

A conversation between Nicolás Dumit Estévez and Antonia Pérez

NDE: Thank you, Antonia for agreeing to discuss your work with me. I am aware of your consistent use of recyclables and found materials in the crochet work that you are generating as part of *Back in Five Minutes*, the residency at El Museo del Barrio. Can you talk about the role these objects play in your art practice?

AP: The plastic grocery bags I have been using become a means to express some core ideas within my personal value system—certainly with regard to environmental issues and mega-consumerist packaging and lifestyles, but also using transformation literally and metaphorically as a catalyst for thinking about ideas of beauty, labor, the intrinsic value of objects, and our perceptions of everyday objects. I have been collecting and crocheting used plastic bags for a number of years now. I also collect many other objects that most would consider trash, but that I see as objects to be used in making my art. Partly, the determination to use these objects came from my thinking about how much we, as consumers, waste materials. There is an over-abundance of re-usable trash. In 2004, when my accumulation of plastic bags had become so big that they no longer fit under my sink, I took them out and sorted them into what turned out to be a full spectrum of color. It was a pivotal point for me as I decided to make the bags a primary medium for my work. I had been crocheting garments all my life and after working with the plastic bags for a while, the choice to crochet them seemed a natural way to proceed. I felt there was a certain poetry in using such a humble material with a technique that is also considered quite humble, both in the world of needlework and in the art world in general.

NDE: Are there any specific histories and stories behind the objects that you use for art making purposes?

AP: I grew up in a household with a father who taught us not to waste things. He was a child during the Mexican Revolution and went through years of deprivation. To him every piece of string and paper bag was valuable, had a use and was meant to be saved until needed. In our household, broken things were not thrown away, but fixed. He could fix just about anything. This attitude of conservation is an integral part of my makeup so it is natural that I save, preserve and collect many kinds of objects as materials for making art. The objects that I collect have suggested themselves to me in the normal course of every day life. For example, I have seasonal allergies and during those times I use a huge number of tissues. I noticed at one point that there were quite a few empty tissue boxes at home and decided that I would begin collecting them to make some sculpture. I had an artist residency in a public

school where in each classroom every student contributes one box of tissues for the term and asked the schoolteachers to save the empty boxes for me. As the boxes accumulated, I began to see that their designs were changing over time and many of these images mimic different types of textile design, which is one of my interests. The designs that different families chose intrigued me as well; they were very different from the ones I would pick and it was evident that people are making aesthetic choices when they buy tissues. This takes me back again to ideas about marketing and consumerism.

NDE: What is your relationship to objects beyond your artistic work and as part of your day to day?

AP: I tend to keep things for a long time, trying to preserve the objects I use in good condition. I like things that are made of natural materials and that are hand made. I like functional objects, but also objects to which I have an emotional connection, such as small tools that my father had in his machine shop or little toys my sons used. I can appreciate new things if they are well made and beautifully designed, but I am more attracted to the beauty of old things. And I feel I can see beauty in things that others might regard as past their time.

I also collect and save such things as old tablecloths, towels, curtains, sheets and clothing. I am interested in the textiles as objects that retain the history of their use. Sometimes that is visible in the way they have been worn out with faded spots, rips and stains. The textile designs themselves are historical and cultural representations. I have used these things in my art, but I was collecting them for a long time before I thought of using them for that purpose.

NDE: Many of us in the so-called developed world, a term that I find problematic, are engaged in a reckless relationship with consumption. There is a constant push for one to shop, to spend, and to waste so that more and more stuff can be produced and sold. How can the arts and artists break away from this destructive pattern and perhaps propose and envision ethical approaches to creativity? I know that artists like Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens are pioneers in the burgeoning field of sexecology. Annie and Beth are getting married to snow, clouds, and the earth.

AP: I love that Annie and Beth are formalizing a relationship that we, as living beings, all have with the natural world whether we recognize it or not. Intrinsic to the marriage relationship is love and respect. I think that art and artists have an opportunity to point out ways that we may commit ourselves to a healthier relationship with the natural world

through our work and through the example of our behavior. In challenging the white male-dominated status quo, many feminist artists include environmental concerns as part of their ideology. A number of artists are using performance and social interventions to that end. A good example is the number of artists participating in the upcoming **People's Climate March and related activities**. Also more and more artists are using discarded and found objects to make their work rather than buying new materials. In teaching art to young people and art students, we have the opportunity to impress upon them to consider the impact of what they create on the world around them. We can also teach them how to repurpose materials and to avoid using toxic materials. This attitude of shopping, spending and wasting is taught from a very young age and we can only counter it with teaching other ways of thinking. I am inspired by artists who feel a sense of responsibility to society and to the earth.

NDE: This is more of a comment than a question. There is a compelling reference to objects in Gabriel Garcías Márquez's film *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother*. During one part of the film an older woman tells her granddaughter to make sure to put the dishes she is washing where they belong, because when one does not put objects in the place they are meant to go, they suffer. More than anthropomorphizing objects I am thinking about the energies their previous owners imbue them with. Any thoughts about the transformation of these energies through the crocheting you do?

AP: I certainly believe that our thoughts and attitudes about objects have energy and that this energy attaches to these objects. Through transformation I aim to make objects that are beautiful. Part of the transformation is the change from rejection to appreciation. I have thought intermittently about the people who give me their bags. I am interested in the types of bags they give, which tells me a little about their shopping habits. A collection of bags from one person is somewhat biographical. But, mostly the bags have been only used for a short trip from the store to home where they end up accumulating in a closet or thrown in the trash. I **don't feel that they have much of their temporary owners attached to them**. On the contrary, they and we suffer when they end up in the landfill and the waterways—the places they are not meant to go. I also feel that in general, people do not recognize their beauty until I put them through the transformation of becoming art.

NDE: You have an interesting background. I recall you mentioned how your family can trace its roots to different parts of the world: Mexico, Vietnam, the United States, Hungary, New Zealand, and Morocco. How do you weave all of these cultures, metaphorically speaking?

AP: Having familial connections to a number of countries and cultures means that I am able to understand, appreciate and respect a range of ways of being and thinking. Understanding, appreciating, and respecting people who are different from us, to me, is the key to being a pacifist. It also brings us closer to knowing how much we are the same.

NDE: What about the division of labor? Many of us are so conditioned to relate manual work of the kind you do to women. I do know that needlework transcends gender binaries. Do you find yourself having to defy-work related preconceptions?

AP: I developed my love of needlework through my relationships with my Hungarian-American grandmother and my elder female Mexican cousins and part of my choice to use crocheting as a technique for making sculpture is out of respect for them, and in recognition of their artistry. All of them made needlework textiles at a very high level. But my choice also grew out of a desire to challenge certain received notions: such as the one that says women who use craft to make utilitarian objects are not artists, or the one that values artists who write instructions and make blueprints for fabricators and machines to produce their work over artists who make work by hand. The irony in your question for me is that so often when a man uses crochet or embroidery to make his art, he gets a lot of attention for the 'novelty' of his technique. But when a woman uses needlework, she is regarded as a craftsperson (read: not artist) or an essentialist. Even though I am using a labor-intensive needlework process to make objects, embedded in that process, are some powerful ideas. I would say that I am using the visual aspect of the work to draw the viewer into considering not just the work's aesthetics but also the underlying ideas about labor, value, the environment, consumerism and other artists' work. I find that preconceptions about my work come less from the visitors to El Museo and perhaps more from some sectors of the art establishment.

NDE: I can imagine that your work in the galleries of El Museo is eliciting the curiosity of those who visit them. Can you narrate some of your exchanges with museumgoers and with the staff that cares for the artworks in the space?

AP: It's been really thrilling for me to have so many interesting conversations with El Museo's visitors. There have been tourists from other countries, from other parts of this country and also people from this city, even from the surrounding neighborhood and also summer camp groups and students of all ages. Most visitors are curious to know what I am doing and so many have expressed pleasure at the opportunity to talk with an artist in the process of making work. They

have a lot of questions. They have all wanted to touch the piece I am working on. Just about everyone has reacted with surprise that the material I am using is plastic bags. Even when I show how I cut and crochet them, they point to the other works on the wall and ask what material I used for them. Some even question the piece I am actually working on because, as the plastic is crocheted, its visual aspect is so transformed that it appears to be straw or some other natural fiber. Many visitors have been excited about my repurposing the bags and are supportive of the message I am trying to communicate with this work. Other crocheters have introduced themselves to me as well and have been encouraged to use plastic bags too. I have also had many great exchanges with the staff in the galleries. They too have expressed curiosity about my work and are happy to have an artist working in front of them and talking to them, not just about the art, but about everything.

NDE: Your studio is not far from some of Raphael Montañez Ortiz's pieces. What do you have to say about working in proximity to the artworks in the galleries?

AP: For me there is a delicious synchronicity in this because of my past connection to Raphael. I brought in some small works to put on the wall of my studio, which is perpendicular to the wall displaying his two feathered pyramids. The colors in my works and in his two pieces are so similar in hue and intensity, and with the positioning of the two pyramids pointing in the direction of my work, they form a visual link in the gallery space that happened without any pre-planning. When I was a student at the High School of Music and Art (now called La Guardia School of the Arts), Mr. Ortíz, as I knew him then, was a substitute painting teacher for my class a number of times. He was an imposing figure whose critiques of my painting at the time left a lasting impression. I never saw him or had contact with him after that period so that now I feel we have come full circle with me working in the museum that he founded.

NDE: Do you have any questions for me or would you like to add anything to our conversation?

AP: I wanted to say that this experience has opened up my work in unexpected ways through the interaction with the public. I don't generally have much exchange of ideas with people who are not artists or in the arts education community. It was eye opening to realize how many kinds of people appreciate art and artists and also to know that so many are thinking about the environment. Many of them express powerlessness to do anything about it. I have had the opportunity to say to many, that their small actions, such as using their own bags

instead of taking single use bags at the store, do have a powerful effect.
So, thank you so much for this opportunity to grow!