Cambio 16, May 24, 2024, Juan Emilio Ballesteros

The work of Dagoberto Rodriguez, a Cuban conceptual artist who has gained international recognition in exile, delves into ways of conceiving existence, incessantly searching for a space to live in while wondering what he can do there. As a refugee, it is very difficult for him to look away and ignore the political context he comes from, but his artistic vision goes far beyond the borders of freedom: it is not so much about looking for a better future as about not being able to return to a present in crisis. Cubans, he argues, have been deprived of everything in this life, except art. However, he is aware that art will go where the man who produces it goes.

Art is not so much a tool for social change as a means of transmitting transformative ideas. More than delving into the facts, it is necessary to aesthetically interpret the experience of those facts. Reality is stubborn, but the creative spirit is capable of taming it to educate and raise awareness in society. Like journalism, art educates, informs and entertains. Cuban conceptual artist Dagoberto Rodriguez was forced to escape from an elusive reality, dictated by a totalitarian system, and tell his experience by resorting to space, color and time, the three Proustian vectors that led him to the search for lost time and that were sublimated in the recovered life.

In his eagerness to conquer new spaces, he neither renounces the values of the past nor ventures a future that is no longer as it was: his work makes permanent everything that coexists in an instant. The work is a matter of hours, sweat and effort, but inspiration is a sparkle that shines brightly, although it is soon extinguished. He does not approach reality from the crudeness because, as he says, it would be something pornographic. He is interested in man, but he is more interested in the shadow that man casts on the wall. His concerns are philosophical and narrative because, at the end of the day, it is about “furnishing our existence”.

Dagoberto Rodriguez was born in Caibarien, Las Villas, in 1969, and graduated from the Higher Institute of Art in Havana in 1994. In 1992 he co-founded the Los Carpinteros collective and during the 1990s his success as an artistic collective was consolidated. In 2009, he performed in Madrid and achieved international recognition. He arrived accompanied by Laura Lis, visual artist, sculptor and jewelry designer.

“In a general sense, my work starts from an interest in the living space necessary for living, it is the same interest that a designer or an architect may have, the difference is functionality, I as an artist, I don't have to make it work, my concerns are philosophical, existential, narrative, etc., but we start from a common interest, to furnish our existence.”

Both had intended to return, but settled permanently in Madrid, where he develops his solo career and she has expanded her creative spectrum to digital art and NFT. Dagoberto Rodriguez's works have been exhibited in museums and cultural institutions around the world such as the MoMA, Whitney Museum of American Art or Guggenheim in New York; the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris; the Tate Modern in London; the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Atchugarry (MACA) in Uruguay, among others. He currently lives and works between Madrid and Havana. His work combines architecture, design and sculpture and uses humor and irony to reflect on fundamental issues related to art, politics and society.

Through architecture, design and sculpture you delve into the field of culture, politics and society. Is art a tool for social transformation?

I think that art cannot transform reality, but it can transmit transforming ideas. I believe in art as an educational tool, as a transforming testimony. In Cuba, after 65 years of deterioration as a country and as a society, our culture miraculously remains alive more than ever. Art does not transform, but it sustains part of our identity. This heterogeneity is visible in our cinema, literature, theater, etc., in a tremendous effort inside and outside the island. Cubans have been deprived of everything in this life, except art.

He conceives art as the narrative of our existence. It's not a narrative of historians or journalists, but of artists. What's the difference?

The difference is that historians speak from the facts, we artists speak from the experience of the facts, our narrative puts in value those facts, for example, when you read the history of the Battle of Gettysburg, you probably get an

idea of what happened, but you really understand what happened when you see the photos that Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan took of this event.

Art and politics are intertwined: should artistic creation not be understood as a cultural industry, a luxury, but as a political and social commitment?

Art, among many other things, has a mission to translate our existence into symbols, metaphors, light and color. For an artist, coming from Cuba where politics is everything, it is very difficult to make art that is not political, even our oblivions are political, for better or for worse. The exhibition BABEL, which was presented at the Hilario Galguera gallery in Madrid from January 19 to February 22, illustrates this interview.

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ. The Cuban artist based in Madrid poses for photographer Mayra Carreño at the Hilario Galguera gallery during the BABEL exhibition.
Between the “there is, but it doesn't touch you” of a totalitarian society, as happens in Cuba, and the “you can” of neoliberal societies, of course I choose the latter, but the “you can” produces coercion that neoliberal society sells you as “freedom” when in reality it is nothing more than self-exploitation.

Picasso used to say: “When inspiration comes, may it find me working”. Do you believe in inspiration?

I completely agree with this idea about the creative process: you have to go every day to the workshop and make some progress, you have to want to do it. Hemingway did about fifteen words a day, he got up very early and wrote standing up, in front of the typewriter. Making a novel is a slow and laborious process, making a painting too, many people think it all starts when you stand at the canvas and paint, but, in my case, that is the last part of the process, the creative part happens in the early hours of the morning or reading something.

Humor and irony are present in his work. However, the world you describe is hostile and violent to the point that struggle is the engine of life. Do you deform reality so that its contradictions become evident?

I don't like to capture reality in all its crudeness because I don't have a “pornographic” interest in reality. My mission is to translate it and tell it in another way. I'm interested in the man, but I'm more interested in the shadow that man casts on the wall.

What did the irruption of the Los Carpinteros collective, with which you collaborated for three decades until its dissolution in 2018, mean for the Cuban artistic avant-garde and popular culture?

Los Carpinteros were among the most important artists of our generation. Our way of interacting with reality and our narrative strategies are still alive in our individual ways. There is nothing that I do that I didn't outline before during the Los Carpinteros stage.

What characterizes this stage in your artistic trajectory?

I want to complete what I started when I worked as a collective. I want to deepen the ideas I defended in the past because they are still valid in the present.

Are trends and fashion pure marketing or do they embody artistic movements and currents of thought?

I don't believe much in trends, but it is important to note the irruption of digital art into the art scene globally. In recent years, our interaction with the machine is conditioned in almost every aspect of our lives, from our food to the way we see the landscape through electronic devices. That is our reality today.

In BABEL you revisit the biblical myth and update it with artificial intelligence. Do these myths raise the same questions that man has been asking since the dawn of history?

Undoubtedly. We are still the same beings eager for fiction, trying to find our place under the sun.

Do we need to rethink our cities and the way we live in them? What does artistic creation contribute to this debate?

Absolutely. Artistic creation brings transparency and functionality to structures. I have been following with great curiosity for some time the project of The Line in the Saudi desert. A city in the form of a straight line is a project

that cannot only have come from the mind of an engineer. Here the idea of mimicry with the environment is clear, the renovating idea of not visually altering that environment, of visually protecting it. In that aspect, the project gravitates more towards what sculpture can be.

Do the new technologies, the NFTs, to cite just one example, condition the plastic and aesthetic function of art?

Yes. Our relationship with the machine is starting to become visible now (although we've had decades of digital art). The idea of sending a sculpture by Whatsapp is as if it were part of a neural network of the same brain (the idea that we are in the image and likeness of God).

Liquid life, according to Bauman, reflects an uncertain and changing reality, devoid of values and references. Does the current cultural and artistic industry contribute in any way to intellectual inanity and lack of critical spirit?

In many ways, we live in a time of too much “spoiledness”, too few things to do, apps do it all. I come from a much more analogical world, which I somehow defend in my art. Although some of my work is nourished by digital, the staging is analog.

People who do not know their history are condemned to constantly repeat the same mistakes. In Retropía you warn about the risk of the seduction of consumerism, fashions and ideological extremism. Faced with a disturbing future, why does he warn us about the consequences of the nostalgic exaltation of the past?

That phrase is Marx's, and it is very true, I am sure that if many current leaders read history, there would be less conflicts, I prefer human error to the error of the algorithm. My last exposition is about that, about how we imagined the future decades ago and how it has been in reality.

The metaphor of Havana as a refugee camp activates a bitter criticism by Rodriguez of the extreme situation in his country of origin, but also of the indifference of certain sectors and interests in the face of the humanitarian crisis there. It is the state of exception turned into a rule.
The transition towards sustainability in the face of the ravages of the Anthropocene advocates that no one should be left behind. However, the imbalance and social injustice are evident. Does the gap between rich societies and underdevelopment widen as an inherited utopia or a permanent dystopia?

The gap between rich and poor societies is a kind of permanent dystopia, even if there are countries that have managed to reduce the gap considerably.

You recreate dystopian landscapes of futuristic architectures supported on Lego pieces and impossible bridges. Does that utopian architecture reflect the fragility of today's world?

Yes, that's the idea; a fragile and mutant, modular reality.

Geopolitical conflicts, the climate crisis, or simply the longing for a better life, push millions of refugees to abandon everything in search of a home. How do you interpret this permanent exodus in Refugee Camp?

You are talking to an exile. Many times, it's not about looking for a better future, but that you can't return to a present in crisis. This is a question I ask myself every day: what is the minimum space I need to live in and what can I do in that space?

You recreated refugee camps in Palestine from a distance and a year ago you were able to visit them in situ. Today all that remains is devastation and death. How do you depict the horror?

When I was in Palestine you could feel the tension in the places I visited, thanks to the Spanish embassy in Israel that coordinated visits to the Aida and Jericho refugee camps. I took photos, collected information, then came October 7 and I could not complete the series. I'm missing something, I'm missing Lego pieces to complete the scene. Although horror is not impossible to represent, it is a new ingredient to my reflection on the minimum living space.

Miscegenation, as a result of the symbiosis between rootedness and uprootedness, does not understand borders. To what extent does the mixture of cultures enrich?

Mixed cultures such as the Mediterranean have shaped my vision of reality. To the Mediterranean basin we owe our epic, our philosophical thinking, our mathematics. In America we are heirs to this richness. I believe in the intellectual fecundity of crossbreeding, of exchanges of blood, of traditions, of ways of conceiving existence, as Alejo Carpentier used to say.

Art and design intermingle in the aesthetic approach and plastic expression of interior space and furniture: a sensual dance between Le Corbusier and Scandinavian style, as you define it. What do you mean?

In a general sense, my work stems from an interest in the living space necessary for living. It is the same interest that a designer or an architect can have, the difference is functionality. I, as an artist, don't have to make it work, my concerns are philosophical, existential, narrative, etc., but we start from a common interest: to furnish our existence.

In Mars Storm you reflect on the human condition in a fallen world. What does the remains of that colonizing hecatomb convey to us?

Mars Storm was an exhibition about our desire to colonize. There is a very interesting dialogue in the movie Matrix where a computer virus (Agent Smith) gives his opinion about what we humans are. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern of depleting natural resources wherever it goes: viruses. Space exploitation has been privatized, now it is no longer a sign of power of some power, now it is our new colonial goal. This research arose when I saw for the first time a drone flying over the planet Mars. Contrary to seeing it as a tremendous scientific achievement, the image is disturbing. We are in a constant search for new spaces to conquer.

Where is art heading and what should its mission be?

It depends on the context. In my case, as a Cuban, it is difficult for me to ignore, in my work, the political context I come from. Man and art must be seen within their human context. Art will go where the man who produces it goes.