



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Juan Sánchez,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Juan Sánchez on July 30, 2020. The interview took place at Sánchez's home in Brooklyn, New York, and was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right. So, we're here with um Juan Sánchez and this is Fernanda Espinosa recording an interview for the Pandemic Project at the Archives of the American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And Juan, Juan is joining us from Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, from his home. All right, Juan, so thank you so much for joining me on this interview. First of all, I just want to ask you how you are doing today and how you've been in the past few months?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, um uh first of all, thank you for um the interview. I really appreciate that. And my relationship with the Smithsonian has been very uh good. The archives with Josh Franco is still ongoing, but uh the encounters, and the interviews with him have been wonderful. And of course, I'm so happy the Smithsonian has a number of my works in their collection.

Uh, I think, uh, since the event of the pandemic, things have shaken up a lot on my end. First of all, it's certainly has impacted and shaken up the world. And and and it's shaking up my life, um, um, my studio practice, as as well as my practice as an educator. I could say that it's the kind of situation where I am constantly in alert because at any given moment things changes, and that has a radical impact in my daily life

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First of all, um, I had to be very mindful of my own health. I'm not in the best of health, and so my immune system is extremely compromised, and and even though I tend to be a bit mule-headed, my wife convinced me that I should stay home, and not commute from Williamsburg to Dumbo, Brooklyn. It's a short train ride, but it's still—you're interacting with the train system, and you're interacting with people. And even if I took a—by taking all the measures, I'm still, you know, very susceptible to being infected.

So, I spent, uh, almost three months, I would say, two months-and-a-half at home. And at home, I ordered some art supplies to see if I could do work, but the environment is not quite conducive for that. So, for the most part, I was teaching my graduate seminars and tutorials through Zoom. And I had to switch gears, change my syllabus, and try to accommodate into this virtual system, which literally takes me away from my students. And the students who have lost their studios had to make their work at home, which was with extreme limitations in the same way that I was affected. So um, uh those students that were making six-by-eight large-scale paintings, and others making combined media installations, and so on, and so forth, ended up in their small apartment trying to refigure what to do in order to present their work during the course of the semester.

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And the first session was very difficult because of what they were confronted with. And of course, I shared my own experiences. I told them as to how frustrated I am also to have to teach in this format, but also the fact that my studio practice was also compromised. Um, um, and so, we shared a lot of that, which opened up the possibilities of switching gears. I was wise enough to restructure the seminar and told them that, you know, no you can't can't, you can't make large sculptures, you can't make combined media installations, you can't make large or even medium-sized paintings. But whatever you can make in your apartment, whatever you can make is more than than eligible to be presented in the seminar because this is a whole new situation. The impact of that will definitely influence your work. The limitations will put you in a situation to creatively work out, uh, alternative to what you're going to make.

And um from that point on, things went really wonderfully, and I feel that the fact [inaudible].

[Inaudible] would go for like 7:00 p.m., you know. It was very productive, very fruitful, and we became much more unified, you know. There was a sense of harmony and community that was established between us.

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Throughout all that, I haven't been able to to do similar in my practice because I got caught up with the classes, and I got caught up with so many other things that the pandemic brought about. And only after the semester ended was I able to settle down a little bit and refigure. That didn't work out, and after about two-and-a-half months, I decided to take my chances and go to my studio. And so far, it's been going well. There are days where I would skip, so I would end up going to the studio maybe five days a week, four days. I usually go there six days and work and then, you know, go home. And that was the only way I could, um, engage with my own work again. And it took a while for me to even, um, um, get into the frame of mind in the studio because I've been absent from it for so long and the work that I was doing at the time. I haven't touched it in—during that time and just to reacquaint and and and acclimate myself to the studio. So that took a little time.

But I'm back. I'm working. The work is moving slowly but surely. If anything, the period that I was absent gave me a lot of time to think about the project and and a lot of ideas came out of that process. And so, I'm in—I'm back with full force and and executing them.

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FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I'm happy to hear that. Where is your studio located?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: It's located in Dumbo, Brooklyn. I've been there—I moved in Dumbo, Brooklyn in 1990. And about four years ago, the real estate just kicked me out of the studio, but I was able to come back two years ago to to resettle. So, it's going to be, well, it's going to be almost 30 years that I've been in in in Dumbo, Brooklyn. And I moved— I established my studio there back at the time when that area was not known as Dumbo. And and it was full of factories and somewhat dark and dangerous after a certain hour of the night. It was pretty risky to step out into the streets. But I've seen how it's been transformed, and how real estate has also impacted so many people, particularly artists, and how so many artists have been just moving out of of Dumbo. The building that I was in at the time I was kicked out, there was but a handful of artists left, and yet, it was a building that when I moved in 1990, it was all artists, you know.

So, I have a history, I have a history with Dumbo. I got to meet a lot of artists and even throughout the decades meet people who opened up galleries, and and and theater groups, and so on, and so forth. And a constant struggle. Everybody holding by their nails, like myself. But I've seen how that evolved, and I would dare say that my life as an artist at Dumbo, that established my career. You know, 1990 my career started taking off maybe about four or five years before, but after once I moved into Dumbo, and I settled there, I could say that everything that I have achieved since took place in Dumbo.

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Um, I don't know if that answered your question [laughs].

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And how do you right now with the situation with the pandemic, how do you get yourself from your home to your studio?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: I take the subway.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Okay.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Depending on how I feel. I mean with the subway, it's only—I only need to take two trains, two stops, from Williamsburg to Manhattan, Delancey, and then take the F train back to Brooklyn, which is two stops. So, in essence, it's about half-an-hour, you know. But there are times where I take taxis to the studio, but I always come back via the subway.

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FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Okay. So, it's not too far or risky?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Yes.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Tell me more about the project that, or the work that you've been creating in this time.

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, this project—I started this project before I moved back into Dumbo two years ago. It actually started—the fact was that when I lost my studio, um, obviously I had to take all of my work and—all of my work since college, since Cooper Union. I had it stored in that studio. It was a huge studio. And I still had a lot of space to work on several six-by-six feet paintings and even conduct—I had a print press, so I conducted a lot of printmaking workshops there, and things like that. But once I lost that studio, I had to put everything in storage. And, um, immediately after I moved out, which was January 1st of 1915 [*sic*], if I'm not mistaken, I felt ill. I came down with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

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So, at the time that I had to move out, I didn't have the finances to move out and move into another studio. But then thereafter, I fell ill and and so I decided that I have to forget about my studio situation because I have to contend with my health. So, I went through chemo and that was about two years or more of that. And then as I got better, then I started looking for studio space, and then I found this space through an art residency program that the Two Tree Management Corporation established, um, where they bring artists—they rent a studio at below-market in a number of their buildings. So of course, I had to apply before that, and I got it, and that's how I was able to get back, and start my practice.

But during the time that I was at home recuperating, again, I got very frustrated because I couldn't get—I just couldn't continue painting at the scale that I was. So, I thought of an idea of working on 12-by-12 inch square panels. And the idea is to work on a number of panels to create a 15-by-15 feet wall piece, as well as a 15-by-15 feet floor piece. And the images that I was using as collage elements are images that people are already familiar with because I used it on several occasions in past works, which incorporates a photographic image of the man whose face is covered by the Puerto Rican national flag. And there's another photograph of a woman, as well, and there's even one of a woman holding a crying baby.

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So, I just had to select two of those images through Photoshop, just create multiples, and by hand print them, and by hand make each collage, which are like grids, but the grids are not perfect. They're like fractured grids or collapsed grids. Um, and so, I've been working on dozens, and dozens, and dozens of these panels individually. With these images, each one is unique because each one has its own unique, you know, combinations. And then the idea is to then put these squares together, which is a more structured grid. And the name of the series is called Fractured Grids. Along the way, I started working on many of the individual 12-by-12 inch pieces. Then I started making a diptychs and triptychs out of them. So, from this initial project, there's this spin-off where I started making diptychs, triptychs, and even individual pieces, which would not be part of the grid, but separate.

And also, I went to my storage to look for something. And I found boxes of negatives, contact prints, and prints, silver gellatin prints of work that I'd done in the '70s and the '80s because there was a time when I was doing my painting on one end and then I was also doing a lot of street photography. And I was documenting my neighborhood. I was documenting similar neighborhoods, like in El Barrio in East Harlem. Going back to a lot of the Puerto Rican, the Latino communities, and just documenting that environment. Of course, at that time most of the people there were Puerto Ricans. So, so I have a whole body of photographic works that I shot from the mid-'70s into the beginning of the '90s, and I haven't looked at them since. I had a one-person show of these works back in 1979, but I never exhibited these prints again.

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So, when I found this box in the warehouse, I decided to bring these boxes to my studio. And I found another box full of what they call proofs. You make these direct proof prints and then with grease pencil you determine where you're going to dodge, where you're going to burn, how you're going to expose the negative to make the finalized print. And I found boxes of those that were, like, five-by-six inches. I decided to incorporate that, these photographs, into the Fractured Grid series. So, then there's another spin-off that came out of that.

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So, the project had been growing, and growing, and growing and there had been curators from various museums that have come to see the work, and they're very excited about it, and I'm hoping that at some point when it's done, I'll definitely have a place to show them. But this is a project that has taken over completely, and it has gone full speed since I moved into my new space.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: That's great. I'm really happy to hear you're you're back at work. So finally, I'd like to ask you if you have any reflections, or urgent thoughts, or memories that you'd like to document in this interview, especially considering these very shifting and transformational times that we're living?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, we are, we are in a transformational time. We are in in in a time when things have been impacted in very severe ways. You know, it's not just the pandemic affecting the health of society, but the stress, the tension, the anxiety that carries through. And and the recent event with Black men has been ongoing for such a—forever, you know. That has kind of like blown up. And so, there has been demonstrations against the restrictions imposed on people because of the pandemic, and then the blow up into demonstrations in terms of police brutality. And then there are other movement that has surfaced that has been in conversation, and there have been manifestation, but it has really blown up even further in terms of decolonizing the museums, and decolonizing the education system, and so on, and so forth, which I think it's all wonderful, but very challenging. It's like a lot of the things that have been buried for so long, and even in some cases that has come to the surface, it's now blown totally up to the surface and into the minds of so many people. And as a result, you know, people are embracing it, and other people are not embracing it, you know. So obviously there's conflict.

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So, we're living in very hard times, you know. If I would say very interesting times. I'm very hopeful that a lot will change for the better because all of the things that I named plus more are the kinds of struggles that people like myself, not only here in the United States, but globally have been struggling to change. Um I just hope that along the way there's a sense of forgiveness and of being able to to to work through this in such a way that these manifestations can achieve, you know, can be achieved. So, I'm kind of like very excited at the same time very nervous. But at the same time, hopeful. But I feel that every one of us are going to go through a lot of growing pains, and it depends on how we accept that in order for us to grow, you know.

And and I myself am confronting my own contradictions and things like that. How am I going to make those changes? How am I going to grow from that? How am I going to transcend, you know? I think that every human being needs to go through that from all sides, you know. So, I'm I'm very hopeful that when it's all said and done, things are going to be for the better.

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FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much. Is there anything else that you'd like to name here that I didn't ask you about?

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Well, I think, I think since, since you're interviewing artists, art is so important, art is so vital in society and our lives. I think what needs to be said is what is the artists responsibility in society, you know? Art is beautiful. Art is aesthetic but also art is human. And throughout history, art has confronted a lot of issues. I've tried to reach certain truth, and and and have society face them, and you know, reflect. And that's what we have to continue to do. I mean, that has been my dedication, that has been my commitment with my own work, and with so many other artists that I've known, and had even as professors, and that's the kind of impression that I'm trying to embed in my undergraduate students as well as my graduate students. You know, it's like who are you as an artist in this society? What are your responsibility? To have exhibitions is great, to sell your work is wonderful, and to get reviews, and so on, and so forth. But what kind of art are you creating that will definitely contribute in the most positive way, in a way that is transcending to society, you know? So that society can gravitate to that not only in the visual arts but in poetry, in music, and theater, whatever, you know. And I think that's the best thing that I can say, you know, I mean that's the question. It's like, who are you as an artist and what's your responsibility as an artist to society? And just leave it at that.

Um, the manifestation has been taking place with even a lot of the younger artist. I think they've given it a lot of thought, and they're doing it, you know. But I want to echo them.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Again, thank you so much, Juan. Thank you for joining us for this brief interview today. And I am going to stop recording now.

[00:28:00]

JUAN SÁNCHEZ: Okay. My pleasure. Thank you.

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