

A Conversation Between Veronica Gonzalez and George Porcari

Veronica: The work of the last few years concentrates a lot on reflection, a confusion of inside outside, city-scapes; what seems different in this set of work is the presence of a lot of color and this seems very painterly. Do you want to talk about the color in the new work?

George: I think in some ways I'm a photo-journalist style of photographer, for those people, as for myself, local color is just local color, what you find. In the last few years I've become much more conscious of palette.

V: On the one hand you can compare yourself to the photo-journalists, but on the other hand in this body of work somehow that notion gets thrown up because the color is a uniting principle in these photographs, so there has to be some framing, something going on in that direction. At least as an organizing principle of the show, the choosing of the images, if not in the shooting.

G: Yes, because color does something else; one of the things that I love about shooting reflections - aside from the fact that there's just a lot of density of information, which automatically I like, I'm attracted to - is that the one point perspective aspect of the camera, you know the basics of cameras and lenses, when you shoot reflections that automatically gets thrown out of balance. So that it's really hard to tell where you're focusing, where that one

point perspective ends up; it's just this jumble of information. And if you shoot reflections what happens sometimes is you get what I call the wallpaper effect where there's so much information that it's just basically like you're looking at wallpaper, at shapes. And not that I have anything against shapes, one of my best friends, Jorge Pardo, has spent his whole career making them, but there needs to be some kind of unifying element for me so the eye gets directed in certain ways and one of the ways to best do that is to have one central unifying element, like I used to have this vertical bar that would go through the work.

V: That's very Manet; do you get that from him?

G: Oh yeah, Manet and Degas both specialize in that, splitting the painting into these various segments, that way you can control where the eye is going, you have a first and second panel almost.

V: Which is also so filmic.

G: Yeah, they kind of anticipated film in many ways. Their framing is completely cinematic; it's much more cinematic than the early filmmakers were themselves. But color is one way to do that; it's one way to direct. First off, it's a way to unify everything and then direct the eye through this maze of all of this stuff.

V: So if you were to think of that philosophically, you write a little in your artist statement about the cubists and different people who cut the image up and direct your

eye away from the center. I think a bit about your sense of fragmentation and what that does and in that sense of fragmentation there's always an implied motion, and there's also an implied "the rest of it" which really can expand, go out, exponentially, to include, well, everything... so when you create this maze of images and then direct the eye to something you're setting up these two different fields, these two different philosophies of looking within one photograph, on the one hand... the fragmentation of the self, breaking up of the subject and the object and all that that implies.. ideas of process and motion, and on the other you're re-aligning that eye in this very sharp tonal shift. How do you read those two modalities in one image?

G: Well on the one hand you have this breaking apart, you have this fragmentation you have everything taking you almost outside of the frame, in fact you could say that all the interesting stuff is even happening outside of the frame. But on the other hand I sort of want to have a very strong point of view.

V: Well you love Nabokov, Flaubert, don't you? the strong artistic hand.

G: Yeah, because I want to be in someone else's shoes for a while and see the world through their eyes. I get enormous pleasure out of doing that. And for that you need a really strong point of view, you need just the opposite of everything I said before because you need to have someone directing you through a work. Which doesn't mean you need to see it their way, it just means you can experience, I guess, reality, through their eyes for however long you are

in that world. So it is maybe more of a point of view but also a pleasure principle because I think there's an enormous amount of pleasure to be had in that. Both Nabokov and Flaubert were immensely talented at providing pleasure.

V: That Nicholas Roeg film that we were watching the other night?

G: Oh, *Bad Timing*..

V: Yeah, I know how influential film is to your work and I remember you said this in relation to, was it *Bad Timing* or another Roeg film?

G: When I was very young I was influenced by Cartier Bresson and Robert Frank... who I still really love, but all that stuff was very much about Cartier Bresson's decisive moment, sort of catching a particularly poignant moment; Robert Frank was a master of doing that, maybe in a subtle way, it didn't have to be someone falling out a window, it could be someone watching tv, someone dancing but looking really bored, you know some poignant thing. But when I saw the films of Nicholas Roeg and some other people I realized that if you stop the frame at any one moment - even though these were, of course, the days before the vcr - if you could stop the frame I imagined that it would be, first of all, beautiful but that it would be a kind of non-moment, nothing would be happening; it would not be either a Cartier Bresson moment or a Robert Frank moment. It would really be nothing. But it would also be so many other things; you could apply your own imagination to everything that came before and came after. It was so rich with

possibility and photographers hadn't explored that area. So here was a whole virgin territory that a young photographer could, you know, explore.

V: Do you think there's something about the *rich with possibilities* which is attractive to you more than *THE moment*. You know the epiphany is like an absolute. Do you think that there is something about the rich with possibilities, the openness of that, which is more attractive to your sensibility?

G: Oh yeah. That's why I could never have been a photo-journalist even if I'd wanted to be because a photo-journalist - if you walk into a room and someone is crying and they're having a hysterical break-down, the photo-journalist has to be able to walk right up to that person and frame the shot and take it. I would never be able to do that in a million years. So, that career...

V: What would you be shooting?

G: I wouldn't be shooting anything. If I walked into a room and someone was crying I would either be so embarrassed I would leave or if I knew them a little bit I would go up and try to comfort them, talk to them. The last thing I'd be doing would be shooting film.

V: I remember one night you went to a reading at Irvine with me, and we were in the South Bay, and because we were in the South Bay where you grew up we went out to a bar together and I think because we were in the area of your

adolescence it was very reminiscent to you and you began talking about those years in your life. And it was really kind of amazing to me, I don't think I had ever heard before that you loaded trucks and were into cars and did all of this kind of macho stuff because that's not the George I know. But the thing that was really interesting to me in terms of the George I do know now is that we were sitting at the bar and I'm not sure what we were talking about, sensitivity, both of our sense of sensitivity, our shyness and there was a series of bottles lined up in front of us as there are in any bar, with a mirror behind them with a lot of reflections and a lot of light and you told me that when you were young and you would go to bars like that with all the other guys after loading trucks they would all be engaged, drunk and hooking up or whatever it is that these young guys would be doing and you would be focused on these bottles at the bar because the rest of it was somehow too much for you. So you would find this side element, that was still a part of where you were, but was the edges of where you were, and I've thought about that often when we've spoken about the edges and of fragments and when I think of your photography; I think back on the you surrounded by drunk south bay guys and you at the bar looking at the bottles, the light and the reflections, and somehow that's stuck with me, the level of sensitivity in the work, and in the person.

G: Yeah, I think at that time I was one of those people who cannot take too much information and if there's too much they freak out.

V: Socially autistic?

G: I don't know if it was due to shock from coming to LA or if... I don't think I was always that way actually. I think it had a lot to do with coming to America.

V: I think of the reactions that you tell me people have when they look at those 70s photographs, *the how cool, wow, LA in the 70s*, and for me the moment I saw those photographs together I got a sense of melancholy there.

G: Greetings from LA, people often tell me George you're such a good letter writer and I say, well I've been writing letters since I was twelve years old. And if you've been doing something since you were twelve you get to be pretty good.

(PAUSE)

G: When I was unloading trucks and doing all that stuff, actually I had a great admiration for the guys I worked with, most of them were Vietnam vets and they knew much more about life than I did. And in fact they taught me a lot. But I was also just scared shitless most of the time because these people were into stuff... I didn't know what was going on most of the time I was with them. They were in a completely grown-up world and when I was doing that I was 17, 18 years old. So when we'd go out to places yeah, you know, I would concentrate on maybe the flicker of light, zone out on that for a while because I could deal with that but not this other stuff that was going on around me. Actually when I shoot those kinds of reflections now what I'm doing in a way is I'm mimicking the kind of thing I

went through psychologically when I was 17 or 18, but ironically when I was 17 or 18 I would never have been able to do the work I'm doing now, I could never have done that work... I could feel it but I couldn't do it. Now I no longer feel that kind of alienation, but now I can do the work.

V: That's like me and my writing; my characters are always a much younger version of me, not in age necessarily, but developmentally.

G: What's nice is you can play with that person...

V: You can make fun of them a little bit...

G: In a way that at the time would have been unthinkable...

V: No it was too devastating...

G: Yeah.

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