

A Conversation: Juan Manuel Echavarría and Laurel Reuter

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LR: What did your life encompass in the thirty years before becoming a photographer?

JME: More than anything I have tried to live, to live with a feeling for life which of course includes books, friends, conversations, trips and relationships.

LR: Did you study art?

JME: Art? Unfortunately never. History of art? Yes. That took me to Italy and Greece during my college years where I became aware that the art world would always be a close companion. But it was only in New York—ten years ago—that I began to be exposed to contemporary art.

LR: What are you reading these days? War?

JME: *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Remarque. I must read *The Iliad* again. But to continually read war books would take me straight into insanity. It is more than enough to live in Colombia where there is constant war.

LR: You spent much of your adult life as a writer of fiction. How do you think that influences your art?

JME: The discipline of writing gave me a passion for metaphor and image, which goes hand-in-hand with visual arts. I was fed up with my writing. I was about to be fifty years old and was lost in turmoil. Then my very close friends, Ana Tiscornia and Liliana Porter, both fine artists living in New York, suggested that I get a camera. I followed their advice and it was like jumping over a precipice. The camera opened new worlds. It allowed me to get emotionally involved with the realities that exist in Colombia.

LR: And this was totally different from your writing?

JME: In my writing I was always looking for the *onírico* or the dreamy side. I always enjoyed literature that would transport me to other worlds like Ray Bradbury's fantastic short stories. But I never addressed the conflict that for more than fifty years has been going on in Colombia. In my literature I was interested in a mythical time, never in the present.

LR: Did this signal an internal change in you?

JME: The camera took me into an unexpected path. When I photographed my first series in 1996, *Retratos* (Portraits), images of beaten up mannequins in the streets of Bogotá, I felt that I was waking up from a prolonged coma, from a deep sleep. The mannequins were like the stone that shatters the tranquil waters.

LR: Next came *Corte de Florero* (Flower Vase Cut). Tell me about it.

JME: I imagine it comes from memories of my childhood in Medellín, my home town.

LR: Were you ever afraid as a child?

JME: Never. During the 1950s in Medellín the war was far away in the countryside between the liberal and conservative peasants. It was a vicious war which left around 200,000 people dead. Mostly peasants. During this time the victims' corpses were frequently mutilated with machetes. The mutilations came to be known as *cortes* or cuts. The news of these mutilations, though very abstract for a child, must have filtered into my unconscious. Many years later, after reading the book *Matar, rematar, contramatar* by the anthropologist María Victoria Uribe, I recalled these *cortes*. *Corte de Corbata* (Necktie Cut) and *Corte de Franela* (Vest Cut), in particular, left a strange imprint upon my childhood psyche.

LR: Why did they ritualize the killing?

JME: I think it is a thing of power. It is to show that "I have power over death, I have power over you. I even have the power over your corpse. And I will mutilate your corpse so others can see what can happen to them."

LR: How did you find the bones to make this work?

JME: I had two choices: get them in New York in a store called Evolution or find them here in Bogotá through physicians. I chose the latter because the skeletons in the New York store looked very clean, very proper. Yes, they were for sale and had to be presentable and enticing to the public.

People are taken by these images because they are very beautiful. Then they discover the horror behind the beauty. I believe you can speak about horror through beauty. It allows people to meditate. You will either endorse the beautiful image or move away from it. My work must be in the manner of the oyster. From the illness comes the pearl.

LR: It is almost like a seduction into another reality. How about the work *Escuela Nueva*?

JME: I found the children's books in an abandoned school in a tiny village called Chicocóra in the Chocó region of Colombia. Chicocóra is a ghost town on the Pacific Ocean. Everyone had left because they feared a paramilitary incursion, which always brings hell.

LR: The books are about evil?

JME: I see these books as traces left behind by the invisible children of Chicocóra. Traces of Afro-Colombian children caught in the middle of the drug war that has affected thousands of Afro-Colombians who live on the Pacific Coast. The war is between the armed forces, the paramilitary, and the guerillas. As long as drug trafficking continues, the only escape for these people will continue to be death and forceful displacement.

LR: The illustrations in the coloring books would have been designed by adults. Right?

JME: The pages to be colored—which the children hadn't finished—are of virtual threats: a bear who goes after a child, a cobra which makes a girl scream, a lion that menaces a boy. Isn't it perverse irony that the threat of the paramilitaries did not allow the children to finish coloring the threats encompassed in their illustrations?

LR: Do the ideas come before the images?

JME: I think both ways.

LR: What underpins *Bolívar's Platter:1999*?

JME: *Bolívar's Platter:1999* represents the fragmentation of a nation. In the nineteenth century we had nine civil wars and in the twentieth century we have had sixty years of war. In the beginning of the 1980s, the drug war began and the fragmentation continues with more than two million people forcefully displaced from their lands. Not to mention the death and mutilations that accompany the drug war.

LR: I find *Bolívar's Platter:1999* a perfect work of art. It is pared to its very essence. It is as if the work distilled inside of you for a long time before you realized it.

JME: Yes, I have lived with the circumstances behind it for a long time. For example, drug money has filtered into every institution that you can imagine. Not long ago we had a president whose campaign accepted drug money and a congress which has many members elected with drug

money. The examples are plentiful. The list infinite. The drug war has ripped apart this nation and with it the lives of thousands and thousands of innocent civilians. Let's not forget that both of the irregular armies—the paramilitary and the guerilla—are also financed by drug trafficking.

LR: I find the video version of *Bolívar's Platter: 1999*, based upon the suite of ten photographs, more powerful than the still photographs shown alone. The work is intensified by adding the sound of the porcelain platter being smashed and by the fact that the ending is revealed only in the last frame. I was caught unaware when, instead of the dust of shattered Colombia drifting off into the Milky Way, it coalesces into a shining, glistening, perfect mound of cocaine.

How did you discover La María?

JME: Through an anthropologist I heard that a group of women had made an extraordinary effort to turn their kidnapping into a positive experience. On May 30, 1999, the ELN [National Liberation Army] abducted 167 people from the Church of La María in Cali. They were taken to the mountain jungle and divided into different groups, one of eleven people—eight women and three men. I felt I had to contact them. In my family we have had kidnappings with fatal results so contacting them became an obsession for me. When I reached Melitza, I felt an immediate connection, she being an art teacher. Melitza opened all the doors for this project. My friendship with these women has been a deeply human experience.

LR: Do you think these were ordinary people transformed by extraordinary experiences?

JME: Courageous people. Resilient people. They never allowed kidnapping to dehumanize them. Because what kidnapping does is to turn a person into merchandise for whom there is only one buyer: the family. In their ordeal in the jungle, they began collecting insects, carving stones, and playing imaginary games as part of their struggle for survival. Tolerance and imagination played a definite role.

LR: Did they talk about the engagement of the young guards in making the bug collection?

JME: The insect collection became a communication bridge with the captors, some of them as young as thirteen or fourteen years old. They are seduced into becoming a guerilla because many of them are mistreated in their homes. Others have no opportunity. Their captors became fascinated and began to bring bugs to add to the women's collection. When they were finally released, it was the captors who gave them empty cassette holders so they could bring the insects safely from the jungle to their homes.

LR: Do you think their religious faith helped the women?

JME: They did not let go of their faith. They always believed that they would be released, that they would be able to return to their families and friends.

LR: What about their carvings?

JME: Gifts for those they had left behind. Hopefully mementos from a very long nightmare. Five months in captivity.

LR: Your photographs of the red cloth, the rosary, and the tin basin are different from the rest, almost a body within a larger body of work. I can't look at them without seeing the chalice, the blood, and, of course, the rosary.

JME: Yes, I also feel that there is something sacred about them. Especially the bowl which is inscribed with the word "libre" and the red rag which they all shared as a towel during their long ordeal. Rossana always said that the guerillas entered the church at the moment when the holy Eucharist was being raised and thus the mass ritual was interrupted at the most sacred moment.

LR: I felt that these photographs contain the summation. Here is the altar, the place where belief is housed. I wonder if you told me that or if I saw it in the work.

JME: This kidnapping was an eccentric one. A sacred space had been violated.

LR: How is *La María* different from your other bodies of work? I find it somehow less self-contained, more open-ended. I don't know if that is true.

JME: Perhaps so. Every single image in *La María* has a story to tell about resilience and courage: hell turned into a positive human experience.

LR: The women were also captured and put in a box?

JME: They slept in a plastic tent, which they called *maloca*. But for me the cassette box where they kept their bugs was, metaphorically speaking, their *maloca*. This became apparent when they spoke about their experience at night. They would sleep very tight to each other, not only because of the small space in the tent, but because of the unbearable cold. And in their collection there were eleven insects of the same species just as there were eleven persons in their group. Coincidence? When I showed the women of *La María* the photograph of the cassette box with these insects, Melitza, who initiated the collecting, exclaimed: "This is us." Yes, metaphorically speaking, the women recognized how they too were put like insects in a cassette box.

LR: Talk about *Guerra y Pa* (War and Peace).

JME: After three years of recently failed peace talks during the presidency of Pastrana, I thought of mimicking the politicians and the guerilla leaders who endlessly and irresponsibly repeated the words “war” and “peace.” So I found in the market two young parrots and Bonifacio, an old friend from the village of Baru who has trained birds all his life, repeated these two words during eight months of training until the parrots finally learned to imitate him.

LR: *Guerra y Pa* is such a tiny little work, so simple. Only 8.5 minutes. It’s a small parable of life that ranges across history and time, across human and sexual relationships, from continent to continent. One throws a stone in the water and the ripples spiral out, endlessly. What about *Bocas de Ceniza* (Mouths of Ash)?

JME: It all happened by accident. When I heard Dorismel’s song thanking God after having survived a massacre, I was deeply moved and told him about my work. I asked him if he would allow me to film him singing his song. He felt very proud and did not hesitate. I filmed him and since that very first moment a friendship grew between us.

LR: And the next singer?

JME: I felt Dorismel could not be alone. Others must also be composing their songs about their individual suffering. It was an intuition that proved to be correct. In Afro-Colombian symposiums, in Afro-Colombian festivals in the Chocó region, I met most of the other singers and each one brought me other singers.

LR: Did you discard many taped songs?

JME: It was not a matter of discarding. It was just impossible to strike a relationship with all of the singers. I could not just film them and then leave. I became emotionally attached to those singers I filmed. I am involved in their lives, in their personal projects. We speak on the phone. We see each other. I have met their families and have made sure they know where their songs are being heard. I have learned many things about this war through their stories and friendship.

At the end of last year I had an exhibition at the Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá and, except for Rafael Moreno, they all came. I felt it was important for them to see how deeply moved people were by their songs, how genuine the response. I think this allowed them to speak further about their grief, their wounds. For me it was most important to share with them the exhibition and to have them see how I present their songs.

LR: Do you think the songs come out of the black oral tradition.

JME: Afro-Colombians have a fantastic oral tradition and of course a rich musical heritage.

LR: The songs and the children's books are your most direct work. There is little intervention by you, the artist, no intellectualization.

JME: I agree. The children's books are what they are: traces left by the fleeing children of Chicocóra. In *Bocas de Ceniza*, in the songs, the main concept was the eyes as the mirror of the soul. My work, I believe, must burn with an emotional temperature.

LR: Often the critics make up the words. But you as a writer can give words to your work.

You first showed *NN* (No Name) at the North Dakota Museum of Art in *The Disappeared* exhibition [April – June 2005]. As the piece unfolded, it seemed you were thinking about the disappeared rather than those kidnapped for ransom.

JME: The work is based upon a mannequin I found abandoned in a courtyard of an old textile factory in Bogotá. It was a mannequin of a child. Made of burlap and plaster, it caught my attention. I took it to my home and kept it for nine years until I decided to bring it out again.

I photographed this mannequin as if I was doing an emotional autopsy, looking closely at the different parts of the body and its different wounds. It was a body that I immediately associated with the mass graves and the massacres, which keep occurring in Colombia. Here was a corpse that presented cuts that could have been done by machete and other cutting instruments. This child's body became a metaphor of mutilation.

LR: We hear so much about kidnappings in Colombia. What about the killings of the disappeared?

JME: I spoke earlier of the *cortes* or cuts with reference to images of *Corte de Florero*. In the 1950s during the war between the conservative and the liberal peasants, there was also another mutilation of the corpse known as *picar para tamal* [tamal being a national dish and picadillo meaning minced]. In this mutilation the body was cut into small pieces and so the identification of the person was erased. Let's remember this was at a time when forensic technology was not very developed.

Today the paramilitaries disappear people through similar practices. In some massacres in the countryside it is known that they cut open the stomach of the victim and disemboweled it so the

body sinks to the bottom when thrown into the waters. Other corpses float and, if the vultures do not eat them, the rescued corpse is buried under a cross inscribed with the words *NN* (No Name).

LR: Does a person have to know about the recent history of Colombia in order to enter your work?

JME: I hope that my images and the metaphors that they contain are able to carry the viewer beyond Colombia. *Guerra y Pa* (War and Peace), for instance, can also be a metaphor for all conflicts and relationships among human beings as Hans Herzog, Chief Curator of Daros-Latin America, recently suggested.

LR: I once showed an exhibition *Drawings from the Terazine Concentration Camp* and one of the survivors came to the opening. He said, "It was as if the artists were saying, 'If I live I will tell. If I don't live, my work will tell.'" Art communicates across language. Art bears witness. Your children's books bear witness.

JME: Good point. Very good point. Memory is important. A responsibility. And let me add that Colombia has a thin layer of memory. Nations can also suffer from Alzheimer's.

LR: The singers are bearing witness. *La María* is bearing witness. I have always been drawn to your photograph of the starving white horse. You call it *El Testigo* (The Witness).

JME: The horse looks at us and his gaze is almost human.

LR: To me the starving white horse is Colombia itself. As it says in Revelations 6: 8, "Behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him."

JME: I feel the gaze of this pale horse seems to be asking: "Why are human beings so cruel to each other?"

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