

People are running out to the street: José García Torres interviewed by Simon Fujiwara

"To organize shows and have fun," was what led José García Torres to open his first gallery. It was Mexico City in the summer of 2005, and José was 24 years old. With the passing of time, Proyectos Monclova grew to become a fundamental space in the city's artistic scene, while also achieving a solid international presence via the careful balance of both national and international artists and an uncompromising program of radical exhibitions. After 10 years running Monclova, José has now moved on to a whole new gallery project which bears his name, José García Torres, Mexico City. Together with artist Simon Fujiwara, with whom he has been working for a long time, Torres revisits the inception of his past gallery, comments on his vision for his present space, and imagines a very near future.

Simon Fujiwara: You are one of the most laconic people I know. Do you think this is a necessary part of how you work?

José García Torres: Yes. I work with artists that have a lot to say, so they need a good listener.

You saw one of my first ever performances, The Mirror Stage, presented on the beach at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2009. My earlier works were characterized by talking a lot and even over-explaining things to lead the spectator to realize that said explanation had no actual function. What attracted you to it?

I guess with being silent comes an interest in language. I'm interested in different forms of communication, and your work deals with expressing ideas outside the limits of language.

The Mirror Stage was a play about a childhood realization living in a rural town, about a desire to become an artist. It seems like your childhood and origins are central to how you work—your first gallery was even named after your hometown of Monclova...

Monclova is situated in the north of Mexico, close to Texas. It's a hot, semi-desert landscape, where I spent a lot of time in my father's ranch. Although I don't think I would return to live there, I'm glad that I had the chance to grow up in such an environment. So when I first opened the gallery I thought to name it Proyectos Monclova as tribute to it.

What about your education?

My grandfather was involved in the foundation of the first Montessori school in town. As I was severely dyslexic it was a salvation because their method focuses on learning through practical tasks with an individual approach to each student. That influenced my decision to run a gallery: a structure and a context that I've created in which I can operate freely on my own terms.

Did you know that I grew up living in a Montessori school? When my family moved back from Japan to England my mother decided to move us to Cornwall and since there were no kindergartens, only "playgroups," she trained as a Montessori teacher and opened a school in our kitchen!

There's an earthquake happening here, right now.

What? Is it strong?

It's not too bad, but people are running out to the street. It's fine... I think it's over now... Let's continue, you were saying?(1)

Perhaps Montessori and its practical, material focus led you to the art world, which is all about physical things, their place in the world, and learning through doing. How did you start the gallery?

I was working as an editor for some art, fashion, and architecture magazines in the early 2000s, which was my first real introduction to art apart from through my brother, Mario. We were dealing with digital files but mostly getting prints and illustrations through FedEx and it was a pity to just scan and disregard them after going to print. My friend Chicle and I wanted to organize shows and have fun, so we decided to open a space in a dodgy basement in the Roma neighborhood to show the work of these artists. The rent was only 200 dollars a month! That's how we opened Proyectos Monclova. It was the summer of 2005 and I was 24. The intention was never to have a formal gallery. However, it didn't feel right to do shows with artists and then forget about them, so I moved in the direction of a proper commercial space.

This is a story you hear less and less today. The world has become a more expensive place, and the landscape in Mexico has changed a lot since you first started the gallery. Do you think it would be possible to open a gallery in the same way now?

I guess so, although the panorama in Mexico has changed substantially in the past 10 years. Yet, compared to other cities, I'm sure it's still possible to do it today with little means. Lately, new galleries and even more interesting independent artist-run spaces have sprouted up. If you do things right, it is easy to receive local and international visibility through social media. That was not necessarily the case 10 years ago.

How much has the political instability of Mexico played out in your program and selection of works and artists, if that is something that you consciously think about?

I am very interested in the explicit political and social content of some of the artists' work—for example, in the practices of Edgardo Aragón, Tercerunquinto, and Eduardo Sarabia—but also in a more subtle way, in the work of others like Francois Bucher, Rometti Costales, and yourself. The gallery is also a political arena, and I hope it serves as a platform for discussion. During the last couple

of years I have also been organizing Monclova No Existe [Monclova doesn't exist], a stand-up comedy night. It's a project I'm doing with a group of friends, people involved in art, film, and literature who come and talk about their everyday life and criticize our context through comedy. We do it at the gallery, in-between shows. It's a very relevant way to address the problems we face today.

Almost everything you show is produced in Mexico, even with international artists. Is that a conscious, ideology-driven approach? Or is it just practical?

Both. It comes from practicality: artists travel here to take advantage of the reduction in shipping prices and the possibilities of producing work in Mexico, but they end up getting deeply involved in a social and ideological way.

It makes me think of Montessori again, this idea of not starting with a theory per se but allowing something to evolve first.

I believe in the artists I work with. I try to accompany them in the process of producing new work without questioning the final outcome, even if we obviously discuss things. I get the sense that artists appreciate this trust. I know that they are trying hard to push their practice and to take risks, and they know they can rely on me to do so, and this way of working eventually pays off. I recall when we were planning Nina Beier's show ["Tragedy Teaser," 2013] and her kid suddenly got ill. She had to cancel her trip and as a backup plan she proposed to do a performance with a rug and a trained dog playing dead. I just loved the idea and it was a very special show. Apparently people were very surprised that she managed to convince me to do only that piece for a commercial gallery show. We didn't sell it at the time but it was a brilliant project. It's very nice to see how successful that work turned out to be, becoming one of her best-known pieces.

The key is trust, again. Often I feel that with you my work will be represented in the way I want it to be. You operate with artists like friends, all of your artists seem also to be your friends. Is that is important to you?

Yes. The gallery was built very organically. For instance, Marie Lund and Nina Beier were my neighbors in London way before I opened the gallery. The same happened with José León Cerrillo, Tania Pérez Córdova, and Christian Jankowski. Our friendship came years before our working relationships, and of course there is the case of my brother. Even if I approached the other artists after becoming a gallerist, I was always conscious that we had to be able to establish a real dialogue and build an honest relationship before thinking of a long-term working commitment.

You are married to a curator, how does that influence the way you think?

She has taught me a lot, her relationship with art is the most honest and pure that I know. There is no bullshit with her.

You just opened a new space and changed the identity of the gallery now to José García, mx. It seems that you are always rethinking the gallery and its format.

I constantly try to question how the gallery works. As you know, I founded Proyectos Monclova 10 years ago, and seven years later I incorporated two financial partners. Unfortunately, it was too late when we realized we had very different visions. It became too difficult to keep the integrity of the program and fulfill some of their financial expectations, so the best thing for me was to sell my part of the company, which included the name of the gallery, and move on. I'm still working with most of the artists that I was working with before, and I feel liberated and happy, even if I'm nostalgic about the name. I managed to maintain the essence of the project. I kept the artists, the friends, and the program. I am also opening a second space in Mérida, a gallery with walls but no ceiling.

An outdoor gallery?

In a way yes, but I wouldn't really associate it with an outdoor gallery or a sculpture park. It is a 200-square-meter space surrounded by high walls in downtown Mérida, with no ceiling or stable flooring, so that all the natural elements come into play.

I love the idea of a gallery with no roof, it is quite perverse. The most basic notion of human shelter is a roof, and art is often considered unimportant to survival but necessary for life, so to make a gallery without a roof is a fun reversal and maybe an unintentional reflection on the ideas of survival, needs, and luxury. Lots of new galleries open with painting shows to finance themselves, but there it won't be possible to show paintings, it has no roof!

Yes, I'm sure it will be fun and interesting to work in it for a while. In a few years we'll transform it into something else.

Maybe I should do my first painting show there?

All right, let's do it!(2)

(1) This conversation was realized by Skype on November 23, 2015. At 14:41 local time an earthquake rattled Mexico City. It had a magnitude of 5.5 and its epicenter was in the sparsely populated mountains north-east of Acapulco, about 260 km south of Mexico City.
(2) "Mérida Paintings" by Simon Fujiwara will open on January 30, 2016, at sunset.