

## Noe Martínez and the Art of Survivors

Mexican Nahua-Teenek artist **Noe Martínez** (born 1986), originally from Michoacán, is a multidisciplinary creator with previous studies in political science. Whether it is drawing, installation or performance, he addresses issues such as transgenerational migration and the effects of colonization on the body politic of indigenous groups. Supported by ethnographic techniques and archival research, he does a kind of mapping and translation where he exhibits the processes of racialization about himself and the history of his people.

Artist **Beatriz Paz Jiménez** interviewed **Noe Martínez** about his practice in Mexico City where they both live and work. The interview was conducted in Spanish and translated into English, both versions are available on the Art Gallery of Burlington's website alongside Martínez's video work *Las cosas vividas antes de nacer* (*The things lived before being born*). Martínez's work *La última parte del cuerpo II* (*The final part of the body II*), 2020, aluminum sheet crimped with obsidian, ceramic, shell, amber and oil. 290 × 160 cm (114.17 x 62.99 in) can be seen in the gallery space. Both works are part of Su-Ying Lee's curatorial programming in the exhibition *How to Read a Vessel* on view from September 10, 2021 – January 9, 2022.

\*Content warning - colonial violence

**What do you consider to be the importance of the historical document in the interpretation of the fictions and realities of the past?**

I think of the historical document in two dimensions: the document that yields data, and the other as “physis” (how the nature of a being is shown). When I was in the *Archivo de Indias* (an archive established in 1785 centralizing documentation of the administration of the Spanish colonies), located where they carried out slave contracts in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as I held the slave records in my hands, I knew that on the paper, the destiny was written of 100 African people who had arrived, or 100 people who had left. In a stack of 1000 papers, you are seeing the documentation of genocide. The slavery of natives of present-day Mexico, trafficked to Europe or the Caribbean or Africa, is almost invisible in speech, but when you are seeing a document that demonstrates the past, that paper becomes really powerful.

The impact of a culture on another is also perceived in the physical dimension of the documents, including the landscape. For my culture, the landscape, and the objects, where this impact is revealed, are dark places, sick places.

**Talk about entering the past like a space that is alive in another way, identifying what has become ill.**

Entering a space is entering a time, and vice versa. I think of movement more as an experience than as a concept: to go to the past and return to the present is a constant sickening-healing (the work of accessing traumatic histories stored in the body for the purposes of healing). Violent events are informed by space, territories, and relations, then confirmed by some historical document or trace. The body is an archive, you know it when you are in front of racialized bodies, dark and light.

I wrote a letter, that I have performed as spoken-word as part of *La obsidiana y el mar*, to colonizer Nuño de Gúzman (Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán was appointed governor of Panuco, Mexico in 1525 by the Spanish colonial government. Guzmán treated the original people of the territory with such violence, that he was nick-named Bloody Guzmán) to tell him what I needed to, but possibly more people needed it, some before I was born. You began to live because someone has already carved out how you are going to find the world, someone has already configured it for you. It is totally free, potent, that art reorders the configuration of that. Or at least it proposes to. I believe that art has that capacity to restructure things that are already arranged in a certain way, and in doing so, to think of certain times as sick time, and as a place of entry and exit.

**On a personal level, how did you live the effects of the migration of your parents?**

Colonial wounds are like scabs. I was born far from my ancestral community of Calmecayo (Coxcatlán, San Luis Potosí). Mine has been a labor of recognition, where the dimension of the territory is in the body, the relationships, the dream world. In Mexico and other colonized countries, to recognize oneself as a member of an original group carries with it a burden of discrimination due to a social fabric that was made homogenous and mestizo.

My parents migrated from their community to Mexico City and afterwards to Morelia, Michoacán, where I was born. To study, I migrated to Mexico City, in a time in which the right to the city was lost due to the war against the *narco* in Michoacán. I saw people hanged and shot. In school, they aspired to produce European and United States style art. Their set of tools didn't make sense to my purposes, nor did I have an artist colleague that was looking for the same thing as I. When I began to work directly with my family, they became both my characters as well as my interlocutors. It was a very solitary and one-on-one process, sometimes I would record them and sometimes not. We drew a lot together, we wrote, it was very intimate. The history of my family is part of a chain of migration of original people that for more than 500 years has had to see how territories and opportunities are centralized.

**What are the challenges of exhibiting Indigenous art in contexts where artistic production and exhibition often derive from colonizing systems?**

Due to my skin color and my features, airports sometimes are a nightmare. They usually check my passport five times, or they stop me in the tunnel when I'm about to board the plane. I've had experiences where security guards have denied me access to my own exhibitions, or they have confused me with other people who do the cleaning in the building. This of course is not the problem. The problem is how my image is stigmatized due to years and years of racial segregation. I think about it a lot with my friends with whom I rap, who live in the periphery of the city. When I invite them to do something in the context of a museum, they ask, *where is the museum? Can we go? What clothes should we wear?* These seem like unimportant questions, but they are satirical remarks which show how we behave as a society. It is disturbing to be told, "I do not want to go to the museum because in that zone of the city I do not feel good," and many people have said that to me.

There are situations which serve as a sort of simulation of integration for original peoples, but that do not actually problematize nor resolve the issues faced by racialized peoples. "Indigenous" is a colonial concept. There are those who reinvent it, or who make it part of their identity. I do not use it. I try to use the term "original" or *Teenek* (which defines my own culture). The continuity of your identity in your work converts into double work, and you end up inventing a toolbox which does not always prevent your work from being exoticized when it enters the art market.

I do not consider myself indigenous and I do not consider myself only Nahua, like other friends consider themselves, I consider myself Teenek-Nahua. I mean, I am linguistically Nahua but spiritually I am a Teenek relative, but I am an artist who also lives as a city artist with a specific lifestyle, so I go swimming, I do yoga, I eat organic vegetables... So what am I at the end?

Recently some curators were very insistent that I identify as an *Indigenous artist*. I felt violated for having to explain why I don't identify as Indigenous. I have never seen an exposition that is called "White Mexican Art". I don't think it is the right way to establish a real dialogue from the plurality of which is a country like Mexico, nor from the cultural plurality of art in the world. There is no nation that is totally uniform. I believe that naming "contemporary Indigenous art," "LGBTQ art," exercises a sort of double exclusion dressed as inclusion.

**How does Nahuatl reflect the cosmovision and culture of your community, and how can that be seen in your work: The Last Part of the Body II?**

I approach my language more like an experience that rediscovers things in me, a point of encounter and relation. The Nahuatl that my family speaks is a collage of dialects. I think of language as a presence which can generate relations between people, encrypt others, and appeal to phonetic affectivities.

In that specific piece, I wanted to know if my ancestors could be heard in Mexico City. I began by structuring a large rattle, where the plates replaced bones which the people used in prehispanic times. I wanted a response from them, and my acknowledgement was the wind. The wind and the presence of that sound is almost the same as the phonetic presence of the sounds of Nahuatl. For me, it is a very personal piece, one sound for another, the dialogue that I had with my dead ones.

**What are the relationships that your use of materials influences in other works?**

The materials are metaphors that make connections, the phenomenology of the materials takes me back to distant experiences. When a piece of skin appears, it is the equivalence of the exchange of animals for people. Through Spanish participation in the transatlantic slave trade, one animal was worth 60 people; there are ceramic pieces that allude to the interchange of sugar slaves and have sugar crystals in symbolic places where the bodies were void; stone and paper amate (a type of paper made from bark) are metaphors of the body, obsidian is a metaphor of the sea. Silver is present for the monetary exchange during the Colony. The sheet of gold was a vice royal technique to cover wood, which is very violent because in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when they cut a ceiba tree, they were removing a very strong symbolic structure from the landscape to turn it into a door with a Virgin Mary carved into it. We can't stop at seeing the colonial cities and cathedrals as vestiges of ecocide. We have to expand our sensibility and recognize what happens in the streets where we walk.

**What do you think of artistic work that is called "misery porn" which reproduces contexts of social marginalization?**

There is a fine line between making evident a social situation and reproducing it. There can even be a process of self-exotization. You have to contextualize the conversation around the art that you produce. For me, my art serves as a catharsis or personal discovery, sometimes like a reformulation of my identity.

From the deep class frontier in Latin America, to generate art is highly expensive. Not only does one have to produce the aesthetic or sensible presence, but there is also a necessary economic chain. You have to think about who's back your work is made upon. All the violence that can be contained in a material or immaterial object, including the most critical, but that is going to cost someone, so that you can continue thinking and earning a living for your productive labor.

It would be necessary to review work by work to know what misery porn is and what is decolonial, along with the dialogue that each work raises within its context, to see how we name and categorize things, and how we want to homogenize them. That which is called misery porn may in some cases be a social good, insofar as it generates a social discussion, however polarizing the problem may be.

**Is there any contemporary world oppressor you would write to as you did with Nuño de Gúzman?**

Yes, I would write to many, and I will continue writing with the same intention, as a metaphor of those reincarnated people of the past who have the face with which they killed my father's father. My father just finished a process of cancer, which he was able to overcome, but it was brutal. I did a lot of this series of bodies that were hanging thinking about how if you cannot maintain a level of consumption, nor production or work, as was the case with my father, you are discarded in a brutal manner.

I continue feeling like I am in a colonial regime, and I continue feeling like I make the art of survivors. There is nothing to celebrate in the 500 years of the conquest. We continue making art of people who survived the end of the world, pandemic after pandemic.

**How has your artistic process changed with the pandemic?**

In Mexico, every day there are 100 recognized deaths caused by *narco* violence. That is to say 100 loved ones go missing daily. Mexico is the country with the most child abuse. It is one of the worst countries in the world in relation to the way it treats women and trans people. People are locked up with their tormentors. The pandemic exacerbates a constant reopening of wounds.

The place that my generation occupies in the agenda of those that make decisions is cruel. Many of my generation, that is the work force, died during the second wave of COVID. We do not have union rights, which were had before. As a generation, we pay the most taxes. We are the most outsourced in the economy, and the ones who sustain the bureaucratic and political apparatus in Mexico. We are the generation most prepared academically, at the same time we earn the least.

The pandemic has transformed how I think about socializing my practice, understanding with what strategies am I going to survive, including basic rights and my experience of empowerment as another professional activity.

## **Bios**

**Noé Martínez** uses reconstruction as an aesthetic operation, his work is a case study record that emerges from his personal history to position himself critically in the face of social phenomena. Topics such as language, the history of the European invasion in the 16th century, the re-elaboration and ethnic vindication in the current political processes of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, and the political potential of memory surround his reflections, questioning the elaboration and interpretation of the common past.

By means of ethnographic compilation, field research and the study of archives, it generates artistic approaches that reconstruct ideological conditions and circumstances from the phenomenology of the image and the artistic object.

**Beatriz Paz Jiménez** is a Mexican researcher, artist, and activist. She works in the mediums of collage, book-art, editorial design, and social engagement. Beatriz has traveled internationally as a speaker on Indigenous topics regarding land defense and ancestral art. She and Canadian artist Zoë Heyn-Jones, are co-founders of Dupla Molcajete, a space for experimentation at the nexus of art, food, and culture.