



Miguel Ángel Rojas

Crystals

▲ *Via Láctea / Milky Way*, 1979/2008, black and white photographs.



▲ *Nowadays*, ed 1/3, 2001, 3000 circular coca leaf cuts on acetate.

GALLERY

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► *Translated to English by Debra Andrist*

Installation 2008

A point ◀ by Rose Mary Salum

Full of Significance

► An Interview with **Miguel Ángel Rojas**

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
AND SICARDI GALLERY



▲ *Caquetá*, ed of 5, 2007, Video, 7.38 minutes.



▲ *Houston/Puerto Hormiga*, 2008, Coca leaves and dollar bills on paper.

In Latin American countries, I don't believe that the connection between art and reality can be obviated; that one can pass along the connection of art with reality by way of a moral or ethical thought.

Rose Mary Salum: Your first works are simultaneously documents, manifestos and position papers. Your work contains materials strongly charged with ideology. Is it a myth for you to think about art for art's sake?

Miguel Ángel Rojas: Yes, it's a contemporary myth, but I also understand that it's a stage of art that was unavoidable. Cubism, the abstraction and everything that came from pure form was necessary. But the same artistic sensibility has weighed anchor on finishing off the myth that art is a discipline independent from ethics and morality. I believe that the artist, as a sensitive person, has to confront the human problematic of the moment and the specifics that surround it. It could be that such a thought might be a myth later on because everything evolves. But in the Latin American countries, I don't believe that the connection between art and reality can be obviated, that one can pass along the connection of art with reality by way of a moral thought, from an ethical thought.

RMS: In *Milky Way, Francie buys an ice cream and Medellín, New York*, pointillism is present, but it's a pointillism full of significance as much in its formal sense as its metaphorical: each point is a photograph (each one a work on its own), the dollar, the coconut, the ant-person, that is very present in your work, *Broadway*. What brings you to employ *pointillism*, by referring to it in this way?

MÁR: The exhibit that José Ignacio Roca curated in Bogotá was titled "Objective, Subjective." I believe that it has been the inverse, "Subjective, Objective" because I left off confessions of a subjective manner to arrive at objective situations and critiques that involve human groups, including countries. I answer your question saying that the point that I am utilizing, let's say that which conforms to the work, and that is repetitive, as you express so well, can be the character or the subject matter, comes from the purely subjective because it comes from the orifices of the bathroom doors. From there comes that graphic element that I have utilized in situations very removed from those places.

RMS: But there are also the pencils that are full of significance. They are those little parts that form a whole.

MÁR: It's the repetition and seriousness. It comes from the photography, from the photographic sequences and formally comes from the bathroom orifices through which I made the first documentary registers of those movies. They were purely subjective perceptions in order to speak of things like education in the Latin American countries. And, I think that is the only solution to the problems: education of the masses. That is why you have the pencil.

RMS: Now that you mention the exhibit that Roca curated, he speaks of a duality. From my first insight into your work, it is your play with dualities, diptyches that

are constantly brought to the fore. My perception in regard to your work is always of oppositions. Is something premeditated?

MÁR: It hasn't been a conscious quest. Your assessment is right on, and it also clarifies that circumstance to me. This makes me think that it comes from being in the midst of a society that is severed; it's divided in two very distant segments. In my case, due to belonging to the Middle Class, to an emerging class, I access the highest social and cultural levels of these two Colombias by way of culture, and in a neutral manner. It's a situation that is not only repeated in Latin America, but throughout the world. I believe that tension provokes a look towards the oppositions, towards the clashes where there is conflict. And, as I'm interested in working from ethical bases, I've brought a new morality to my life because it interests me a lot to set up those opposites as a manifesto.

RMS: Then it's as if Miguel Ángel Rojas were a battleground where these encounters are debated.

▼ *Bloque, Columna*, ed 2/10, 2007, Coca leaves, wood, acrylic.



MÁR: I strongly insist it is a necessity to modernize morality views tied to the past. We're living in a period that is between the past and the future. There's a big difference between the thought of the past and all the projection that science and real knowledge of the universe can give us. For example, I cite the Holocaust: it was a product of a thought tied to the religious past with a desire to forward human development and turn the human race to something pure. And I believe that it is a critical period that has strong ideological confrontation, in which these religious wars have found a basis. While part of the world population bases its thought on what science can show us about the universe as truth, where evolution cannot be denied, there is another part that is glued to the thought of the past by way of religions. One sees this a lot in Latin America.

RMS: The thing that most affects Colombia is the drug situation. You are at the forefront of artists who address this problem.

MÁR: I am the first who has treated this theme. At the beginning of the Eighties, the drug traffic began to reverberate at all stratas of society. Violence was already showing up in the cities. I was asking myself why the national art wasn't addressing that theme. I began incorporating its presence with some pictures of some elements that were associated with drugs. Already in '96, I began to utilize the coca leaf, and it has been an important theme in my work, although it doesn't cover all the problems of the country—because this problematic has very old roots; already from the time of the Conquest—in every way it has come to worsen those differences, and through the money that enters the country. The two parts are the forces of the paramilitary and of the guerrillas, who have armed themselves to the teeth and due to that leaf, can sustain armies; as a consequence, it has provoked war and confrontation.

▼ *El Freddy*, ed of 3, 1979/2008, digital image printed from 35mm negative.



RMS: And that specific reason is why you present a mutilated David of enormous dimensions. The mutilation (physical and moral) that not only your characters suffer but that transcends Colombian and North American society.

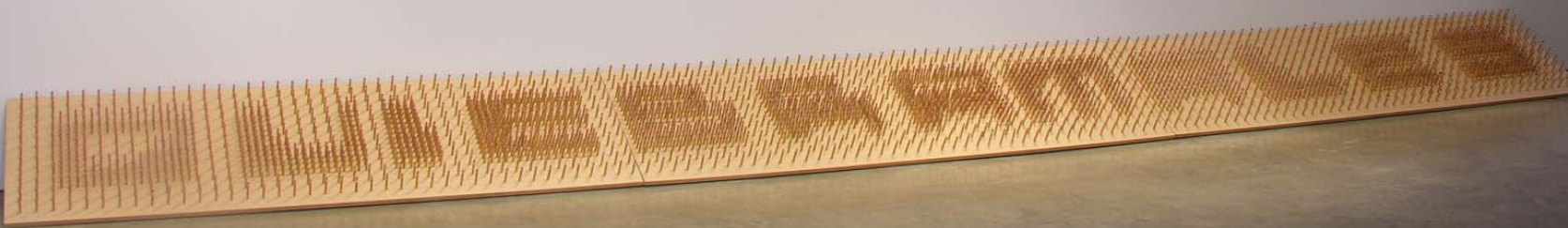
MÁR: It's important that the leaders of the countries understand that human nature is much more complex. The solutions can't be repressive. A news item that led me to work with dollar bills was the story that a world channel published that was talking about an American pathologist who was looking for germs on dollar bills because they were the most widely circulating things in the world. He discovered that seven out of ten bills contain cocaine crystals. That means that if there are traces of cocaine there, the usage is hyper-elevated. The repression is to be ignorant of true human nature which looks for an outlet through drugs. The repression isn't the way out, first you have to accept that people look for these types of experiences. Later is when to do educational campaigns, to control the sale and to legalize the use to avoid war between countries. The war has produced more deaths than the drug itself. The politics are wrong. The same thing happens with norms that repress sexual conduct. Somebody said that was anti-natural when sexual plurality is part of human behavior. This is to ignore human nature. In the case of drugs, it's to ignore history because the prohibition of alcohol in the 30's produced organized crime and didn't do away with liquor consumption.

RMS: Which is the work which provoked a change in you?

MÁR: The big change came about from my initial efforts. I feel very satisfied to have dedicated the effort of these 30 plus years to produce works about my experience and its relation to the medium. That was very early, and in that sense, we return to the first question because I decided that I couldn't make art for art's sake, that I had to have a justification and at the same time that I had to utilize that medium to communicate. And, imagine, after 30 years, I landed on my feet.

RMS: You're an artist who feels responsibility with respect to your medium.

MÁR: And that's how it should be. Art is evasive by nature. If you were a person more adapted to a particular medium, you would choose whichever profession that would satisfy human necessities. Art satisfies intellectual necessities. In reality, I wouldn't have chosen to be an artist, I chose it because it was the option in order to not be so immersed in the determinants that society imposes. But with the passage of time, one also has a responsibility to that medium. One isn't delinquent, one then has to have an approach from another point of view, much more sensitive and human, that includes the situation of the medium, the human condition.



▲ *David*, 2005, Digital print from 35 mm negative [Top Image] / *Quebramales. Evil Breaker*, version 1 ed. 2/3, 2005/2008, Pencils on wood [Bottom Image].

About the Artist

Miguel Angel Rojas is one of the most important Latin American artists from Bogotá, Colombia. He has shown his work in exhibitions through out the world. He uses the processes, semantics, and pragmatics of the medium of photography to expose unexpected layers of reality. These layers involve not only Rojas's sexual preferences and interests, but also the sociopolitical circumstances of his life. An early series of photographs from the *Faenza cinemas in Bogotá* (2001), also using coca-leaf dots, takes off from *Roy Lichtenstein's As I Opened Fire* (1964) except the cartoon strips captions Lichtenstein included in his triptych have been changed to the single phrase "Addiction Storm." Rojas appropriated a jaguar from Colombian truck iconography, which he rendered with confetti dots of U.S. dollars, in a work titled *It's Better to be Rich Than Poor* (2001).

► Para leer la entrevista con Miguel Ángel Rojas en español, escriba a: info@literalmagazine.com

“ I tried to address the theme of drug-trafficking from several angles: the presence of the empire and the acculturation caused by the immorality and corruption that are the direct consequence of easy money. —M.A. ROJAS ”