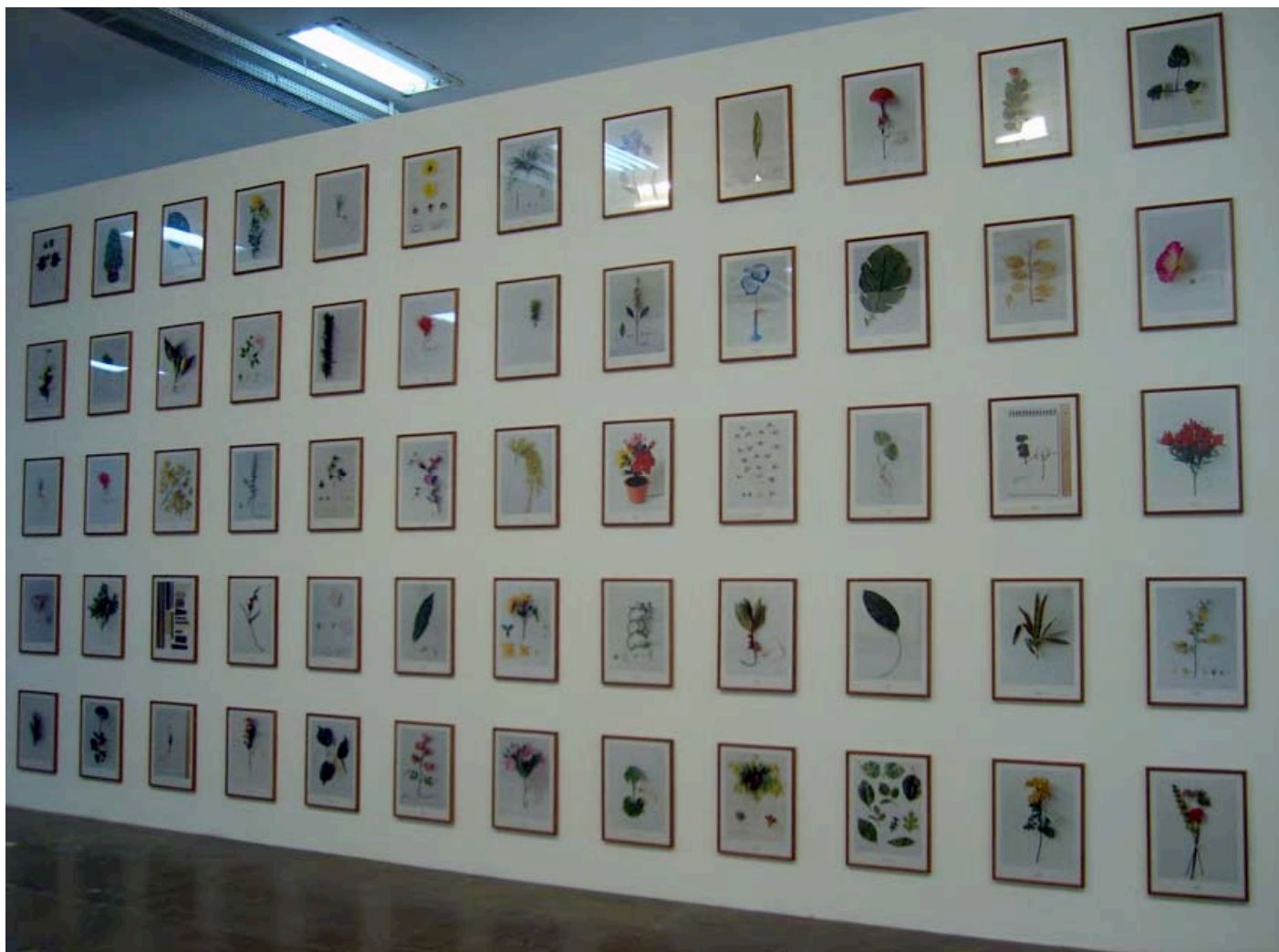
Hortensia 2 azul
Object + drawing
116 x 85 x 9 cm
2006



Rosa amarilla
Object + drawing
116 x 85 x 9 cm
2006



Rosa salmón
Object + drawing
116 x 85 x 9 cm
2006



60 fotografías de taxones

50 x 37 cms cada una

Edición 3 + 2 P/A



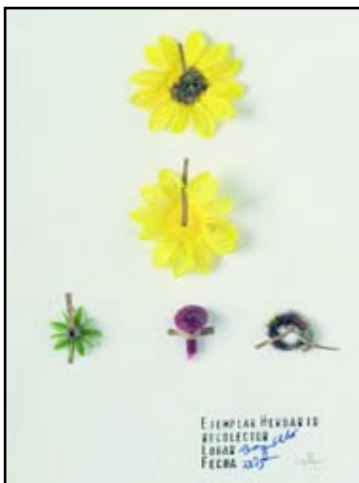
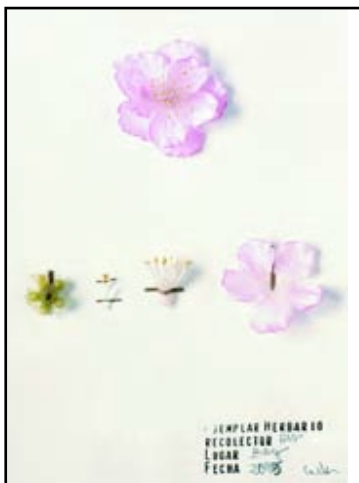
Archivo in situ

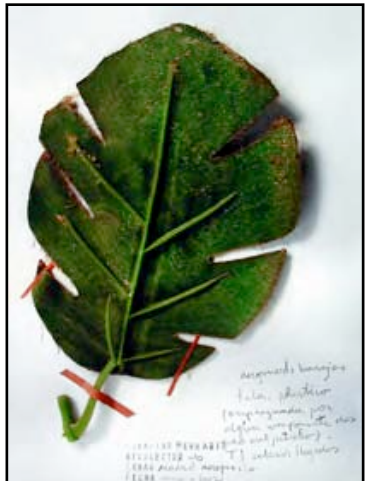
2.100 Fotografías

10 x 15 cms cada una

2002 - 2006









Híbrida Psic
Color photograph
50 x 37 cm
2005



Amapola JFH.
Color photograph
50 x 37 cm
2005



Olivo Grecia
Color photograph
50 x 37 cm
2005

RÍO 2004

A partir del Herbario de plantas Artificiales, me dediqué a buscar taxones plásticos en la selva amazónica.

Realicé una travesía por el Río Putumayo a bordo de un buque de guerra de la Armada Nacional, encontrando varios ejemplares de flores a lo largo del recorrido.

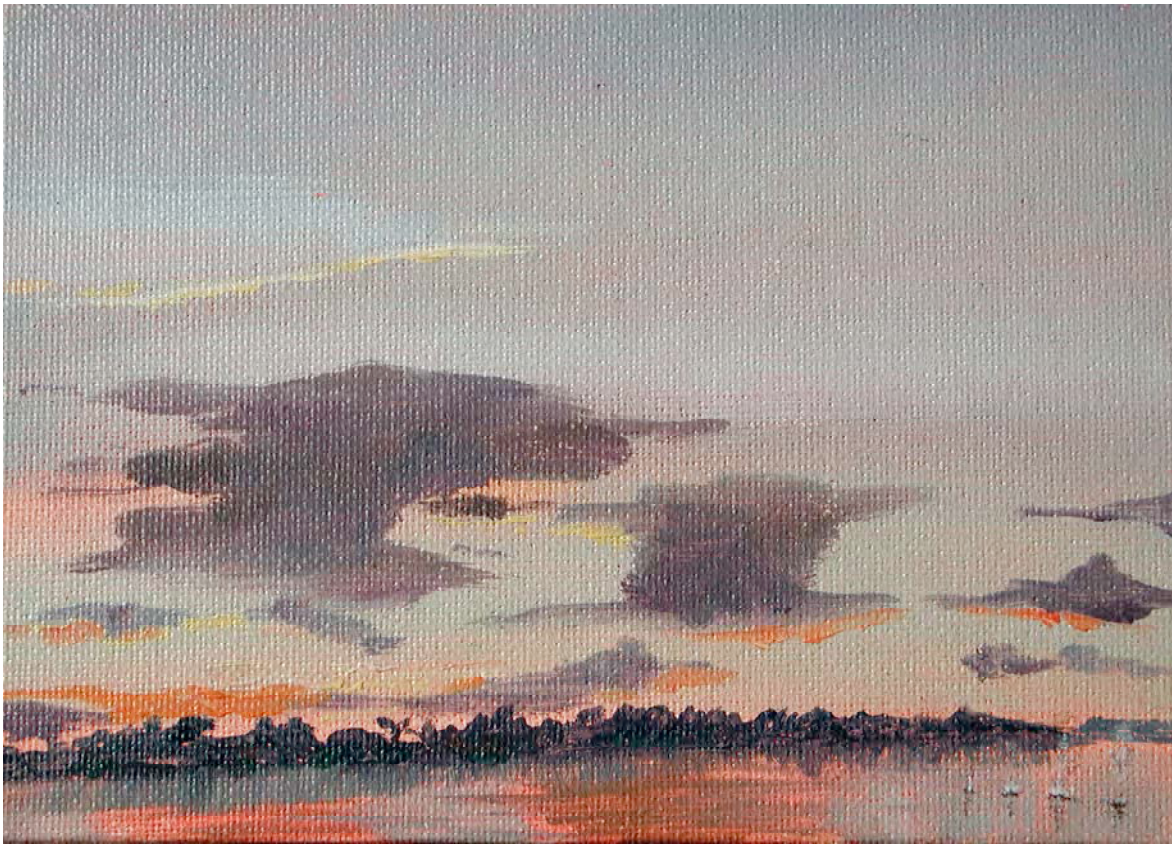
Por las tardes, desde el techo, ejercí romanticismo con pincel, caja de oleos y lienzos pequeños con los que manejaba las nubes del cielo, reflejos del río, líneas de árboles lejanos y, de paso, juicios sobre el ejercicio de la pintura. Una tarde, al pasar frente al lugar de “las Barranquillas”, la patrullera fluvial 611 ARC Tonny Pastrana mermó su curso y el personal se alistó para un ejercicio de polígono. Las ametralladoras SS, los Galil, las punto cincuenta. Todos los marineros dispararon sus fierros contra el agua del río. Desde el techo, estuve filmando los estallidos, los “splash” de las balas en el espejo del agua.

Después de eso, todos mis paisajes domingueros al óleo quedaron documentando esas líneas de disparos sobre el agua que pintaban.

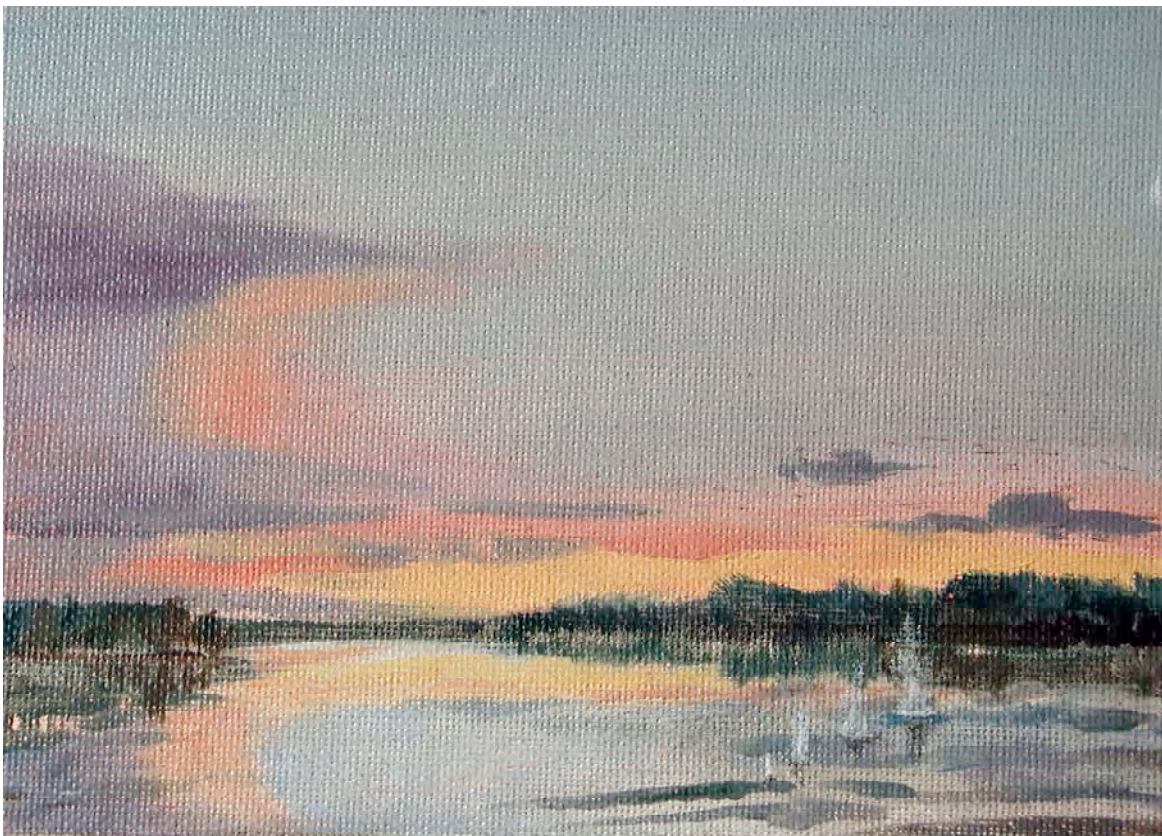


Río

Pintando al óleo en un buque blindado.



Paisajes Río Putumayo
20 x 30 cm aproximadamente





Paisajes Río Putumayo
20 x 30 cm aproximadamente





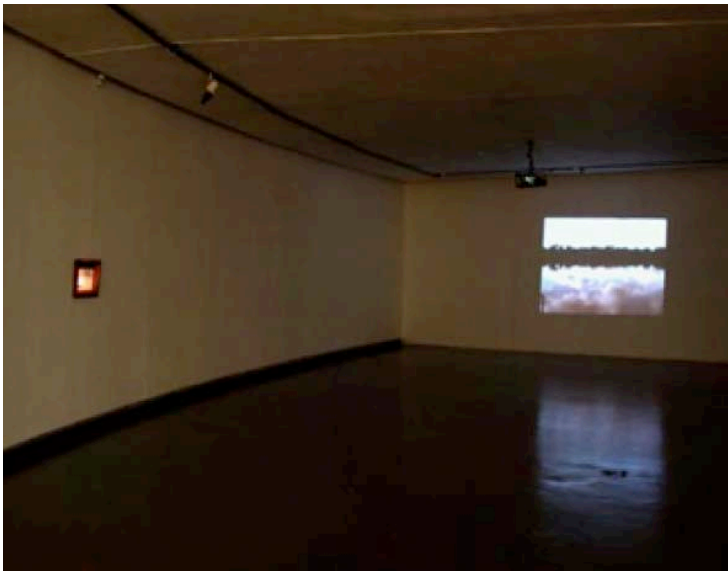
Río

Video color, sonido DVD

2 minutos

2005

Edición de 6 + 2 P/A



Río

Video instalación y pintura al óleo

2006

LATEX TREE PROJECT

2006

For many years, Alberto Baraya has been conducting a research aimed at deconstructing the claims of veracity of the colonial gaze of the 19th century Naturalist, and, by extension, the objectivity of the discourse of science. This research has materialized in an incredible ongoing project: an Herbarium of artificial plants (plastic, paper, rubber, etc.), with “specimens” sent to him by many “naturalists” (friends, other artists, etc.) from all over the world. Baraya painstakingly dissects, classifies and frames these flowers and plants, signalling with utmost precision every detail regarding the construction of these ubiquitous simulacra, the place where it was found, and the name of the person who collected it for him. He also devises methods for classifying his specimens that mimic botanical categories and taxonomic systems that also attempt to signal the arbitrariness of most hierarchical categories. Baraya has also followed the path of American ethno-botanists Richard Evans Schultes and Wade Davis in the Putumayo jungle, collecting all of the artificial plants he found in the trip. It is startling to realize that even in the farthest town in the middle of the jungle it is possible to find artificial plants or flowers, surrounded by lush vegetation.

Baraya has done a herbarium of the artificial plants he collected while doing a two-month residence in Acre, in the Brazilian Amazon, as part of the 27 Bienal de Sao Paulo. His main project for the Bienal involved contacting the local rubber workers -seringueiros- to produce a life-size Rubber tree made from natural latex.

This enormous soft tree was then taken to Sao Paulo, echoing one of the primary problems of the Rubber trade in the 19th century –how to get the product out of the jungle for the global market– and also highlighting the relative isolation that modern-day Acre still has.

Jose Roca



Latex tree project
Process
Rio Branco, Acre State, Brasil
2006



Latex tree project
Instalation of the latex tree at 27th Sao Paulo Biennial





Latex tree project
Instalation of the latex tree
at 27th Sao Paulo Biennial





Latex tree project
Rama B



Latex tree project
Caucho Bogotá 2

IGLESIAS

2006

Búsqueda de un espacio amplio ventilado, sin muchas divisiones arquitectónicas que pudiese albergar un árbol en su interior para el trabajo de molde con sus partes.

Llegué al encuentro de estos espacios, acogedores de comunidades, misioneros, conquistadores de frontera, propagadores de palabras, ideas y creaciones artificiales como las plantas del herbario, y en ocasiones prósperos negocios.

Edición de 29 fotografías a color

30 x 40 cms cada una

Edición de 3 + 2 P/A







Alberto Baraya, *Greenhouse*, 2007

Outdoor installation

Over the past years, Alberto Baraya has constructed a *Herbarium of Artificial Plants* as an ongoing project that re-elaborates royal scientific journeys of the 18th and 19th century to the Americas, such as *The Spanish Royal Botanical Expedition* in Nueva Granada, which recollected, dissected, classified and framed non-European nature. The names and visual representations given to each plant in these aforementioned colonial campaigns, constructed the scientific reality in which today we still rely on. In his herbarium, Baraya appropriates and interprets “scientific” forms and functions of representation/construction in order to create taxonomies for artificial plastic plants that he has personally found or gained from friends and colleagues. Baraya’s intervention makes these fake and uncanny taxonomies seem closer to reality, resulting on an ironical comment on the scientific paradigm, as well as on our everyday cultural aesthetic behaviors and uses of these types of plants.

The *Greenhouse* project is an outdoor installation that takes the elements of the herbarium in order to create a live fictional experience of these collections. As the greenhouse is filled with plastic plants and flowers, all classified with tags that “scientifically” label each individual artificial specimen. If the plastic plants inside this greenhouse were to be real botanical living beings, these couldn’t possibly coexist in one same environment. Within that sense, these *Made in China* plants comment not only on the limits for the construction of reality but also on the fiction of democracy in a globalized world; as in this fictitious ecosystem one could find a Colombian rose next to an orchid from Florida, next to an English Victorian bush, etc.

General view



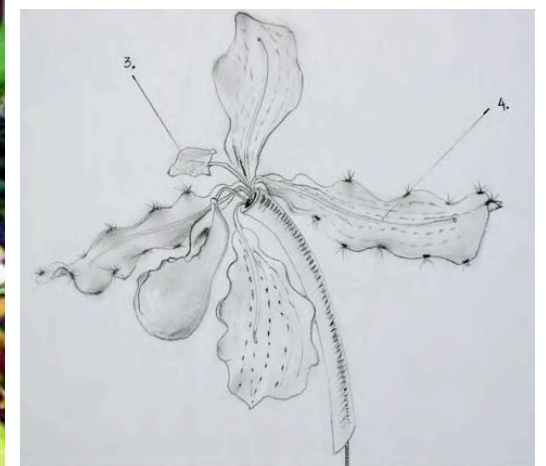
Structure



Inside view

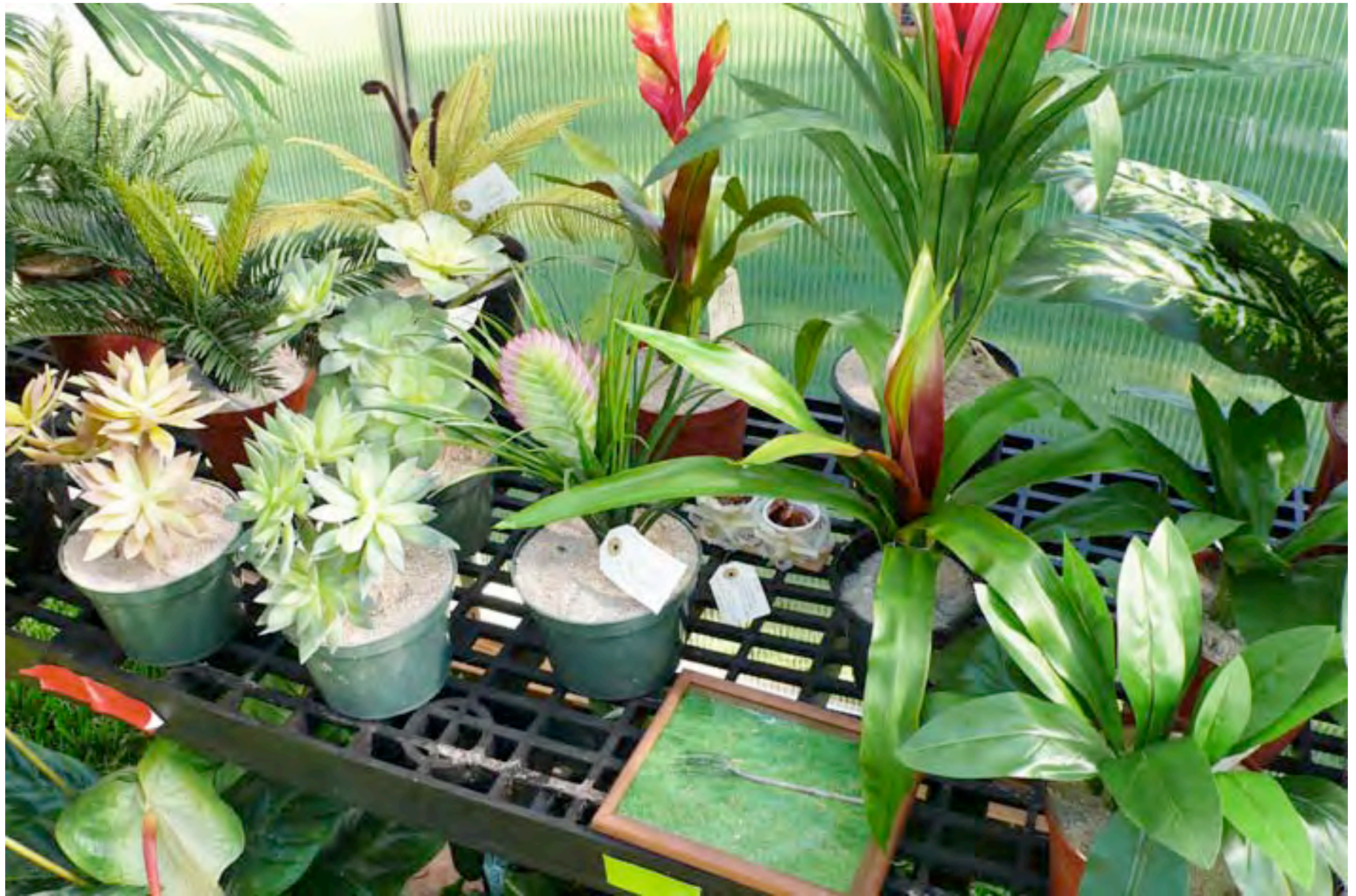


Inside view with dissected flowers and plants



Drawing detail

Artificial plants detail



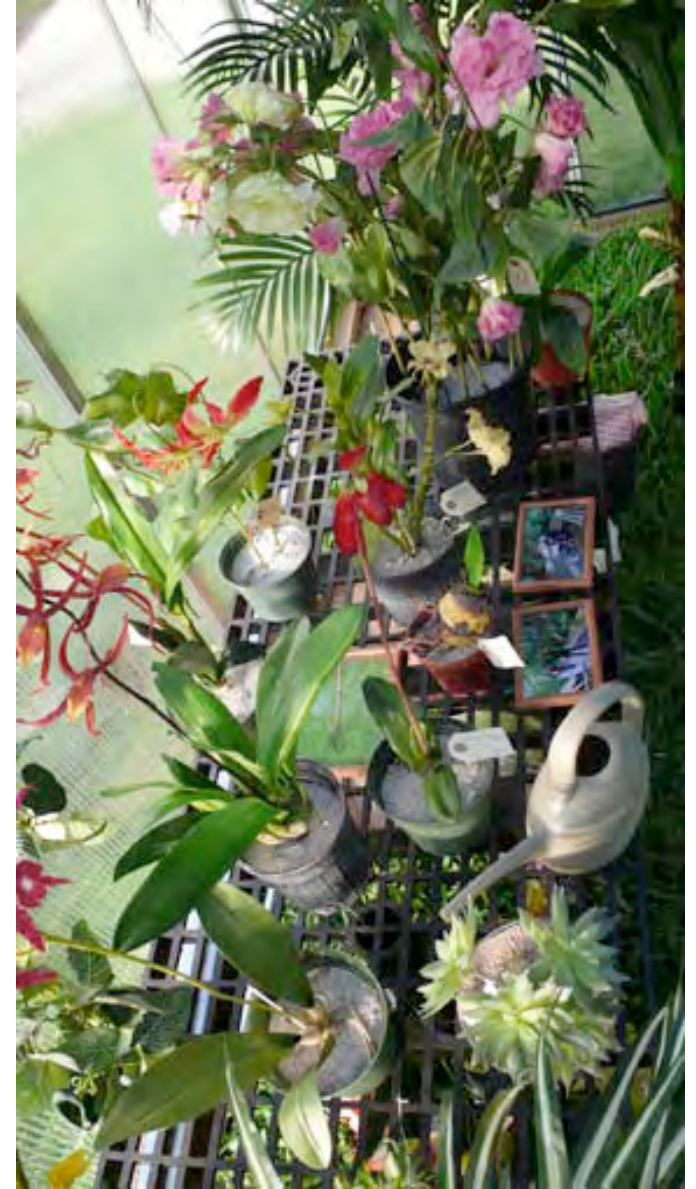
Inside detail



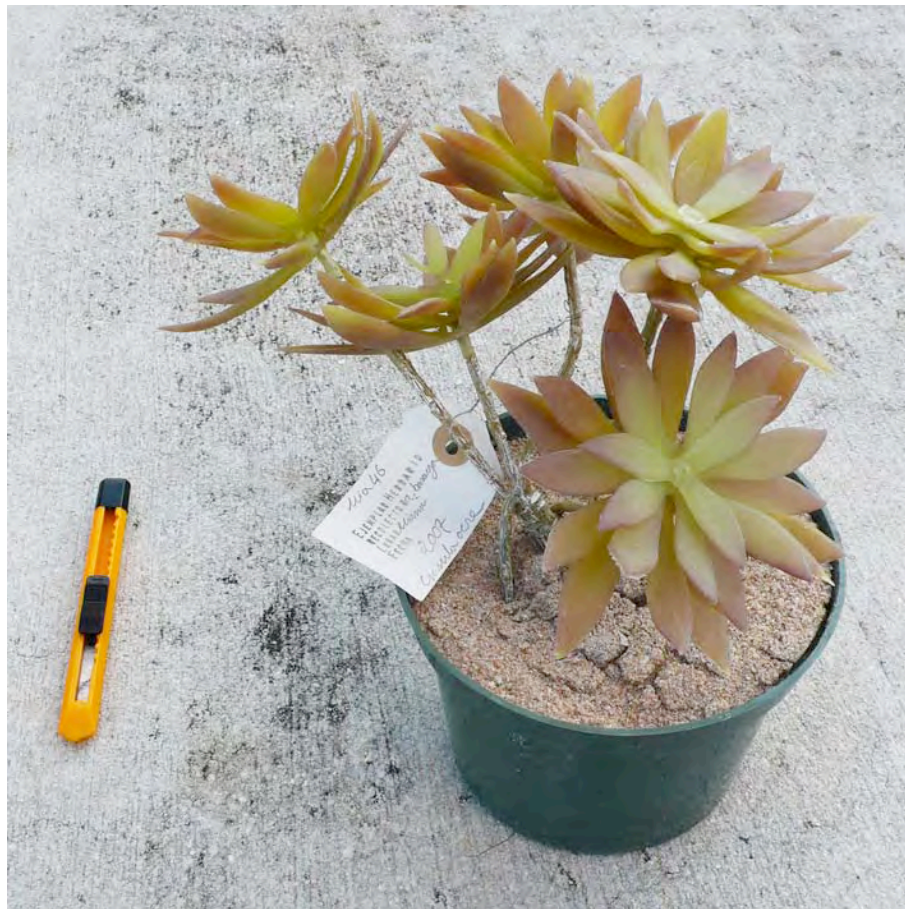
Inside detail



Inside detail



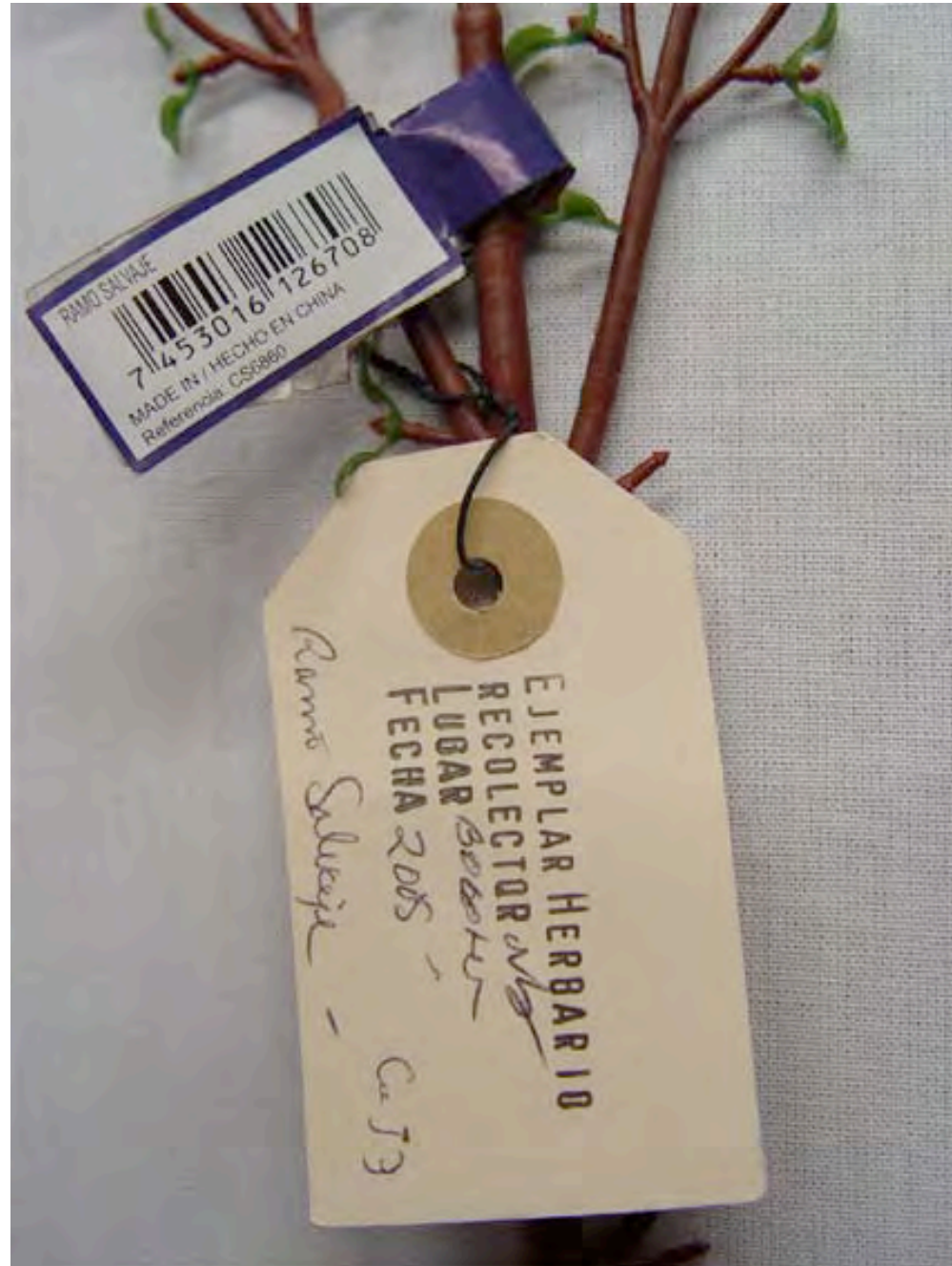
Taxons and pots



Taxons



Tag detail



Installation details

The Greenhouse Installation is composed of the following elements:

- Greenhouse: Ref. Juliana 12 type, prefabricated.
Aluminum and polycarbonate panels. Front doors
Size: L 437 x W 277 x H 221 cm.
Depending on the location a wooden base may be needed.
- 2 tables and 1 chair
- 52 artificial plants.
Different types of plants made in China or Thailand, mounted in botanical use plastic pots. Reproductions of Orchids, Palms, and Aracea type plants, vines and small bushes.
- Gardening tools:
Scissors
Shovel
Magnifying lens
Tweezers
Thermometer (20 cm.)
Atomizer water bottle
- 1 taxon from the Herbarium of Artificial Plants
- 7 framed photographs



27 Sao Paulo Bienale artists guide cover

Interview between Alberto Baraya and curator Jose Roca

JR: There is a multiple strategy of displacement in your *Herbarium of Artificial Plants*: you displace the character of the botanical Naturalist, parody his practice, question the objectivity of his methods, and his subject matter itself –the plant- is replaced by a stand-in for the original. Do you see your work as a rewriting of history?

AB: The “herbarium” is a project that comes from a spontaneous gesture that repeats the things we learn in Biology class at elementary school: I see some plastic flowers on the street and I pick them up. In a way, I behave like the scientist that Western education expects us to become. The resistance to this “destiny” lies in my changing of the goals of this simple task. In that moment all assumptions are put into question, even History. It could be said that you can rewrite History from your own praxis and experience, with a simple gesture of resistance.

JR: When assuming the role of the European Botanist that “discovers” the New World, you have also taken the strategy of literally entering the territory. What motivated you to follow the path of American ethnobotanists Richard Evans Schultes and Wade Davis, and what was it like to collect artificial specimens in the Amazon jungle?

AB: Until 2004 the *Herbarium* project had been developing in urban areas. As my collection grew, I realized that in many ways I was copying those grand scientific expeditions. In the case of Colombia, Mutis’ expedition is the most recurring image [1]. These botanical expeditions, with their built-in social hierarchies and their ready-made assumptions on scientific truth gave me a structure for my own excursions.

In 2004 I participated in an institutional trip to the Putumayo river, in the Colombian Amazon, brought in as a documentalist. This trip was thus supported -at least potentially- by a scientific will. I bring with me the tools of the scientist (scissors and pliers) and the tools of the documentalist (photo and video camera, notebooks for making drawings and observations, and also paints and brushes for making “exotic-romantic” landscapes). I also bring a copy of “One River”, a book on Schultes as told by the American explorer Wade Davis: almost immediately I am enchanted to a long saga of travelers-explorers. I exercise the task of collecting plastic “taxons” (specimens), and in my own way, I propose an alternative form of knowledge. Would I find plastic plants in the Amazon? The anticipation generated a certain fear, because it implied the ecological question regarding the fate of the last frontiers of resistance to “civilization” and “progress”. Actually finding them ended up being a sort of constant of what I would term “the laws of decoration”, that globalization penetrates even the farthest corners of the world, and also the evidence of a break of cultural frontiers.

[1] José Celestino Mutis (1732-1808). Spanish Botanist who was in charge of the Royal Botanical Expedition in the Nueva Granada.

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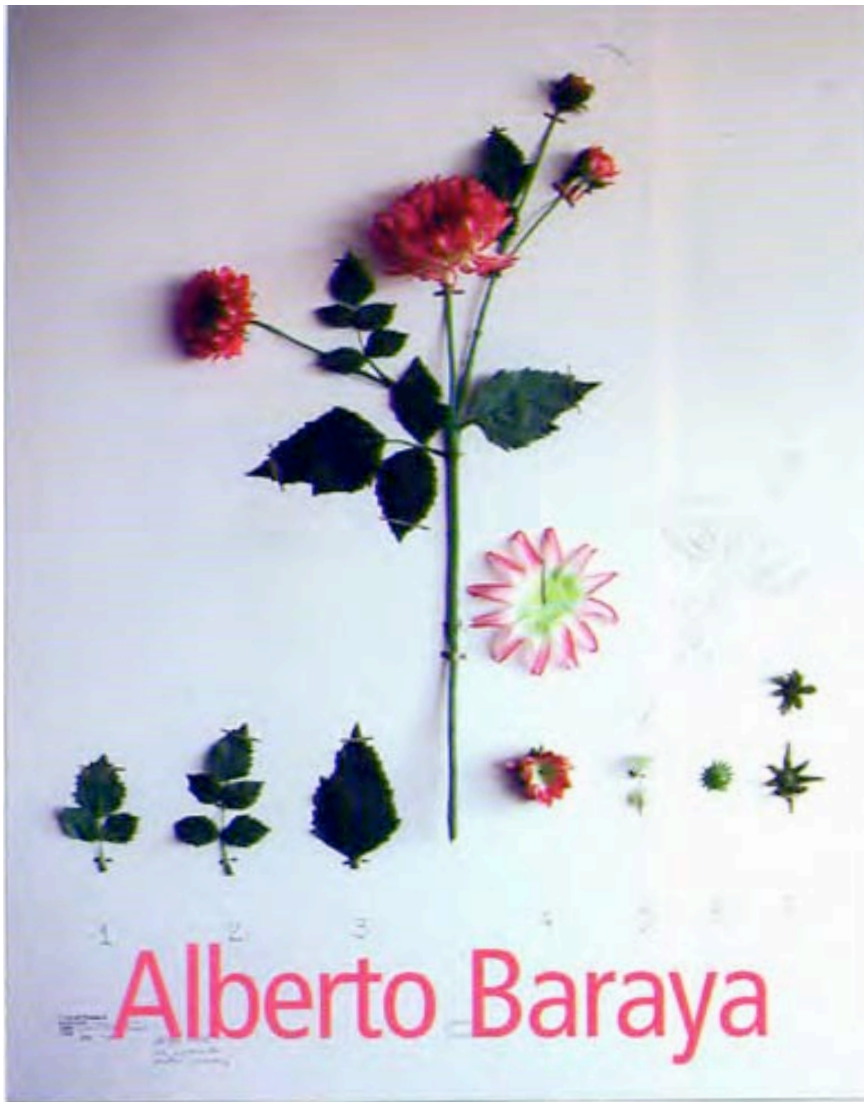
RUBÉN TORRES LLORCA

Venice Biennial • Martín Ramírez - Reverón

Documenta • Carlos Amorales • Photo España

Biennial of the End of the World • Alberto Baraya





Dahlia (from the series *Herbarium of Artificial Plants*, 2006. Chinese taxon on cardboard. 45 1/4 x 33 1/4 x 3 1/4 in. (116 x 86 x 9 cm.).

Reflections Around Fiction

The Herbario project allowed Baraya to establish a world of cultural relationships, either between men and the collected object, or between Nature and its representation.

The frequency of cataloging, selection, and segregation generates a particular relationship with the objects, which do not operate as neutral elements and reveal that classification is not always objective and innocent.

To analyze the work of Alberto Baraya (born 1968, Bogotá) is to connect it to the idea of fiction. The connection between art and fiction is not a surprise but, in the case of Baraya's oeuvre, the manifold possibilities with which he questions the content of the word are particularly interesting. Painting, photography, video, and installation are only some of the resources he deploys to explore the fetishistic charge in the art world and the peculiar relationship between art and scientific knowledge.

Baraya's project *Artificial Mitification of Painting (You Shall Die, You Shall Not Know When)* was begun in 1997. Baraya created an image with a Baroque referent, St. John the Baptist's severed head, but with a key alteration: he painted his own head and not the saint's. With this unframed canvas alluding to an often-reproduced image of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western art, Baraya set out on a journey that sought to legitimize and mystify his painting, supported by the particularities of the spaces he visited. His journey included photographing himself with the portrait in such diverse places as Rome, Madrid, Paris, New York, Bogotá and Egypt. Some of these visits included emblematic spaces that preserve the history of art, such as museums. On what the artist called "a kind of pilgrimage," he photographed himself with his self-portrait alongside artworks noted for their significant auras, in an attitude befitting the project's title.¹ Placing his work next to a Picasso, a Duchamp, or the Temple of Hatshepsut legitimized him. The photographs became the resource through which the relationship between reality and fiction was inscribed.

What remained from this variation on artistic tourism, which Baraya undertook with his severed-head picture rolled up under his arm, was the photographic record in which the legendary object—the Victory of Samothrace, the Captive Slave, or the Pyramids—shared space with Baraya and his painting. The self-portrait was destroyed in the year 2000, and, as the artist puts it, "The burning of the painting that I did at a given point obeyed to a mode of 'mystification.' In itself, the painting

already represented a kind of destruction (a mutilated self-portrait, the severed head). Its burning was the final symbolic step, where after its destructions it was the turn of the narrative and the photographs to speak about the painting, no longer the painting by itself.”²

His 1998 project *Venus (from Milo)* followed similar lines of exploration. For several days, the artist positioned himself with his severed head painting behind the famously emblematic sculpture of Venus. Using statistical analysis, he was able to determine that more than 41,000 people took their photograph next to the sculpture, meaning that Baraya and his self-portrait were captured in those images, now dispersed throughout the world.

Concurrent with these projects, Baraya continued to explore the idea of legitimization connected to space, to other works, to texts, and to the words of history. He made Torn Pages, consisting of loose sheets connected as if part of a book, on which he included stories, experiences, and personal reflections. Following the model of the severed head, the beginning and end of the text were truncated, as a record of the paradoxical circumstances Baraya lived through while creating the project.

In Paris, at the Tokyo Palace, he presented one of these sheets, and *Expedition-Européenne* reproduced the work carried out by the Latin American Center for Geographical Studies that analyzed the customs of primitive European peoples. Harking back to both the language and the style of European ethnographic works from the nineteenth century, Baraya confronted the viewer with the contemporary perseverance of an exoticizing attitude regarding other cultures, a situation promoted by ignorance of the cultural models in reference. The artist says that while his work was on display, a survey showed that over sixty percent of visitors were unable to locate Bogotá.³

This experience led Baraya to consider the elements that surround a journey, the knowledge and relationship of different spaces and cultural models, and how

tourism promotes that relationship, with one particular aspect: there must be a record, a proof of presence in the visited locale. The most common techniques for this are photography and video; the prevailing idea is if the record is not made, the action may not have happened.

Baraya's interest in tourism and its implications regarding the image takes into account the way that tourism becomes a mode of cultural consumption that posits a complex relationship between the local and the global. With the particularity, according to Augé, the journey will be transformed into a verification in which the real must resemble its image; otherwise, it will be a disappointment.⁴ How does one appropriate that image? By means of photography, which, following Susan Sontag, is not only the most economical means of appropriation but also the way that tourists supposedly acquire knowledge.⁵

The exhibition “Doble seducción,” organized by the Injuve and the Cultural Center of Spain in Havana, was held in Spain to coincide with the Eighth Havana Biennial. It sought to reflect upon the weight of the image in the contemporary world. The power of image that invades one's awareness and generates fictive worlds drove Baraya to present his Turistic Map of Havana. On this, based on a tourist map of Old Havana and alongside the usual reference points, he located such emblematic museums as the Prado, the Louvre, and the Guggenheim. To the local inventory of sites, a new inventory of architectural signals was added, ones that legitimized art with their “unquestionable” character.

Baraya, who had already made a significant photographic record of tourist behavior at the Prado museum while photographing the statue of Velásquez, joined the Mexican artist Jonathan Hernández for the project titled 1204tr/h.⁶ The title referred to the number of tourists that walk every day by the statue of Velásquez placed at one of the museum's entrances. The project was an attempt to subvert the traditional relationship be-

tween observer and object; two video cameras on the statue's pedestal recorded what occurred, i.e., tourists photographing the statue and photographing each other.

The choice of Velásquez's image was not random. One of the artist's emblematic works (and a mandatory stop when visiting the Prado), *Las Meninas*, questioned traditional compositional criteria; the artist proposed an inversion of the gaze: it is the work that looks at the viewer. The presentation of Baraya and Hernández's video at a higher speed allowed for a clearer perception of the agglomerations and frantic movements of the visitors intent on recording their visit. Again, photography legitimized the site; the experience with the

Artificial Mystification of a Painting, 1998. Chinese art, British Museum, London. Black and white photograph.



object counts for little, and the true trophy is the photograph that allows those who possess it to prove they were present.

In 2002, Baraya started a project, Artificial Plant Herbarium, which addressed complex notions like “truth” and “fiction.” This project brought together a variety of works and was more than a singular work of art. Based on Baraya's initial questions, others arose that pushed the Herbarium toward many different directions. How did the herbarium get started? Let's begin with an anecdote. Baraya, walking in Madrid in the fall, found something unseasonable: a green leaf. Picking it up, he realized it was plastic. The act of saving it was related to the memory of school homework, when students were required to keep herbaria for biology class. (In school, we are given tools for science as a safe path to knowledge—so safe, in fact, that the reality of any

limitations to science is denied, and the titanic possibility of enclosing Nature's exuberance within rigorous parameters is posited.)

Baraya's first Herbario was a collection like those created by botanists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as those of José Celestino Mutis in New Granada. There was one substantial difference: what he collected were artificial plants made of plastic, which could be found in homes, cafeterias, hotels, restaurants, buildings, airports, and bathrooms. The represented fiction made it possible to construct a taxonomy using the same classification criteria of the natural sciences. Baraya's artificial-nature collection used the tools of naturalists but applied them to artificial objects and fixed its own taxonomic parameters, which were related more to the use of the plant than to the plant itself. Thus, the “orders” in his par-

ticular taxonomy—hotels, table-tops, religious elements, fashion accessories—established guidelines for showing the aesthetic value of plastic plants as decorations in highly diverse spaces and situations. But it was also an active taxonomy: the discovery of new uses implies the incorporation of new organizing criteria.⁷ And one must not forget that this vegetation came from a single origin: they were all identified as “Made in China.”

Baraya makes his viewers think, from the standpoint of art, about a variety of issues. Mutis's botanical expedition recorded a significant number of plants and ordered them in a taxonomy; his depictions in his travel journal became art-world objects. Reproductions of Mutis's drawings have been used not only for scientific knowledge but also as decorative objects. But the scientist who discovers and organizes an alien world has an order-

Torn sheets: Expedition dans l'Ancienne Europe for a Tokyorama, 2001. Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Offset print on paper in the form of flyers to be handed out at Musee Guimet. Edition of 3000 copies.

Tourist Map of Old Havana, 2003. Foldable map of the historical centre of Havana, highlighting the main cultural sites, hotels and locations of interest. In addition, the blueprints of European and American art museums have been placed in different scales. Produced by Injuve, Madrid, in March 2003, for the exhibition “Double Seduction”. 5000 printed copies. To be handed out to tourists, travelers and inhabitants of the city.





First peeling cut for the *Rubber Tree Project*. Rio Branco, 2006.



Rubber Tree Project. Montage process of the tree's skin. Del Carmen Convent, Valencia, April, 2007.

ing obsession, one that not only collects natural elements but also dominates them, regardless of where they are or to whom they belong. Baraya places the neutrality of scientific tools under suspicion.

The Herbarium project allowed Baraya to establish a world of cultural relationships, either between men and the collected object, or between Nature and its representation. The frequency of cataloging, selection, and segregation generates a particular relationship with the objects, which do not operate as neutral elements and reveal that classification is not always objective and innocent.

And thus we come back to the word "fiction." When Baraya photographed the Herbarium, the fiction of representing reality was duplicated, while, paradoxically, the representation achieved seemed much closer to the "real." The artist constructed his images to reflect on the associations among nature, artifice, and representation. Nature, which we admire as something distinct from the artificial, can be ordered by human hands, for instance in a garden. Using natural elements does not guarantee the absence of artifice, and Baraya, with his Herbario project, implied that all cultural con-

structs are artificial in the end.

Baraya's "botanical expedition" followed a different path: collecting more artificial species along the Amazon River to be incorporated into his herbarium. The artist tells some details of his journey: "I brought along the book *The River*, the best companion and guide one could possibly find in terms of exploratory routes and fantasies. After innumerable trips in Amazonia in the 1970s, Wade Davis, the author, tells of the tireless expeditions carried out in the 1940s by the New England ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes. Schultes, in turn, followed by memory the adventures narrated in the Romantic-era exploration journals written by the British botanist Richard Spruce and the traces of exoticism left by the elegant German traveler Alexander von Humboldt, or the Spaniards Ruiz and Pavón, or that of José Celestino Mutis himself in South American forests. To this long line of explorers and botany scientists, of encounters and misencounters, I connected the parody of my herbarium of plastic plants. I felt like an explorer in terra incognita in the search of exotic types of silk roses and wire ferns for my collection. A strange journey along the Putumayo River, seek-

ing out plastic plants in river port cafes, diners, altars, and house porches, as samples of the infinite expansion of this strange Chinese vegetation in all corners of the world."⁸

Traveling on a Colombian Navy vessel (with the mission to wage war rather than to explore), Baraya was a documentarian for the Centro de Integración Fluvial de Sur América, charged with filming the characteristics of the vegetation along the shore, as well as the peoples and animals he encountered. He was to fulfill the role of the traveling chronicler, and he even painted scenes of the landscape, in the best Romantic style. But his most significant discovery was the story of rubber and the cruel consequences of the industry's early-nineteenth-century boom, when a silent genocide of indigenous peoples took place. Also contained in this history were the relationships between Europe and the Americas and the implications of the industrial use of rubber. The experience made Baraya decide to create a rubber plant for his herbarium, which formed the basis for his project for the twenty-seventh São Paulo Biennial (2006).

The project was presented as part of the Artificial Plant Herbarium and arose



River, 2005. Video still.

from the experience of his journey along the Amazon River. The aim was to reproduce a plant using natural rubber, the liquid that seeps out of the *Hevea brasiliensis* tree when its bark is cut. In order to execute his Project of the "Borracha" Tree, Baraya was one of ten artists invited by the Biennial for a three-month residency in Rio Branco, the capital of the state of Acre, in the western part of the country. In Acre, Baraya worked with rubber, which in the nineteenth century was the region's primary raw material and the cause of many conflicts, including the 1988 assassination of Chico Mendes, a Brazilian environmental activist who is now considered a symbol in the struggle to protect the Amazon basin.

With the help of the local population, Baraya built a seringueiro, a rubber plant of almost ten meters in height, using latex and conceived as part of his Herbarium collection. His attitude as expeditionary traveler that was present in his previous works appeared once again, accepting the challenge of working in unexplored territories. His project was connected to the Biennial's central theme, "How to Live Together" (now

that we know we can be so different); as an artist, Baraya is part of a cosmopolitan community that shares issues and can bring attention to acts and situations otherwise condemned to oblivion.

But the artistic act underwent a variation. Baraya had been gathering, organizing, and displaying his collection, but now it was his turn to create the object within the collection—did this betray his prior position? No, he continued to be a simulator, recreating the tree using the very matter it produced and transforming it into a mold, a skin, a trace. With this giant, soft, sagging, natural-latex skin, a space was opened for reflection regarding social considerations, such as the difficult circumstances of Amazonian communities on both the Colombian and Brazilian sides, the tragic history of rubber, and the dramatic white-gold rush it produced. Baraya's Arce residency not only strengthened his determination as a traveler, it also gave him a chance to think and to make us think about the history of the place, the issues affecting border communities, and the struggle for territorial possession. Amazonia is not the space we often imagine from the standpoint of urbanity; living with that

nature means confronting conflicts that take us far from the notion of a lost paradise.

NOTES

1. Author's interview with Alberto Baraya, February 2007.
2. Silas's questions for Alberto Baraya, May 16, 2006. Text made available by the artist.
3. Author's interview with Alberto Baraya, February 2007.
4. Marc Augé, *El tiempo en ruinas* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2003) p. 65.
5. Susan Sontag, *Sobre la fotografía* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1980).
6. Jonathan Hernández also worked with the stereotypes of tourism using postcards. In his project *Conozca México* (1996–2000), he created postcards that moved his viewers away from the traditional tourist's gaze and presented them with urban spaces that offered views distant from the normal order of pre-established tourism circuits. This experience drove him to explore the characteristics of global tourism in his *No Tourism* project.
7. Author's interview with Alberto Baraya, February 2007.
8. Alberto Baraya Leí, "El río en el río," *Piedepágina*, revista de libros 2 (March 2005).

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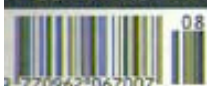
Issue 106, June-July 2011

"If there is no energy, there will be no art"

James Wines, 'Art and the Energy Crisis', 1974

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Alberto Baraya

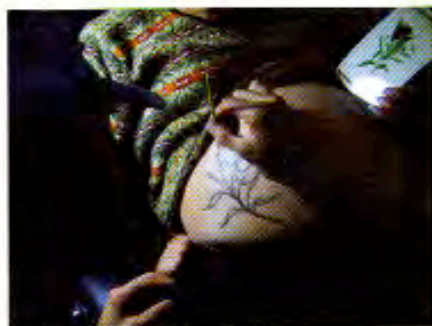
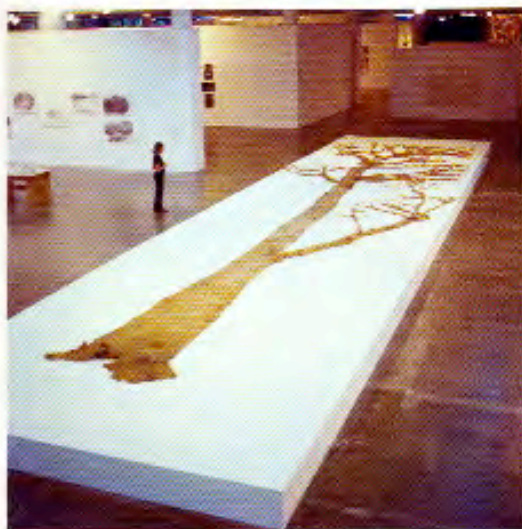
Colombia, botany and classification;
fake flowers and post-colonialism

by José Roca

Proyecto del árbol de
caucho
(Latex tree project)
2006
Natural rubber
Installation view

Tatuaje botánico
(Botanical tattoo)
2007
Photograph
70x100 cm

Herbario de
plantas artificiales,
Molondre
(Herbarium of
artificial plants,
'badmother' plant)
2006
Found objects and
pencil on cardboard
112x86x9 cm



Many historians contend that the 'discovery' of the New World began in the 15th century, when geographers, mineralogists, botanists and zoologists came to America to chart the territory and its natural resources. These scientists, financed by the Spanish crown until the 19th century and by European countries after the emancipation of the colonies, had clear political and economic agendas – charting a territory means having the will to dominate it. More importantly, acquiring an inventory of the botanical resources of the colonies paved the way for their subsequent capitalist exploitation. Like their sword- or cross-bearing predecessors, these explorers came armed with Truth itself, in this case a system of thought seemingly grounded in objective observation and the disinterested discourse of science.

Arguably, the categorization of the botanical wealth of the Americas was among the biggest instances of biological theft ever. As scientists, the Europeans imparted to the locals their empirical 'knowledge' about the superiority of some portions of the human race and the measurable limitations inherent in living in certain places. Geographical determinism made the case for the impossibility of people in certain climates to develop 'sophisticated' civilizations. The observations of the *nóvagos* (travellers), as they are collectively known, helped buttress a social and political system based on exclusion, racism and privilege – establishing a pyramidal system of values, with the tip occupied by Europeans, their religion and cultural values.

For more than a decade the Colombian artist Alberto Baraya has been working on deconstructing the figure of the *nóvago* – and by extension, the discourse of science. In his 'Herbario de plantas artificiales'

(Herbarium of Artificial Plants, 2001–ongoing) he parodies and questions the empirical objectivity of a botanical naturalist. The 'Herbarium' is as enormous and absurd an enterprise as that of the naturalist Carl Linnaeus: Baraya aims to collect, identify and classify every artificial plant he can get his hands on. Many of these plastic, cloth or paper specimens have been stolen from restaurants, lifted from waiting-rooms or pocketed at someone's house, thus re-enacting the ethical quandary embodied in the act of 'collecting' committed by the historical scientific expeditions. As Baraya has stated: 'By picking up some plastic flowers on the street, I become like the scientists that Western education experts us to become. By changing the goals of this simple task I resist this "destiny". In that moment all assumptions are put into question, even History.' The first leg of this ongoing project involved the classification of all the specimens in a sort of absurd taxonomy in the spirit of Jorge Luis Borges' 'Chinese encyclopedia'. The plants in Baraya's 'Herbarium' are accompanied by a file that lists the ways in which they can be classified: by the place where they were found (patery toilets, funeral homes etc.); by their colour; by the spaces they are used to decorate.

In recent years Baraya has gone a step further by entering the territories explored by European and American scientists in the 18th and 19th centuries. He follows the path of these expeditions, collecting artificial specimens on the way: 'In 2004 I participated as a documentarian in a trip to the Putumayo River. [...] The anticipation of finding or not finding plastic flowers in the Amazon generated a certain fear, because it implied an ecological question regarding the fate of the last frontiers of resistance to "civilization" and "progress". Actually finding them ended up being a sort of confirmation of what I would

term "the laws of decoration": even the most "natural" places need to be ornamented by any means. Also, that globalization penetrates even the farthest corners of the world, the evidence of a break of cultural frontiers.'²

For the São Paulo Biennial in 2006, Baraya spent three months in the Amazonian state of Acre, whose post-colonial history was shaped by the rubber boom in the early 19th century. Baraya reversed the process of material exploitation and, with the help of former *seringueiros* (rubber tappers), painstakingly covered the whole surface of a 30-metre-tall rubber tree with latex taken from similar trees. Once the latex solidified, it was peeled off and laid on the ground, like the discarded skin of a giant snake, a life-size cast of a lost cultural practice that fostered the decimation of the indigenous population, the virtual slavery of migrants from the drought-stricken north and the political transformation of an enormous territory.

Recently Baraya's project has turned to his observation that flower and plant specimens are a preferred motif for tattoo artists and their clientele, and he has documented this tradition in photographs. For the current visual arts festival, Encuentro Internacional de Medellín 2007 in Colombia, he chose to work with the archives of the Museo de Antioquia, where he came across the drawings of Ruperto Ferreira, a forgotten local botanist. Baraya put together a booklet of Ferreira's drawings and distributed them to tattoo parlours across the city, which in turn offered the historical designs to their clients. By once again dispersing knowledge throughout the social fabric Baraya continues his quest to problematize the certainties of scientific thought.

1 Interview with the author in *Cómo Finer Junio*, Fundación Boreal, São Paulo, 2006, p. 24

2 Ibid