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I want to live in America

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I want to live in America

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2010

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my mother, María Helena Ramírez and my father, Oscar Forero Villegas for supporting me all these years in which I have been pursuing a career as an artist. Without their moral and economic support for having a higher-level education, it would be almost impossible to tell this story.

May 2010

Abstract

I want to live in America

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

Supervisor: Mark Goodman

The following graduate report is the review of my artistic developments after three years of rigorous training in photography at The University of Texas at Austin. After a long period of not producing artwork, my entrance into graduate school at UT was the first step for beginning to take pictures and rethinking my objectives as an artist. I have to confess that when I was applying to graduate school I did not consider art as the profession I wanted develop in my life; instead, I applied to schools that had an strong focus in commercial photography.

As a Colombian, most of my concerns were more about how to make a living. In my hometown, the only way to be independent is through a professional job, rather than what in the United States is called blue-collar work, including waiting tables or services in general. When I realized again that I was immersed in an endless dialogue about art, I

had to reconsider my objectives to assume the idea of how I was going to combine my creative skills with a strong research in contemporary thinking about the visual image.

My three biggest challenges when entering graduate school were finding a subject to begin to photograph again, exploring the idea of being part of a new community considering my arrival from a different country, and developing strong technical photographic skills.

My relation to the United States in my artwork was the first thematic. Since I was a child and until my undergraduate research project, I always came to the United States as a spectator that experienced the country from the outside. My longest encounter as an observer was in 2004 when I came to do research on illegal immigrants for my undergraduate theses research. At that time, my approach to photography and art was mostly documentary where the visual result was based on video interviews and formal portraits of a minority I was interested in. I tried to find an explanation for the immense flow of people across the border between the United States and México.

Once I was already here, after three years, living in a different city, I realized that I still was interested in photographing people and decided to focus on American stereotypes. Probably one of the issues I began to face was that I discovered that I was not enjoying carrying my camera all the time and thinking as a photographer that documented daily life. My interest was more in using the camera for specific projects rather than documenting my surroundings. At that point, I realized that staging was going to be the main *modus operandi* for creating artwork. From there I began to think in different projects that were developed throughout the three years of the program.

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Stereotypes

My undergraduate education was different from what I experienced in Graduate School in the United States. I had a rigorous training in the visual arts focused on the moving image. However, I found reasonable gaps and differences between United States college level education and the one I had in Colombia.

As a student, I was encouraged to execute photos with the same ideal of contemporary artists. I remember one of my advanced photography classes in which the assignments throughout the semester were exercises in which we had to take pictures as if we were Ansel Adams, Cindy Sherman, Henri Cartier Bresson, Nan Goldin and a long list of artists discussed by the professor during class. At some point we were copying their style, but their influence would not let us find our own voice nor express our personal ideals. In some way we were restricted to re-interpret, re-compose and replicate their images. Somehow it was interesting, however when I arrived at UT I noticed that here art education is based upon a free laboratory of ideas in which students are more dedicated to creating rather than recreating.

Probably this was the first signal that encouraged me to rethink my interest in photography. From that point one of my objectives was to find my own voice in the genre of staged photography hoping to detach myself from what I had seen and reeducating my eyes to see again. My concern was directed to the idea of working with subjects and icons of what I consider indicative of my understanding of the American culture, taking into account my new context.

My first interest in staging was much more related to recreating and reinterpreting an idea with the recollection of images that had already been in my mind. I found it

interesting to show how something looks rather than reflect upon an historic event or a specific situation. Going back in art, I think that my influences in staged photography at some point came from contemporary art photographers. However, I also admit that painters such as Caravaggio and Velazquez also had a great influence on my work taking into consideration that for the execution of their paintings, there had to be a strong work on staging, attention to detail and craft.

I began to stage portraits using props found on the location to construct an image that provided social commentary through elements of actual popular culture. However, I realized that I was still influenced by contemporary artists working with staged photography. Most of my images had resembled the work of artists such as Jeff Wall, Philip Lorca diCorcia, Larry Sultan and others that had explored staged photography for years.

After photographing different people during the first year I started to be interested in stereotypes. I was attracted to the idea of stereotypes and how they promote immediate and generalized recognition. The process for recreating these stereotypes was based on outer appearance, described by clothes, poses, objects and spaces, what some groups of people consider as 'characteristic' or the definition of other social groups. Probably the idea of working with portraiture inspired me to create a whole essay that explored the stereotypes of American male culture.

I approached the idea of stereotypes by observing how they are made up of specific attributes on the physical surface that can be easily reproduced, due to the perception of the majority. Stereotypes are charged with prejudice and are based upon the prejudgment. Probably the immediacy of photography much more than any other visual medium attracted me in a way in which I could explore how our perception transforms

our certainty of what is true and what is not. I began to use visual elements to produce this kind of judgment in the viewer, and then substitute them to create confusion and make that prejudice more evident. The main procedure for developing prejudice was amplifying the visual attributes and making them over the top. The image is recognized immediately, but then the viewer will notice inconsistencies: I swap characteristics and left gaps to generate an ambiguous character that sometimes contradicts the initial assumptions.

The stereotypes led me to also explore gender, race, social class, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation and a list of personal characteristics that people usually do not choose; nevertheless they are always a target of the visual image, specially photography.

One of the first images that I created when entering the Graduate Program was *Worker* (Figure 1). Here I began to explore how through a combination of portraiture and staging, I could approach the idea of the stereotype. I chose to photograph one of my students while being a Teaching Assistant at the University. We had something in common; we were from Latin American countries, and we shared the same language. Therefore my approach to photograph him was more comfortable. Additionally, we shared the same race and, since I did my first research project I tried to address the relation between race and the contemporary image of the “American worker” that is also a stereotype. This stereotype has been changing moderately with the flow of illegal immigrants coming from México and southern countries. I realized that race contributes to the image of immediate recognition; still it prepares the viewer to make fast and often inaccurate assumptions.

For *Worker*, I began to operate as a filmmaker, controlling location, props, and lighting. Additionally, working with a view camera helped me to be more aware of what I was including inside the frame by taking into consideration that its slow setup leads you to pay more attention to details specifically when making decisions about what to include inside the frame.

One of my interests when creating this image was making reference to the photographer Alexander Rodchenko and his images of workers in factories. Probably my approach was related to how migration and the factories have been attached and developed as a phenomenon during the 20th century all around the world. Now, after being inside of a U.S. community for some years, I realize the same phenomena with illegal immigrants, which are the main work force of a country that has been dominated by English speaking individuals.

In *Worker*, I state how ethnicity could be related to occupation incorporating characteristics of context with the use of props, location and gesture. One of the most prevalent characteristics of the image is the red toolbox that positions the viewer for making an immediate assumption. However, the character himself lacks the typical worker attributes (clothes, hands, posture) generating a contradiction in the scene. I employ these attributes to make prejudice more evident when recognizing ethnicity and context.

Another exploration of the stereotype in my work is *Bodybuilder* (Figure 2). Here my attention was still drawn to the “American stereotype”, however I tried to go deeper beneath the surface. In *Bodybuilder*, I intend to question the relation between masculinity and age, making a portrait of a man who begins to lose his hair and other virile attributes of the real man. These are characteristics that everybody loses as middle age

approaches. Instead of trying to portray this stereotype by showing the common fast expensive car and younger woman, I was more interested in the feeling or emotion of regaining control of one's masculinity; which is really at the heart of the stereotype. It's what men are afraid is gone when they have a wife, the shiny luxury car that changes to be transformed into a station wagon, the mortgage and 2.5 kids. In this image I was more interested in reflecting upon the emotional aspects of losing the "male" part of being a man even if it is a stereotype than in how its surface appearance can evoke different impressions.

Portraiture was my first approach to a thematic that helped me to reflect on how society always has a tendency to judge one's neighbor. Probably staged photography was the initial path to project images of immediate recognition that had fell in the flow of what is considered a stereotype. Still I was recreating images that resembled contemporary photographer's work. I tried to detach from those influences to move toward research that brought new ways of analysis to the images I was creating. My next step was beginning to work more with the context and the environment I was living in.

I want to live in America

Like many world citizens, I grew up watching Hollywood movies and internalized the United States culture as portrayed through its spectacular staging. The next step in my research was making a social commentary incorporating concepts of gender, race and class (those portrayed in stereotypes) by exploiting clichés found in theatrical amusements and the Hollywood cinema. I wanted to make use of clichés by integrating details and imagery from these films, reproducing them myself through my own, recollected perceptions.

The *I want to live in America* series probably is the continuation of the research project I did at the end of my undergraduate program in which I explored the illegal immigration phenomenon at the border. In that research, I could state that most of the illegal immigrants from Mexico and Central American countries crossing the border, were attracted by the mediated images that were produced here in the United States, and transmitted to their countries. After watching most of the interviews, I could deduce that everyone had an idealized image of the U.S. Not only as a physical image but also as a transformed story that was told by their friends and relatives who had already crossed the border and had been living here for a while. I was interested in how that distorted reflection might be transformed into a provocative idea to pursue even if it was not real. My first intention was working with the idealized image, however, I wanted to alter it by amplifying every aspect of it.

With staged photography, that is, photography that is not founded on capturing a snapshot of real life, but that is orchestrated under controlled conditions, with art direction, as well as careful attention to detail, I tried to generate contradiction and

uncertainty in most of the images. The process of executing this project began by staging situations that are not so obvious and in which sometimes I do not know what is going to happen. I wanted to work with images that froze an action and left an action moment on hold. After working with portraiture, my curiosity was directed to the idea of recreating moments that probably I had recollected in my mind from movies and TV shows but that were not the before nor the after, just a space of time in which something is going to happen; however, in some cases it never takes place. I recreated characters as main actors in a movie to suggest the presence of an unfolding story authored by the photographer. I also intended to leave gaps through color, lighting and staging in each of my photographs that blurred boundaries between reality and fiction making reference to that distorted reality that most of the never-ending entertainment produces.

With the creation of *Shooter* (Figure 3) I planned to reflect upon ideas of the visual comprehension of opposite cultures. As a foreigner I have always been amazed at how my country projects an image of immediate recognition to the exterior (Cocaine, violence, etc.). In some ways it is real and, at the same time, another countries' media distorts it. My country has the stereotype of violence, drug trafficking and poverty. That is how most other countries perceive Colombia; especially the United States. The first visual impression of an American about a Colombian is the image of cocaine. Even when traveling, the U.S. government predisposes Americans to travel to Colombia with a long list of warnings. All the time when I see an American in my city I approach him and tell him in a very kind way: "Hi, how are you! Why are you here?" My question is more "why are you here?" demonstrating my amusement at his braveness in coming to a place where you are supposed to be kidnapped or shot to dead as soon as you get off the airplane.

With all these questions in my mind I decided to create *Shooter*, an image that expressed my interest in what could be the opposite, a distorted vision of a foreigner coming to study in the United States. As Americans received all the news about violence in Colombia, the rest of the globe also received news about the violent happenings that occurred inside the U.S. Massacres like Columbine, Virginia Tech and the most close to my new context at The University of Texas at Austin, executed by Charles Whitman in 1966.

As a related anecdote, when I was accepted to UT my father told me; “Did you know that one of the first student massacres that happened in the U.S. occurred from the roof of a tower of the University you are going to attend?” He said it with an ironic tone and he laughed at the end (not because he was making fun of the massacre; he was making fun of that relation of a predisposed perception about a foreign country). His thoughts were more about “you did not get killed in what is supposed to be one of the most dangerous countries of the world, however, you can get killed in what is supposed to be the safest one. That is ironic”

Shooter is a completely fictitious image that stages the idea of the stereotype of the American psychopath. With all the images I had in my mind of TV news, documentaries and movies I intended to create an image of how a shooter would look, without doing any kind of research, neither trying to recreate the actual event. My interest was more how our beliefs are molded by the flow of media images. Additionally, I wanted to execute it as ironic and as contradictory as possible; presenting what could be a real event, nevertheless, leaving gaps, saturating the color and amplifying every kind of detail inside the frame. I found color a fascinating tool that I had never used before; or, at least I was not aware I could push into new boundaries. I explore color to the point where

I suggest the formal characteristics of cartoons and comics, making it more artificial and ambiguous, twisting the initial idea of what each image is if this characteristic were not present.

In *Housewife* (Figure 4) I was still interested in the American stereotype. At some point, I intended to portray the role of the American woman taking into consideration the context of the suburban life. This style of life was new to me as an experience, however, it was something I already knew visually through the media. I tried to approach the clichéd role of the American women in society, recreating the stereotype in an amplified way using the same visual strategies that I employed in *Shooter*. The idea of the housewife running from the suburb was still related to the Bodybuilder piece, where the man begins to lose his virility with the American way of life. At some point I wanted to reflect upon the idea of how women begin to lose their freedom within the popular American Dream, and how I could exaggerate and amplify that the stereotype, making it contradictory (of what the real stereotype is supposed to project when the image is transmitted to countries to the south of the United States) and lead the viewer to rethink what is happening to the main character.

For the *I want to live in America* series, I worked with the language of cinema to question assumptions by generating tension and uncertainty, reflecting ideas related to self-struggle of the characters I photograph in their own stereotypical role in society.

However, this understanding of U.S. culture is mediated by stereotyped images that are as fictitious as, for example, the image of what the U.S. media has defined as a terrorist. In *Trade* (Figure 5) I recreated the stereotypical image of the terrorist that has circulated in movies and TV shows as the enemy of the nation. Most of the characteristics of the subject are exaggerated clichés and visual associations that we have seen for years.

The image is recognized immediately, but then the viewer will notice inconsistencies: I swap characteristics and leave gaps to generate an ambiguous character that sometimes contradicts the initial assumption.

Nevertheless I was more interested in other real issues beneath the surface of the image that can affect a nation's security like the free trade agreement treaties and other foreign policies of the U.S. government that usually are seen as an economic threat in third world countries. My intention is, on the one hand, to illustrate the way in which these images shape people's notions about other cultures, race, gender, and social issues. On the other hand, I seek to amplify their characteristics to a point where the image becomes more artificial and ambiguous: where reality and fiction merge.

Another significant image in *I want to live in America* and the one that contributed to the title of this series is *Broadway* (Figure 6). After approaching the idea of cinema and the moving image as a medium of contemporary entertainment, I was interested in addressing theater as a strong form of spectacle that has amused American culture since the 18th century, specifically in New York. With the arrival of burlesque shows from Great Britain, the genre of the musical began to develop in what is today the theater district, adapting prevalent English burlesques to the New York middle class. Those were the beginnings of what today the world knows as Broadway. Signe Hoffos and Bob Moulder affirm when they refer to this kind of spectacle:

The eccentricities of pantomime and burlesque – with their curious combination of comedy, parody, satire, improvisation, song and dance, variety acts, cross-dressing, extravagant stage effects, risqué jokes and saucy costumes – while familiar enough to British audiences, took New York by storm.¹

¹ Hoffos, Signe and Moulder, Bob. "Desperately Seeking Lydia" and "Appreciating Lydia", *The Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery Magazine*, Vol. 43, Autumn 2006, pp. 1–7

In *Broadway*, I try to recreate the idea of a Broadway Musical addressing gender, racial, migration and other social issues that have been transforming the U.S. during the past decades. The whole picture was planned as the representation of a moment in a musical that does not exist and never will because usually these issues are not attached to what we know as entertainment. I executed a ridiculously charged image of what popular media like advertising does not usually approach, taking into account the strong and violent historic events that had happened with racism and segregation. I have always been interested in contradiction as a strategy for developing my staged photographs. In this image I portray the phenomenon of gang culture, taking into consideration a conflict between two diverse social groups. In this image I intend to swap the idea of racism when confronted with an aggressive gesture, addressing the phenomenon of social rejection, something that has threatened two different types of ethnicities.

Broadway is a picture based upon contradiction, still exploring the idea of prejudice and making it more evident by utilizing different kinds of media strategies and the formulas of *Mise-en-scène* from the popular French theater. With the combination of parody, improvisation, staged choreography and contemporary costumes I hoped to question and distort the imaginary of historic events; nevertheless I am not interested in researching deeply the thematic, but more the different associations that can emerge with that visual representation. At the end, I think the associations with the different elements can produce a deeper reaction in the viewer and an image that is not as easy to digest like documentary photography could generate in the viewer.

Something comparable happens in Hollywood (Figure 7) where I recreate the idea of what could be contemporary Hollywood life. I found relevant the racial evolution that

has developed in the selection of actors in Hollywood, staging a scene that disagrees with the assumption of what is considered a main character of a Hollywood movie. Usually most of the main characters in movies that have an specific different ethnicity from the usual stereotype that represent the rich and famous and the ones that have been used for representing the “blue collar” and low class stereotypes. While still addressing issues of ethnicity, I leave the protagonist role to what in the image appears to be a maid. However, the other characters that are supposed to be picturing what is considered high and educated class are represented by ethnicities that throughout history have been segregated from those roles.

The I want to live in America series makes a direct reference to American entertainment specifically thinking of the popular West Side Story where chorus of the musical depicts the ideal of the American Dream:

“I like to be in America!

O.K. by me in America!

Everything free in America

For a small fee in America!”

“...Automobile in America,

Chromium steel in America,

Wire-spoke wheel in America,

Very big deal in America!”

“...Immigrant goes to America,

Many hellos in America;

Nobody knows in America

Puerto Rico's in America!"

"...I like the shores of America!

Comfort is yours in America!

Knobs on the doors in America,

Wall-to-wall

floors in America!"

This whole series of photographs are fictional and a visual exploration of the persistent ideal known as the American Dream. Even if most of them are an invention, these cryptic images are my visual response to what U.S. media has flooded the world with during the past five decades. My intention is not a criticism of what has happened with historic affairs. It is much more a way of reflecting upon the strength of the uncontrollable flow of staged images that are in society. Additionally, how uncomfortable an image can feel when reflecting on the idea of staging. I think that this series is addressing the idea of the staging of the staging to make much more evident the effect of the elaborate imagery that has been produced throughout the years and that generates a superficial image of a real context. As an artist, I work with these images to reflect upon how society molds its beliefs and ideas about itself and about different cultures. My research specifically in I want to live in America series is directed at exploring how this phenomenon generates superficial judgments about cultures and societal typecasting.

Action Heroes

After having a conversation with professor Teresa Hubbard about how stereotypes work as immediately recognizable images and also how they have been used deliberately in advertising and other types of media, we began to discuss the position of the photographer. Her argument was directed to the idea that placing a mirror in front of everyone situates you in a safe and comfortable position. A question emerged from that discussion: “What happens if that mirror turns around?”

From that point I began to explore and project my own image through self-portraiture. After looking at different type of stereotypes I realized that my own image has been a stereotype for years. I began to be interested in researching my own stereotype, questioning how it has been used and abused throughout history. My first reference would be to the 16th century with Velazquez. He portrayed different dwarfs in Spain that usually entertained the monarchy. When you observe artworks like *The Dwarf Sebastian de Mora*, an oil on canvas executed by Velazquez in 1645, most of the characteristics of his clothes and his expression portray his specific role in society as a buffoon.

Relating the amusement that I found in American entertainment in Hollywood and Broadway I wanted to addresses those issues of identity and masculinity (that I found in daily stereotypes) by portraying myself in roles in which individuals with my physical characteristics have never been considered. *Action Heroes* was the next series that followed where my main interest was staging iconic heroes exploited in media, specifically movies. Using the same kind of language and strategies I began to project my own image, a body type considered outside the average, to question not only what is

considered normal but also the prevalent visual imagery representing idealized masculine, heroic characters in fiction and daily life.

As a reference for addressing this kind of issue I want to quote actor Peter Dinklage as one of his characters (*Tito*) in the movie *Living in Oblivion* (Tom DiCillo, 1995). He portrays a movie actor that usually is called to set for performing characters related to dwarfs, considering his physical characteristics. It is a really interesting scene in which he participates in the production of a movie where a dwarf has to appear as a vision, and his clothes and the set are designed to suggest an actual dream. His character has to rehearse the scene various times, and he gets upset until the director says:

Director:

“Look, Tito, it's not that big of a deal.

It's a dream.

Strange things happen in a dream.

All I want you to do is laugh.

Why is that such a problem for you?

Tito: Why does it have to be a dwarf?

Director: What?

Tito: Why does my character have to be a dwarf?

Director: It doesn't have to be a dwarf.

Tito: Then why is he?

Is that the only way you can make this a dream?

Put a dwarf in it?

Director: No, Tito, I...

Tito: Have you ever had a dream with a dwarf in it?

Do you know anyone who's had a dream with a dwarf in it? No!

I don't even have dreams with dwarves in them.

The only place I've seen dwarves in dreams

is in stupid movies like this!

Oh, make it weird.

Put a dwarf in it.

Everyone will go,

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!

It must be a fuckin' dream!

There's a fuckin' dwarf in it!"

Well, I'm sick of it!

You can take this dream sequence and shove it up your ass!"²

Starting this statement I began to work on a series of photographic images that depicted characters that represent the common and popular ideal of a “real man” where aggression, strength, power and the ability to fight and win are the main staged themes. Still, I was interested in the contradictions within the visual image and how they can suggest a different idea by swapping the characteristics in the execution of the staging.

² Living in Oblivion. Dir. Tom DiCillo. Perfs. Steve Buscemi, Peter Dinklage. JDI Productions, 1996.

In *Russian Nuclear Plant* (Figure 8) I recreated the typical cliché of the American spy that is entering an industrial facility to steal information or something valuable. By including some characteristics in the costume that generated associations with real action films I gave birth to a character who is not a stereotype, nevertheless, it evokes the idea of the action hero. Additionally, I attempted to make relations between my physical characteristics and the world that surrounds me. I selected a location that had a short fence in the background. By positioning myself in front of the fence and the camera in a low level I tried to juxtapose my size with the one of the fence. With this strategy, I tried to generate the visual illusion of what could be an average person in a “commando” suit, using the projection of my own body that is excluded from the standards.

My interest in the idea of the surface of the visual image was still present when trying to produce images that at the first sight were immediately recognizable, however, when the viewer gets closer, the idea changes after noticing some characteristics that are subtly “off”. For *Action Heroes* I was interested in photographic tricks and visual illusions without the help from a computer, however I worked with the objects that I had on location and with the position of the camera. In this case of *Russian Nuclear Plant*, positioning myself in front of a short fence to align the height of the fence with the height of my body probably created the illusion that my body was as tall as a fence. Nevertheless, when the viewer gets closer, realizes that change, and the initial pre-judgment of the image is evident as seen in the Stereotypes series.

Another picture that is part of this series and that addresses issues of identity and visual relations is *Illegal Immigrant* (Figure 9). This self-portrait was based on my idea of the stereotype of the blue-collar worker that is building the contemporary U.S. I was interested in rendering this idea of the flow of immigrants from Central America that

masquerade as construction workers as soon as they cross the border. As a reference I wanted to keep analyzing the image of the national hero, in this case, the construction worker that has been portrayed in some Hollywood movies as the “tough man”. However, the visual representation of this kind of hero has been changing during time with the large influx of Hispanic immigrants to a point that nowadays Hispanics represent a big percentage of the U.S. workforce.

In *Illegal Immigrant* I staged a self-portrait of what can be considered the contemporary American construction worker. When I arrived in Texas, I experienced various awkward situations where I talked in Spanish to individuals with my same ethnicity, however they did not respond or felt insulted because if they were second or third generation usually they do not preserve the language. Living in Texas made me realize how we define what we see in ethnicity relating it to language and how hybrid has been evolving. I wanted to depict those hybrid relations by positioning myself as those individuals that can be pre-judged as a community in specific. Additionally I was interested in using the objects around to question and generate size relations. Most of the relationships in size are based around my body making the viewer think which is the correct size or how does my body relate to all the objects that surround me, specifically for executing that kind of labor. At some point I was interested in the visual effect of positioning daily seen objects in my surroundings, leaving a space for questioning what is right and what is considered average size. Even a small detail like the small thermos positioned at the lower right of the image can suggest the contradiction in size compared to the rest of the objects.

The idea of self-portraiture in the *Action Heroes* series was an interesting way of approaching my photographic work. This process began long time ago in a different

exercise that I was executing with my camera. I was documenting the parties I went to, photographing my friends in nightclubs; however, in most of the photos my image appeared because most of the times I gave the camera to a friend so I could appear in the images. At the end of each party I downloaded the photos and found myself in a lot of the shots. I used to publish those photos in a photographic blog (Flickr) to share the moments with some friends. One day one of my friends wrote me:

I forgot to tell you something really important that I have been thinking about some days ago. Since I began to watch your photos: I feel that you have totally reinvented yourself with your images and with those (the ones that you appear in) you have created an extremely cool person, very comfortable with himself.

From her message the most important extract is the idea of feeling comfortable with myself. I think that the action of making a self-portrait makes you aware of the camera but much more makes you aware of yourself, of how you look and the image that you project. I was always wondering what image did I project to the people around me. I always saw curious looks in those people, from close or far away but I never experienced my own image except in the mirror. That idea of turning that mirror to myself with the use of a camera made me realize the curiosity of the human eye in relation to the image of immediate recognition. From that point I decided to execute a final photographic project that reunited all those questions about the projection of my own image in relation to the viewer as a hungry individual for pleasure and entertainment; *The Olympic games*.

The Olympic Games

The Olympic Games are a series of self-portraits that explore the classical idea of virility (from the Greek) or what it means to be a man. The term virility it is defined in Wikipedia as:

Virility refers to any of a wide range of masculine characteristics viewed positively. It is not applicable to women or to negative characteristics. Virility is commonly associated with vigor, health, sturdiness, and constitution, especially in the fathering of children. In this last sense, virility is to men as fertility is to women.³

Taking into consideration that virility is defined by vigor and force, the series I worked on is a representation of thirteen actual Olympic sports. *The Olympic Games* is a long-term project that I developed for months to reinforce my questionings on the misuse and exploitation of my own figure, working with the projection of my body and forcing it to adjust to the body of what is considered an Olympian athlete.

The initial idea of the project was questioning the idea of virility in juxtaposition with my own body. I was interested in the contradiction of the definition of manhood especially with two different aspects; how a man has been proclaimed the protector of the woman due to his physical characteristics (Figure 10) and at the same time how that idea goes beyond the fathering of what is considered healthy children. I probably compare the attribute of how women are related to fertility with expectations of men to continue a legacy of strength and vitality to their heirs. Having a short stature is considered a medical condition, however the definition turns more complicated because the characteristic is not a disease.

³ "Virility" Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 2 Feb. 2010.

In visual terms, my approach to the self-portraits was focused on the symmetry and balanced equilibrium that the Olympic athletes project. However, when adjusting my body to that kind of image there is an error, a mistake or an unbalanced quality that gets between what is considered normal and what is judged as unusual. In *Boxing* (Figure 10) I decided to portray an Olympian boxer, ready to fight and to confront his adversary, duplicating most of the common characteristics of a real boxer. Nevertheless my own stereotype does not match the traditional visual representation of the real boxer and makes the image ambiguous.

The project began in November of 2009 when I decided to work in collaboration with an MFA Student in Theatrical Design to sketch and build my own version of The Olympic games uniforms; custom made that fit perfectly the characteristics of my own body. Taking into account that virility is related to muscle, health and fitness, I began an extreme diet to modify my physical characteristics, lowering my weight and changing slightly my appearance. In most of the images and their executions I reveal my limitations in performing some of the Olympic sports, however when combining a fit body with custom made clothes I explore the idea of uncertainty with the projection of my figure, that leads to blur that boundary that excludes me from what is considered a standard body size.

In *Shooting* (Figure 11) I explore that idea of blurring the boundary of the human average size by making a self-portrait from my back in which I eliminated my identity. The custom made clothes make my body look thinner specially where the end of the jacket blends with the top of the pants on the waist level, and makes my whole body look proportional. At first sight the image could be mistaken for that of a regular athlete

however it still does not look clear and leaves the viewer in doubt. The position of authority changes drastically from the work I have done in the past, where the authority was coming from behind the camera. In *The Olympic Games* the viewer has to determine some aspects by himself, in this case by identifying my scale with such ambiguous delimitations.

In *Equestrian* (Figure 12) I also work with the idea of distorting the notion of scale by executing a self-portrait as a Jockey. Most of the Jockeys have the reputation for being short. This is a characteristic that goes along with weight, considering that with less mass over the horse they will take advantage of its strength to win the race. However, Jockeys are not my kind of short; they are proportionally small without a medical condition. In the image the viewer can stay on that boundary of the average size emphasized by the level of the camera and specifically with the characteristics of the clothes that perfectly match my body. Still, the picture can be perceived as a study of the human body, regarding my lack of confrontation with the viewer.

During my 60-hour orals presentation there were interesting questionings about *The Olympic Games* project. Professor Teresa Hubbard acknowledged a fragment of an interview done with Diane Arbus in which she spoke about her subject matter. In a text written by Daniel Oppenheimer, Arbus affirmed:

Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot," she wrote. "It was one of the first things I photographed and it had a terrific kind of excitement for me. I just used to adore them. I still do adore some of them. I don't quite mean they're my best friends but they made me feel a mixture of shame and awe. There's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats.⁴

⁴ Oppenheimer, Daniel. "Diane Arbus". Jewish Virtual Library. 2010

When I remember Diane Arbus' photographs of what are considered “freaks” in relation to my self-portraits, it makes me think in how different her perspective is. My initial intention of working with my own figure came from the stereotyped image that has been projected throughout history. Initially I did not want to fall in an explicit moralization of what is right and what is wrong about that opinion. Even Arbus' curiosity about the “freak show” transformed those images into something much more powerful than what the media presents.

However, in *The Olympic Games* I was more interested in a way of creating my own “museum of living attractions.” A show in which I was the director and the performer, a place where I could control that curiosity of the human eye and feel comfortable at the same time. And in some way a place in which I could project an image that was different from the popular stereotype. In my 60-hour orals presentation Professor Ann Reynolds brought up the question: how would viewers outside UT react to my images. However in a gallery space the relation would change significantly. That questioning made me realize at some point that the images could be seen as the result of a photographer that takes advantage of an individual with a specific physical condition. Nevertheless in a conversation with Professor Jack Stoney the idea changed when rethinking on how the images of *The Olympic Games* expressed a strong relationship between the photographer and the subject, someone that photographs the subject with care. My “museum of living attractions” would be more about the perception of the human body rather than the literal physicality. At the end my objective was replacing the populist tactics used by media representation for a deeper dialogue about personal concerns in creating these pictures, their relation to mass circulation and the history of photography.

FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4



FIGURE 5



FIGURE 6



FIGURE 7



FIGURE 8



FIGURE 9



FIGURE 10



FIGURE 11



FIGURE 12



References

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Vita

Santiago Forero Ramírez was born and raised in Bogotá, Colombia in 1979, the son of Oscar Forero Villegas and María Helena Ramírez. After graduating from Los Nogales School in Bogotá he studied Visual Arts at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and received his B.F.A. in 2005. In 2007, he began the M.F.A. program in Studio art with a concentration in Photography at the University of Texas at Austin.

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