

A conversation between Nicolás Dumit Estévez and Mauricio Arango

NDE: Mauricio, it is great to pause from working around El Museo to talk about your art practice and the ideas that inform it.

How does the preoccupation with violence surface in your films?

MA: I grew up in Colombia during a period of intense unrest. In my formative years there I saw whole political parties being physically removed from existence by the selective killing of most of their members. There were confrontations between the government and guerrillas; between guerrillas and right wing paramilitary groups; between the government and drug cartels. Exclusion and political favoritism created a very unfair and skewed society. By many measures the country was crumbling. But despite that, I can almost say that my friends and me had a more or less normal life. It is not that we were privileged in any way, but we conducted our lives as if all those horrible things were happening elsewhere; Watching the national news was more like learning about things that were taking place in a far away country. And a lot of society lived like that. Probably that is how you cope with things.

But later, with more distance, I started to question this and wonder how it is possible to assimilate violence and live a seemingly normal life when everything around is on the brink of collapse. **That's when the** understanding of violence became an intellectual obsession of mine.

NDE: *The Night of the Moon Has Many Hours* reminds me of my friend Bernardo in the Dominican Republic. We once visited the cemetery in the center of Santiago and he pointed to a grave he tends, that of a Jewish man. Bernardo took on this task out of love. As far as I know, this is an older grave and no one visits it. How did the subject of your film come about?

MA: What your friend Bernardo is doing is so incredible. If we only knew who would remember us and take care of our remains once we are no longer... I see some parallels between him and the unnamed main character in my film.

The idea for *The Night of the Moon Has Many Hours* came from my readings on the recent violence in Colombia. On the one hand there is a disturbingly large number of people, most of them from the countryside, who one day left home and never came back. On the other hand you have those who they left behind -their parents, brothers, sisters, and loved ones- who despite the passing of time are still waiting

for them and who feel their lives have been put on permanent hold, like a broken vinyl record that keeps skipping on the same spot and advances no more.

In addition to this I read about some regions in Colombia where it was common to see bodies running down the water streams. There are many anecdotes about what took place in those areas. For instance, a gravedigger in one of those towns tells how he started to secretly fish out bodies and bury them at nighttime. He did not want to upset the wrong people and get in trouble so he did his chore clandestinely.

All this information was in mind when I set to make this film, and in many ways, it is a very direct translation of what I was finding out in the news.

NDE: During our first meeting at the galleries of El Museo we briefly discussed Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* and *On Beauty and Being Just*. These books seem to exist at two different ends of the pole, but perhaps not. Can beauty redeem one from violence?

MA: I read *On Beauty and Being Just* several years ago and cannot remember its main premises accurately enough, so what I am going to say does not reflect on the thoughts founded on that book at all.

To me, any discussion on Beauty requires first of all a common agreement of what we mean by it. The way this word is used on a daily basis has to do more with something that is attractive to the eyes. And what we consider attractive has to do with archetypes that different industries -entertainment, fashion, cosmetic, etc.- have imposed, without us even realizing it. So the 'beauty' that greets us everyday on billboards, on ads, on television, is to me a classist, racist, and very limited idea of beauty. This concept of beauty has to do more with fascist ideals than with anything else.

But if one considers beauty as a state in which all the parts of a system have reached a sustainable state of equilibrium and coexist in some sort of harmony then I think we can see beauty as a horizon that is worth achieving. To illustrate this idea, one could speak about the beauty found in nature -and I don't mean a puffy white sheep or any other cute animal- but about nature itself as a system that has evolved over millions of years, and that though all its cycles, beginnings, endings, destructions, deaths and renovations, keeps on thriving. As such I can qualify nature as something beautiful because it is a system that has reached a sustainable state of equilibrium -even though we are about to turn it upside down.

If we apply this idea of beauty to our economic system and in lieu of all the inequality, destruction, exclusive privileges it grants, etc., we could say with certainty that our capitalistic system veers away from beauty.

Imagine then, what a 'beautiful' society could be. Or what a 'beautiful' economic model or a 'beautiful' justice system would be like. For me, beauty, if thought in this way, can be an ideal worth searching for and could indeed one day redeem us from our own violence.

NDE: You grew up in Colombia, a nation that not too long ago, was portrayed in the U.S. and beyond as living in a state of war. I was born in the Dominican Republic, where I regret to say violence has been escalating since I moved to New York several decades ago. Has living in the U.S. changed your perception of violence in Colombia and how you deal with it in your work?

MA: Coming from a so-called Third World country one has a little bit of an inferiority complex and imagines that everything that is wrong with your country or region only takes place there. How wrong is that, right? There is also serious violence taking place inside American society: School shootings -a very American phenomenon, armed crime, attacks against women, racial and sexual minorities are not a rarity. If the conditions are there, any society is prone to one form of violence or the other.

So being here has helped me out at being a little bit less harsh with my judgments of my home country. I still censor what takes place there but realize it is not just Colombia.

Two years ago I embarked on a new film that has to do with death row practices in the US. These executions are another form of violence; after all, these are State-sanctioned killings. This is the first time I am doing a project like this and plan to finish it within the next two years.

NDE: I live in the South Bronx, a place where is not uncommon to encounter images, used to advertise Hollywood movies, of men equipping themselves with phallic machine guns. What is your reading of this imagery in the context of a sex-negative society as the U.S. of America, and in the context of the patriarchal world in which we live?

MA: I understand that within a military apparatus a weapon has a very different meaning than the one it is given in movies and advertisement. For a warrior in training a weapon is like an appendix to her or his body. The ultimate goal is to carry and use a gun, or a rifle, or a knife, as if it were a natural extension of the arm. A warrior should be able to deploy

it instinctually, without thinking or hesitation. That is what marks the difference between winning and losing, between living and dying.

But in the entertainment industry everything is spectacle and there is no real causality. In movies people die like flies and guns are more like toys: the bigger, the flashier, the louder, the better those movies fare. There is a tremendous disconnection with what death and war mean outside in the real world. But nothing is made innocently. I often wonder if the fact that the U.S. embarked more than 10 years ago on a war overseas and that it continues fighting has to do with the onslaught of war and super hero movies we have seen in the last decade. By making us all too familiar with the simulacrum of war and by softening the real impact of combat, these movies end up legitimizing and naturalizing the presence of the military within civil life. They anesthetize us and prevent us from gauging the real effect of warfare. And they also become the means to seduce young men: they make the fighting and being part of an army more fun than anything else could ever be. Those big guns you mentioned are baits to get us to buy a ticket, to be part of a marketing campaign, and to, unknowingly, be part of the ongoing wars, because we stop caring, we only see the fun.

I also think these movies are not alone when playing the attitudes of a patriarchal society. The large majority of the cultural production of our times reflects a chauvinistic excess. **Let's look at the** music industry, Hollywood, TV sitcoms, advertisement, etc. There is no nuance whatsoever: the imagery, attitudes, and concepts are blatantly sexist.

NDE: When I approached you about the possibility to develop a workshop for the staff at El Museo, you mentioned how you wanted to stay away from the darkness characterizing the work you are developing during your residency at this organization. How far does your work push you to travel into this territory and where do you find light in the absence of it?

MA: There was a time when my own research used to depress me a lot. It is hard not to lose faith when you learn about the atrocities we do to each other. But it has gotten much better. As a means of self-preservation I have hardened inside and learned to look at things in a more objective way. When the issues I am reading or exploring get too difficult to digest I pause and try to regain a sense of balance and perspective. The feeling of being alive and the realization of my own agency and autonomy –as much as one can have anyways- are things I cherish and celebrate. I do not take them for granted. I realize they are a privilege. And this realization gives me energy and a sense of purpose that motivates me to continue. I also find a warm light in my personal

relationships with my friends, family and colleagues. What would be of our interests if we do not have friends and dear ones to share with? And what kind of people we would be if there were not others to learn from? These things together give meaning, light –to use your words, to my life experience.

NDE: My friend and mentor Linda Mary Montano has used masks as part of her performances. She talks about how many of us we wear them on a daily basis in order to cope with a difficult situation, or to practice different personas. My relationship with masks comes from the Dominican carnival. Can you talk about their meaning in your work? Masks are part of your original proposal for the residency.

MA: One of the ideas I explored through the work I did at the residence was how we can easily be aggressive and violent individuals, and how we are also vulnerable, suffering beings. These are two slightly dissimilar concepts, aggressiveness and vulnerability, which I could only manage to bring together by means of using several different masks.

I selected three different masks for my installation. One is a mask used by Taiwanese anti-riot soldiers. It is a bullet proof, carbon made, hard shell that soldiers attach to their faces. Seeing a troop of men wearing those masks is like seeing a group of terrifying armed robots. Those masks have a truly nightmarish appearance. Any resemblance to humanity is removed when soldiers wear them. The other mask is part of the combat uniform of the ELN guerrillas in Colombia. I have seen them before at the college I went to in Colombia where squads of those guerrillas used to make militaristic demonstrations and ‘present’ their maxims to the unsuspected students who were caught by their surprising apparitions. In a strange twist these guerrilla masks are quite similar to the pointy hoods worn by K.K.K. members.

The third mask is a rectangular foam layer that is placed over the skin of the face of burn victims. It has a few slits indicating where the eyes, nose and mouth of the victim would go. On a quick glance you would be forgiven for not recognizing it as a mask. It is the least anthropomorphized of the three I chose, and, curiously, it is the only one that is used to heal. I came across this mask when I saw a picture of a survivor of the London tube bombings in 2005. In the picture, you could see the survivor, a woman, walking away the station wreckage in company of a paramedic. A burn mask, similar to the one in my installation, covered her face. The woman’s features were hidden by it; all that was left was her hair coming out of the edges of the mask and her hands pressing it against her face.

The masks on my piece also stand for a type of violence whose aim and product is to erase singularity. By hiding the face, in the case of the first two masks, or by destroying a face, as the third mask testifies to, that which gives identity and a sense of uniqueness is gone. Those masks are like an ontological black hole.

NDE: If you could perform an act of beauty, what would this be and what tool or medium would you use?

MA: An act of love, an act of affection, is an act of beauty...love toward myself and toward everybody and everything around...

NDE: Thank you for your time.

MA: Thanks to you for the questions and for the invitation.