Visual artist Pedro Reyes on fighting the cop in your head

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As told to Uli Beutter Cohen, 2069 words.

Tags: Art, Theater, Culture, Politics, Process, Independence.

This is the most insane home library I've ever seen. Can you point out one book you really love out of these thousands of books?

I've been collecting books all my life. I started when I was a kid and now, I probably buy 200 to 300 books a month. *My Voice Will Go With You* by Milton Erickson is a good book. He is a psychologist and hypnotherapist who gave his patients only five sessions. He said if they can't be cured in that timeframe, they can't be cured at all. That book is incredibly useful because it's an account of how Erickson helped his patients to get over their issues. When you read a book, you read it because you want to find something out about yourself. I'm interested in therapy, and I have found "recipes" in this book that I can use with other people.

Do you like giving advice to people?

Yes, it's fun. When I give advice to people, I steal from Erickson the same way that [Alejandro] Jodorowsky steals from Erickson. There's a story about Jodorowsky going to this bookstore in Paris. The book dealer tells him, "Well, there's another guy that also dresses in purple, like you. His name is Milton Erickson. You should read him." The book dealer gave Jodorowsky a book by Erickson because they both dressed in purple. It was reassuring to realize that my intuition about Jodorowsky's method being based on Erickson's writing was right. It was like seeing a magician hiding the rabbit below the hat. I was like, "Hey, I found your source."

Photo by Uli Beutter Cohen

The first time I heard about you, was when someone told me about your project *Disarm*, where you turned confiscated weapons into musical instruments.

That project has two parts. The first one is *Palas por Pistolas*, where we melted 1,527 confiscated weapons into 1,527 shovels that were used to plant 1,527 trees. The second one is *Disarm*, where we transformed over 6,700 confiscated firearms into musical instruments.

I was inspired by Antanas Mockus, a philosopher and mathematician who became the Mayor of Bogotá in '95. He reduced crime and organized a number of campaigns for people to donate weapons that were then melted and made into different objects like spoons and things. He is one of my mentors and advisors. I always consult him about ideas. The other inspiration was Jodorowsky with whom I had conversations about alchemy. We were talking about how to turn shit into gold. These metaphors can lead to ideas about social transformation. How long do you want the answer to be? Because they can be very long.

Photos courtesy of Pedro Reyes

I love that you are telling us about your sources and process. It's intimidating to see a large, finished idea. It's important to know which conversations made you say, "Weapons are shit. Let's turn them into gold."

In alchemy, you work with the *nigredo*, which is the dark matter or the dark side. Many religions have also spoken about how to transform shit into something else. In Egypt you have the dung beetle. In Buddhism, you have the lotus flower that grows in the mud. In alchemy, which is linked to Christianity, you have the philosopher's stone or the idea that you can turn shit into gold. Our dark side has to do with our fanatic drive to kill, which was necessary for our survival as primates. The same way that we get excited about sex, we get excited about violence.

In reality, we are dealing with a gun problem because of our proximity to the United States. It makes Mexico very vulnerable to gun trafficking. The double standard about the border is that it's very dangerous for Mexico to be a neighbor of the United States. 64% of all weapons sold worldwide are bought by civilians in the United States. That's more than all armies and police forces worldwide. It's like having a neighbor who is building a pool in the apartment upstairs and it's leaking. What it's leaking is guns. It's not about the narcos' guns. It's about the weapon industry.

The blame always goes to whoever pulls the trigger, but we have to look at the systemic framework, like the economy of fear. Crime and the war on drugs is good business for the weapon industry. It's a kind of manifestation of disaster capitalism. A paranoid society will always be fueled by civilians buying more weapons and by massive military spending. The United States is totally hijacked by the military industrial sector. Within that context, the idea is to have an incredibly naïve approach, which is to destroy weapons that are designed to kill, to melt them down, and to recast that metal into shovels to plant trees. The idea of social sculpture is to make a physical transformation that will hopefully lead to a psychological transformation and to a social

transformation.

We have to transform matter…

…in order to transform mindsets. It's very important for changes to have a material manifestation. That's the role of rituals. In rituals, the object and the subject are one.

You've been creating art about social and political issues for a long time. How do you pick your battles?

In the end, you need art because art is food for the spirit and you need to nurture your spirit. What your soul is craving is not socially engaged art. You may find comfort and poetry in things that are totally lyrical but useless. The use of it is the uselessness. I don't think that there's any extra value in socially engaged or political art. I believe that art in general has a very, very important social mission. Half of the things I do exist in a political or social context and try to have some agency beyond the aesthetic realm. But the other half of what I do is very classical and romantic. Sometimes I feel the need to draw a naked woman and I do it. Another time I feel the need to make a pedagogical project about Marxism and I do it.

What do you feel the need to make now?

Right now, I'm doing sculpture. But, what I'm doing immediately tomorrow, is a puppet show that features Noam Chomsky and other figures, like Ayn Rand, who is a character that has never been taken seriously by academia because she's an embarrassment. To any kind of educated person, Ayn Rand is clearly a sociopath and a right-wing, evil person. But the fact that there's a whole other world, where her book is probably the only book people ever read, goes unchecked. Her writing passes as philosophy to those people and they use Ayn Rand to justify all the injustices that they help bring into the world.

Just like someone else will quote Deepak Chopra and say, "Well, here it is. Here's truth."

Yes, I decided to bring in Ayn Rand and also other figures like Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, and Donald Trump for this new play. It's called *Manufacturing Mischief*, which is a take on a Manufacturing Consent by Noam Chomsky. There's a device in the play called the Print-a-Friend. It's a machine where you put in a book and, poof, it prints out the author. Noam Chomsky is invited to judge a science competition, hosted by Elon Musk. They're in this intellectual-elite-festival-of-ideas environment. People like Steve Jobs and Elon Musk loved Ayn Rand. It's typical for rich people to love her because she justifies all the oppression they cause.

There's a tradition of technocrats that started with Henry Ford and Frederick Taylor. Now that Steve Jobs is dead, that technocrat figure is Elon Musk. He's a visionary, but he's a visionary with a capitalist ethos. You can only think of going to Mars as a source of hope if you think that…actually, it's a super stupid idea. There's nothing more stupid than the idea of going to Mars. It's a boring rock and there's nothing there. It's even more stupid than to say, "I'm going to dig a hole 500 kilometers deep into the Earth and live in it." I want to mock all of this stupidity.

Photo courtesy of Sham Sthankiya

What is something that you would like Americans to start doing or keep doing, because it's positive change?

Some of the most inspiring movements of the last year came from the American people, for instance the students who organized March for Our Lives in order to stop gun violence. I think that is an incredibly inspiring movement. Also, the Me Too movement is incredibly inspiring. It's very important that the United States continues to have leadership in civil movements that are advocating for the respect of women and gender equity, and stands up to the military industry, because that's what the gun lobby represents. It's very important to acknowledge that some of the most important social accomplishments and movements are taking place in the United States, as well.

Photo by the *LA Times*

These are topics that have been dealt with for a long time, and some people say that nothing is changing. How do you stay empowered to say, "We're going to keep talking about this. We're going to keep making art about this. We're not giving up."

I think there is change. Chomsky said something that I find very inspiring, "There's nothing stopping us from working on making a better world." We are incredibly free. More free than we want to believe. There's no social punishment that will come for criticizing the system, for expressing the change that needs to happen. It's very important to acknowledge that all the paranoia of being controlled in social media is bullshit. The real threat is the cop in the head.

The real accomplishment of the ideology in the United States is that people have internalized these censorship mechanisms. In reality, you can say whatever you want in the US. I've been doing a workshop called *Amendment to the Amendment* where I ask people to rewrite the Second Amendment. Someone always says, "What if some gun nut comes in now and shoots us all?" That's something that's internalized as a fear. It's very, very important to overcome the cop in the head.

How do you overcome the cop in the head?

There's a specific workshop, you can do it in a group, called *Theater of the Oppressed*. It was created by Augusto Boal, a theater practitioner from Brazil. Let's say you're afraid of criticizing the government because then you might not get that grant. The other people who are in the workshop with you start to get close to you and to bully you. They say things like, "Oh, you're such a poser. You go around as if you were daring. In reality, you're just accommodating everyone's needs. You're such a chicken." You have to confront them and say, "Fuck you. I'm going to say whatever I want." You empower yourself to overcome the bullying. You can do this workshop

wherever. Try it.

If I were to ask you for advice, it seems like it would be to remember that we're free? Is freedom the most important thing?

You could say that. Friendship is also important and it's important to enjoy life, but great happiness comes when something you do makes other people happy. I believe in vicarious joy. The satisfaction of contributing to other people's joy.

Five books from my library which may or may not be out of print, yet they can often be found in second hand bookshops:

The Idealist: Aaron Swartz and the Rise of Free Culture on the Internet by Justin Peters

PiHKAL: A Chemical Love Story by Alexander Shulgin & Ann Shulgin

Growing Up Absurd by Paul Goodman

The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony by Roberto Calasso

Harmonian Man: Selected Writings of Charles Fourier

Name
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Vocation
Artist, Activist and Educator

Photo courtesy of Lisson Gallery