

Looking for the visible and representing the invisible

Camilo Rojas was born in Caracas, Venezuela, where he began his career at an early age. He studied sculpture, graphic design, and engraving at the School of Visual Arts Christopher Rojas. Rojas began to show his work in 1971 and began teaching printmaking at the School of Visual Arts in Julio Arraga in 1973. His work has been selected and exhibited in several museums in Venezuela. In 1982 he moved with his wife to New York and got a BFA in film and animation and an MFA in photography at Pratt Institute. His work has been selected to represent Venezuela in San Juan XI Biennial of Engraving in Latin America and the Caribbean (San Juan XI Biennial of Engraving in Latin America and the Caribbean), San Juan Puerto Rico.

In 1985, his photographs were awarded the third prize at the VII European Salon of Photography in Pla D'Accio Cultural Reus Spain. In 1988, he directed and edited the interaction of color video discs of Joseph Albers exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and Berlin.

After teaching at the Pratt Institute and the School of Visual Arts for several years in 1991, Camilo Rojas became chair of the Program of Communications and Media Arts at Dutchess Community College, part of the system of the University State of New York, Poughkeepsie. He implemented an innovative program that includes television program "Learning in Progress." In 2007, he was awarded the prestigious Fulbright to conduct a series of seminars for teachers of the University of Zulia, in Venezuela. In 2009, he was awarded the Chancellor Awards for Excellence in Education in New York State. In 2015-2016, he was awarded his second Fulbright to investigate the impact of artists from Colombia in Latin American art. Camilo has continued to exhibit his work, drawing, photography, video, and installations nationally and internationally and has his studio on the outskirts of the city of New York.

1. When and where did you start your career in the plastic arts?

My parents without any formal education, my mother learned to read and write for her sister who studied until the second grade, my father studied until the third grade, supported me in my curiosity for the art. They always motivated me to draw and paint until I told them I wanted to be an artist. In their concern of how I could survive, I was given three options one to be a doctor because people get sick, two to be a lawyer since many people get into trouble, or be a priest since everyone wants to go to heaven and that way I would not starve as an artist. In an act of rebellion I registered at a very early age at the "Cristóbal Rojas" school of visual arts in Caracas, Venezuela where I studied drawing, engraving, graphic design and sculpture. Upon graduation I formed several art groups with aesthetic / political propositions. At the beginning, pre-Columbian art was a source of influence in my creative work. I began to develop an environmental sculptural work where the spectator was invited to enter the sculptures where films were projected inside the pieces. In that way I began to experiment with the moving image. In the seventies, I adopted photography as a form of expression. I have always been attracted to the movement of the image and its opposite form (photography) to freeze a moment in time. Reality and its representation became the center of my aesthetic research. The real, the perception of the real and its interpretation have become the axis of my work. The work tries to capture what we think we see and provoke in the spectator a reaction that compromises their perception of the subject they had not considered. At the beginning of the 80's, we emigrated to New York with my wife the plastic artist Virginia Lavado and two children. I studied a degree in film and animation and a master's degree in photography at Pratt Institute.

2. Do your Venezuelan roots influence your work of art?

Our Latin American culture and the Castilian language define my work. As I perceive reality and how I express it many times it is said that my way of expressing it is surreal, which is a preconception far from the center of the

idea. This situation adds an unreal tone to my creative work. Diversity opens ways of thinking defined by the universality of our education, the fact of being a mixture of indigenous, African and European cultures allows us to have a vision of the world perhaps inclusive. The Caribbean culture marks my work, the black humor defines my aesthetic interest in the representation of a reality. I have always wondered what reality is, can represent it, or it is only what we want to perceive.

3. Tell me about your work and the means you use.

My work ranges from drawing on paper and pencil, photography, video or an installation therefore the technique does not limit my way of expressing the idea. I work regularly on an idea that develops in series, for example, the theme of adopting other cultures that are defined as foreign to your own experience are represented through a series of photographs of twins in spaces that contrast their appearance. The process is a bit intuitive which takes time to find the core of the idea, to do and remake is part of the search to provoke in the viewer a reaction not necessarily happy. My inquiry is to incite an act of rebellion in the forms of art, a mischievous smile of complicity in the act of seeing. I am not interested in a response of complacency and satisfaction.

4. Are you a teacher at SUNY Dutchess, how do you coordinate your time between teaching and your art?

I consider teaching as a primordial form of the creative process, you have in front of you an audience willing to explore your aesthetic proposals and return with results that you had never imagined. The process of discussing aesthetic, political, social, and technical ideas with the new generations allows me to define my work when I go to the studio. I spend my time in the studio where I experiment with ideas and techniques that allow me to keep the teaching process fresh and creative. A symbiosis is created where teaching and creation is part of the creative process.

5. What projects do you have in the near future?

At this moment I am developing a series of photographs of what we consider to be neighbors. Also, I'm working on editing videos about Colombian artists and their influence on the political process in Colombia. These interviews were conducted during my stay in Colombia with a Fulbright scholar. The series is about the exploration of the Colombian reality in an environment of sociopolitical hostility and its impact on Colombian art.

Photographer: Camilo Rojas

Elisa Pritzker is a visual artist and an independent curator. Her column "La Esquina de las Artes" [The Corner of the Arts] is actually published in La Voz-Bard College and ABCLatino Bilingual Magazine | For inquires, questions and/or comments visit her webpage at www.elisapritzker.com