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November 9, 2021 - Gerardo Contreras has always been done with the art world establishment. He calls his Preteen Gallery an "ongoing curatorial experiment." Based in Mexico City, Contreras, who is a writer as well as curator, doesn't feel confined to the city. He can work wherever in the world he can find "beauty, a good psychiatrist, and easy access to prescription medication."

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1831 words.

Tags: Art, Curation, Process, Anxiety, Independence.

# On the occasional pain of the creative process

Mexico City-based curator, writer, and Preteen Gallery founder Gerardo Contreras discusses doing an exhibition for \$10, experimenting with solutions to creative blocks, and why making things can hurt.

**How did you make a space for yourself outside of the gallery system?**

Working my ass off and paying for everything myself until a couple of European patrons supported me. They helped out a lot for a little while. But, most of the time, starving to death and working like crazy, doing absolutely everything myself and paying for it all. I got used to opening a show with five pesos left in my pocket. I learned how to make a show that would cost me no more than 10 dollars and, when making an offsite exhibition, take a whole group show in a suitcase and install it myself. I learned this from Lucy Lippard. You don't need that much money to make a good show. A lot of what makes an exhibition memorable is an understanding of the space you're going to work at, in terms of architecture and history.

**How do you keep a show to \$10?**

By printing in Office Max in standard sizes, for instance. I'd use old frames I found at the thrift shop. Sometimes the artist would ship the work to me and I would only spend money on mounting tape. I used the school's plotter more than once.

**While I was in Mexico City, there were three art fairs happening, but you stayed away from all of them. Are you done with the art world establishment?**

I've always been done with the establishment.

**When we met up in Mexico City you mentioned how the art world's gotten very "normal."**

No one is passionate anymore. But they obviously take good care of their looks. I always denied being an art professional. "Take a look at these hands!"

**How has the art scene in Mexico City shifted from when you started?**

It's exactly the same as before, but now there are way more people involved and they all dress very well and they smile.

**You haven't staged a show in a bit.**

Preteen's always been a curatorial experiment. I haven't made shows for a while, but I consider it an ongoing curatorial project. These days I'm concerned with the past. There are so many things to do, but I just want to sit and remember.

**Do you feel blocked creatively? Or do you not worry about that at this point?**

I struggle with creative blocks all the time. But I have learned to embrace plan changes, delays, pauses, periods of silence, and solitude. I take that time to reflect. Most of the time, these impasses and obstacles are a blessing if you take that opportunity to devote your life to thought. I spend most of my awake time thinking, actually. Hours and days and nights thinking, walking, reading...

**What are some specific solutions to creative blocks?**

I've been going through this for the past few months. It's been so long since I started to experiment with potential solutions for creative blocks. Since I was in architecture school. I remember hitting the meth pipe once there was something big to start or complete, but not before. I would watch movies for as long as my mind and vision could stand. After one of those binges, at least one problem would be solved in my head and I would continue to think about it.

I've been doing this ever since those days... but it was around a year and half ago that I realized how important sleep deprivation can be during these times. I also started to experiment with dosing my medication differently, until I find the edge. Sometimes I can get rid of the burden of memory and I take high doses of either gabapentin or pregabalin. These prescription drugs can help one enter into a sort of philosophical trance unlike no other drug I've tried. That, coupled with sleep deprivation works very often, although I also need some kind of upper. Even high doses of caffeine work. I skip clonazepam or take a little dose.

One thing I've finally figured out is that "too wired" exists and it's hard to be productive in any way if you're too wired. Sometimes I take a little olanzapine to bring my mind inside my head.

Singing sad songs has been working wonders for me lately, or listening to sad music. I experiment with different methods of sound masking. Some noises work exactly like a drug: they make you focus, they make you think, they clear your head.

Crime movies are always stimulating. It's kind of pathetic, but I've been turning my projector on with Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*, and it's been helping me a lot. There's something about Monica Vitti's frozen face while she stares at nothing with a numb gaze that drives me crazy. Each single time. I thought for years that she's thinking about nothingness, but I've been focusing in on her eyes lately and she seems to be feeling and thinking something. So, I go on and wonder what could she be thinking about or feeling like for hours.

I must stress that all of this is very painful for me. It is for everyone, but it takes a while to notice how much the thirst for knowledge hurts. I was thinking about that a few days ago and then I felt like picking up and starting to read a book by Bion and it all felt so Jungian... the book is about this; it's one of his classics, *Learning from Experience*. There's something about the Spanish translation that adds a lot of drama to Bion's words. It's striking. I look at it as scientific evidence on the pain all kinds of cognition entail. Richard Dawkins treats this subject under a different light but in a similar brutal tone on his first writings on memes. People will increasingly avoid knowing because by knowing they've learned that it doesn't feel great at all. You see, that's why people thank god all the time. I mean, people genuflect! They still genuflect and somehow it isn't funny to me.

**For the kind of work that you do, what are the most valuable resources?**

Solitude, hunger, sleep deprivation, a decent projector, at least one type of e-reader, books, and enough studio space for one to walk around thinking day and night. Even if it hurts.

**Is it ok to abandon a project?**

Only if you have to say something that truly feels nobody else will ever say. Then you say something new. I recently read something Kenneth Goldsmith said, "no matter how many times you say something, there'll be someone who's hearing it for the first time." This is clever and catchy in a way it sounds true. But no, I've seen it and I see it everyday: no matter how many times you say something, nobody will ever hear.

I like the idea of letting a project evolve with time. After all, knowledge production and cultural agency are inevitably subject to evolution by mutation and adaptation just like organisms and ecosystems. This is a nod to Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*, particularly his theory of the meme.

For instance, Preteen Gallery will go on; I don't know how yet, but it won't be the same, maybe not even a similar project if I decide to open a new space.

**As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success? How do you define failure?**

I could never produce anything if I was truly bothered about the circumstances of my actions. If you care for success, you probably have nothing good to offer anyway. I associate success with professionalism. I'm

the opposite of that. I believe in passion. There is no beauty or wisdom in success because the basis of success is instinctual—from a presidential campaign to the communication between organic molecules in living bodies—whatever the cultural forms this instinct may take or the kind of behavior it may set in motion. There is a reason why people enjoy Katy Perry songs and not Bruckner symphonies.

**A few people I spoke to in Mexico City mentioned that you established yourself by taking risks with newer artistic voices. What's your interest in newer artists?**

There was a lot of risk-taking. Especially when I started to get into painting. I learned years later how subversive it was to constantly make shows by young painters in Mexico City where painting is seen as "less than" and political and conceptual art has been the rule for decades. When I first started I just wanted to show the most fucked up, truly weird shit I could find and I found it!

I have to add that Preteen Gallery has been the only truly gay art project in Mexico. No other space has had such a consistent, overtly gay identity. At some point I threw a series of parties called TOO GAY TO BE COOL. I made a pregnant Mariah Carey infomercial psychedelic video installation for one of them.

I opened Preteen on November 2008 with a group show titled *TRES PUTOS (Three Fags)* with cute drawings by three straight male friends of mine. There is little documentation of that show. I was not satisfied with it, but it created quite a stir locally. A lot of people were perplexed.

**We've talked a bit about the heat and sun in Mexico City, and how you'd enjoy a darker place where it rains more. Do you feel like what you do is inextricably tied to Mexico City?**

I think that whatever I do can happen wherever in the world where I find beauty, a good psychiatrist, and easy access to prescription medication. No heat ever, though. It ruins my skin. I also hate cars. I can't stand car cities.

Remember when I talked about how "Side Effects" by Mariah Carey was one of my anthems? Actually, the song that best describes my daily struggle is "Air" by Talking Heads. "What is happening to my skin? Where is the protection that I needed? Air can hurt you, too."

**How do you nourish your creative side when you aren't working?**

I think of furnishing my studio, then I go and furnish it, only to be unhappy with the results. I sell the furniture and start again. Of course, I do as much research as possible about every single piece of furniture I acquire. I watch movies, I read, I listen to music. Lately I've been doing all this at the same time à la Fassbinder. You can actually write a play while carefully watching film, listening to cerebral music, reading, singing, drinking a glass of water, etc. You just have to constantly raise your pain threshold. It will hurt you a bit, but you'll know something afterwards.

Five young artists I think you should know about by Gerardo Contreras:

Cédric Fargues (France)

Phoebe Collings-James (UK/USA)

Abdul Vas (Spain/Belgium)

Priscilla Tea (Italy)

Rodrigo Hernández (Germany/Switzerland)

Name

Gerardo Contreras

Vocation

Curator, Collector, Writer, Founder of Preteen Gallery

Fact


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Photo: Ramiro Chaves

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