

## Nicolás Dumit Estévez Interviews Quintín Rivera Toro

**NDE:** How did *Gíbaro* come about, and what does this action mean to you at personal level?

**QRT:** This is the story of two men, both named Manuel, who have influenced me deeply at an intellectual, as well as at an emotional level. First, I was fortunate enough to study history at the University of Puerto Rico with Professor Manuel Alvarado Morales before he passed away in January of 2010. It wasn't until I reached the university that I had access to a non-superficial, non-"sanitized" version of my country's history. Under Alvarado Morales I had the opportunity to learn an abundance of facts and information, and it was through this exposure that I learned about the second Manuel; the journalist and poet, who was also a medical doctor, Dr. Manuel A. Alonso, who published in 1845 his book of verses entitled *Gíbaro* (spelled with a "g" as in old *castellano*). In this book Alonso depicted the customs and traditions of the Puerto Rican countryside, as well as of its working class folklore. The term *Jíbaro*, approximately translates as "hillbilly," and is commonly used pejoratively.

*Gíbaro*, the first acknowledged literary accomplishment of the history of our culture, instantly became a point of personal pride. The thirst for such information impelled me to celebrate it, by inscribing the title of the book on my head for the public to witness. As was part of my intention, people asked me about the design on my head, and I had a chance to explain the facts. Using the word *Gíbaro* as a proclamation, my head turned into a billboard. The term became a form of empowerment by subverting its traditional meaning, and by simultaneously promoting this piece of beautiful literature.

**NDE:** *Jíbaro* has been used as a stereotype to refer to people who come from the countryside or those who reside there. What are the implications behind calling oneself *jíbaro* as opposed to using the term to refer to someone else?

**QRT:** In our age of academic and socio-political correctness, I feel that this is a way to re-examine the term and to re-signify a fact that people in my culture often try to ignore: that us Puerto Ricans come from a very mixed heritage. "*¿Y tu abuela dónde está?*, Where is your grandmother? *Con el negro detrás de la oreja*, With black behind the ear. Both of these popular sayings refer to the fact that our genetics are not predominant in any one ethnicity, certainly not White European. I have stopped using the term *jíbaro* (although I grew up with it being very normal) to refer to a third person. I actively curb myself. Likewise with many other terms that might be culturally

common, but really just propagate problems of inequity such as racism, classism and sexism.

**NDE:** Why did you decide to document *Gibaro* in photograph, and is the photograph the actual artwork or the documentation of an action?

**QRT:** To be honest, this photograph exists thanks to a snapshot. The photo depicts me right before stepping out of my car for an opening in the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico back in 2006.

*Gibaro* was originally meant to be an action/performance. Interactions with passersby and the consequent questions and conversation is where the art making really was for me. The action gave me the chance to express my passion for Alonso's book of verses, and for the historic fact that this was the first acknowledged piece of literature in our culture. My haircut grew out very quickly, therefore making *Gibaro* an ephemeral artwork. I am very glad that this photo was taken, because I get to continue to talk about it. Many of my works, like this one, exist now only as stories, yet they are still interesting experiences. They represent lessons that I learned from the conceptual era in art history.

**NDE:** What is your connection to Puerto Rico, besides the fact that you were born on the island and that your family lives there? I am asking because we met in Berlin, Germany, then you moved to Rhode Island to pursue a graduate degree, and after graduating decided to relocate to your homeland.

**QRT:** I also lived in NYC for 7 very intense (!) years where I spent the best of my youth. Perhaps an interesting prefix and semantic layer for the word *connections* could be *inter-connections*. As an islander, and like any islander, we have no roads to interconnect us to other lands. We are not interlocked with other states as is in the U.S.A., Canada and Mexico; or other countries. Or as is in Asia, Europe and South America. It is not so simple for us Puerto Ricans to travel. We can't jump in a car and go cross-country. We therefore must travel abroad, relocate abroad, experience newness abroad. The "diásporas" between Puerto Ricans and the U.S.A. are recurring and cyclical due to our American citizenship status (see the Jones Shafroth Act of 1917, for an incredibly complex set of decisions based on the subject of national identity). That being said, we do enjoy an incredible advantage over the rest of Latin America, due to the fact that we are not illegal immigrants once in the U.S.A.

I conceptually work with locality and identity as a subject matter. The origin of my identity, which I actively choose to be a Puerto Rican identity, and further more a *cagüeño identity* (proud to be born in the municipality of Caguas, Puerto Rico), is a constant source of inspiration. There is work to be done, and

here is where I am most useful. I also use Puerto Rico as an intellectual reference point for me to experience the rest of the world. I do so as a critical thinker, as a maker of art statements, objects, and experiences.

I could also say I relocated back to Puerto Rico due the emotional and intellectual need to bring my daughter back to our cultural roots. I was well aware of the fact that the economic crisis has affected the quality of life in the island. The benefit of family and belonging is unequivocally more important than better asphalted roads, more diversity in culinary options or access to the latest trends. We'll have our chances to consume "better" culture elsewhere again. This is what us islanders do.

**NDE:** I am curious as to the connections that you and artists from your generation, living in Puerto Rico, are forging with their counterparts in the Caribbean and in the Caribbean abroad? I am asking because the migratory borders that situate Puerto Rico out of reach for most "Third World" peoples.

**QRT:** This is a constantly perplexing reality in my mind. We do not have a significant exchange with the rest of our Caribbean counterparts, a ridiculous fact in my opinion. Nevertheless, this is no accident. We have become insulated from the rest of the Caribbean in so many ways because of our relationship to the U.S.A. I sometimes have this image in my head that we are mapped alone in the Caribbean Sea, as if someone had whited out the rest of the islands around us, when really it is us who have been whited out from the Caribbean map. A very telling example is the famous saying: *Cuba y Puerto Rico, de un pájaro las dos alas*, Cuba and Puerto Rico, two wings of one bird. We share the same design in our flags for Christ's sake! But nothing could be further from that truth today. Socio-political events such as Castro's revolution and the U.S. military presence in Puerto Rican territory have made us become a separate phenomenon. Likewise with the rest of what you have called "Third World" peoples. We still are the Third World! I see it in our collective behavior. It is very palpable in our governmental corruption, underground economies, but mostly in our social approach to co-existing. We have been under the influence of a "First World" system for roughly 3/4 of a century, yet our access to it has been through the unsustainable economic possibilities provided by a "democratic" capitalist system.

We are not in any way self-sufficient. We import an abnormal amount of what we consume. We have no real fishing industry in spite of having water all around us. The examples and contradictions are endless. I hope that we become more aware of these underused advantages and of our proximity to other Caribbean nations, and use art as a bridge to help us overcome the not-so-evident political, military and economic barriers dividing us from the rest of the Antilles. Anyone up for an artistic *Confederación Antillana*? Anyone? Anyone?

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