

Carlos Jesus Martinez Dominguez / FEEGZ Interviews Manuel Acevedo

CMD: As I was going through your work and interviews I noticed there's little info about you as a Graff writer, can you give us a quick intro to that chapter? What did you do, bomb or burn? What were your tags if any besides Prince/ Prins? Inspirations?

MA: I'll try to make a long story short. I began my artistic practice as an illustrator, graphic artist and seriously interested student of photography at Arts High School in Newark, NJ. During my junior year, an art teacher who was a great inspiration, Mr. K, introduced me to the world of wide-angle photography using the 20mm lens with a field of vision in 90 degrees. The following year (1982), with camera in hand at all times, I signed up as a member of the Guardian Angels (Newark Chapter) where I had to travel from Newark to NYC to train and occasionally patrol the city subways. That was my first exposure to the Graff writers' scene. The urban landscape was second nature to me, and I felt a strong connection to the expression of subversive language in grand scale and volume. Back in Newark I found off brand spray at my local hardware store and started one color outlines and fill-ins on freestanding cinder block walls around the neighborhood. I officially became known as PRINCE in the West Ward (Vailsburg section) of Newark. I changed the spelling to PRINS and then NAM a year into it, with the intention of forming a crew called No Apparent Motive.

CMD: What do you think of being paired with the other "Graffiti artist" in this project? Is it something that annoys you or has it in the past? Or is it something you embrace and find pride in?

MA: I embrace it. I embrace all of the disciplines that make me the artist I am. First of all, I have never been one to limit my work and artistic pursuits based on commercial appeal or a marketplace that demands stringent definitions. I work in multiple disciplines and I have resisted being categorized as a single-issue, single-genre artist. Fortunately, there is now an appreciation for artists who have multidisciplinary practices. In the past, I have been criticized for changing the direction of my work--particularly after receiving accolades in photography--however I embrace change and am constantly seeking challenges. If it's true that we are constantly evolving we must embrace change, otherwise we limit personal growth.

Long before I could be considered an "indie artist" I embraced

underground or alternative art forms like comic book art, customized car culture, day-glow art of the 70s and sign painters. In fact, underground artists and crafts people in my youth were very inspiring and provided insight into popular, social and political realities of the day. In my hometown of Newark, there was JStarr, Pez and Flare from North Newark. Jstarr was considered a Graff guru and mentor to many up and coming writers, and also was knowledgeable about the Hip Hop scene across the river in NYC. Jerry Gant aka Nasty Nas was the first person to bring temporary street installations and stencil works into the derelict properties of Newark. He recycled old broken TV tubes with other elements (debris) and sprayed up objects with gestural raw encrypted marks. You could spot them from the 31 Bus, which ran across South Orange Avenue (West to East Side).

While in East Orange, I'd meet up with Merge (who became an art director for the Source magazine), Glenie Glen, Jay Burn, Mello Max and Abigail Adams the owner of Movin' Records (a label and record shop of house music). She connected the northern Jersey writers to the Roxy's in NYC, as well. Remember, we were in our early to late teens. It was a hotbed of activity, Jersey writers connected to New York and vice versa.

One day in 1984 I met Doc, Beam and Staf27 at the Sidney Janis Gallery on 57th Street. They were responsible for my introduction to the Graff scene in Brooklyn and I painted my first train on the 3 Line. I joined TC5- -a group of talented self-taught artists though they painted all the time and developed unique style inspired by Dondi and other writers. I feel very fortunate to have experienced such a broad range of audio and visual expressions in the company of these talented artists and am honored to be amongst them.

CMD: Do you think there is still a need for museums dedicated to "Latinos"?

MA: In short, yes. In 1984, I studied photography with Geno Rodríguez at SVA. He was one of the co-founders of the Alternative Museum as well as the first Boricua instructor I had in an educational setting. I learned about cultural representation and photography within a conceptual framework. It challenged my notions of identity and helped me translate between local and global perspectives. My time at SVA shed light on the underrepresentation of people of color, including "Latinos", in the art world.

In the late 80s I discovered El Museo del Barrio. I must admit it represented something special. I experienced a museum that tried to meet the needs of the local community of East Harlem through its

mission to educate the community about Caribbean culture in particular, the island of Borinquen. I didn't know much about the history of Boricuas in New York until I learned the history of East Harlem.

El Museo has informed my understanding of the history of the Caribbean and the Americas through art exhibitions, programming and contextual literature. I feel my education as a young man and over the 25 years as an informed artist and educator wouldn't exist without the foundation for social justice and cultural representation that the museum was built on. Maybe, it should be renamed to The House Raphael Montañez Ortíz Built.

CMD: Do you think all "Latino" cultures and nationalities are represented equally in Institutions dedicated to such subjects?

MA: I'm careful not to play into the further stratification of Latinos by Latinos--when we compare ourselves amongst ourselves, however I think it is our responsibility to consider whose narratives and histories are collected, preserved, exhibited and interpreted by institutions. If it's true that collections of art and artifacts are ways of maintaining and protecting cultures and affirming a sense of identity or identities, then we have a lot more work to do.

CMD: If you could be lead visual propagandist for any government or revolutionary movement in history, which would it be and why?

MA: Prior to La Massacre de Ponce on March 21, 1937 (Palm Sunday) I'll set the stage: some very attractive folks would give out cold glasses of water laced with a minded altering drug like LSD to all the police officers 45 minutes before heading out of the station house to the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party March. As they experience a change of heart and mind, they are provided with Free Pedro Albizu Campos under garments (shirts). Then, their guns would be exchanged for tricycles, which they would ride over to the prime location. Once there, U.S. appointed governor of P.R., Blanton Winship is seated before a punching apparatus. As officers arrive to the scene they get off their trikes and line up. One by one each officer pulls the lever striking blows to his face and body with a leather glove filled with feathers and lead as to not break the skin. Film the event and send a film to Franklin D. Roosevelt. End the motion picture with line...This Is How We Remove U.S. Appointed Gringos. There would be no Ponce massacre. I know it's an absurd act. What act of war isn't absurd?

This interview is part of *Crossfire*, a project conceived and edited by Nicolás Dumit Estévez for El Museo del Barrio.