



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Nao Bustamante,
2020 July 3

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Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Nao Bustamante on July 3, 2020. The interview took place at Bustamante's home in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco 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

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Nao Bustamante at their home in Los Angeles. Correct? Right, on July 3, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. All right. Nao, thanks so much on a Friday afternoon, holiday weekend, taking 20 minutes to talk to us. So, this project is about understanding the impact, for the record, of this year's dual pandemics of anti-Black racism and COVID-19 on artists' practice, and if your practice gives a particular lens on reflecting on what's happening now, is the broad scheme. But really, just how are you doing? How have you been doing since March?

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Did you say the end of Black racism?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, I said dual pandemics, one of them being the surge of anti-Black racism.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Oh, god. See, in my ear, I thought you said the end of Black racism.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: And I was like—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] That's a different kind of conversation.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Please.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yes, you know. I mean it's hard to have that conversation of the pandemic without that moment of, you know, Black Lives Matter and how that is a continuation of the civil rights struggle and all human struggle really, you know, to be free, but I'm doing okay, you know. As you can see, I'm here at my bunker—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Right.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: —in Los Angeles and if you'd like, I can take you inside the bunker.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, can you really?

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yeah, let me just—let me just pull up my interior.

JOSH T. FRANCO: While you're—you know, this technology and our use of it is another—

[Crosstalk.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: —mark this year and do you have—I've been thinking about the ethics of screenshots, because I compulsively started taking them, and then I thought, should I be doing this?

NAO BUSTAMANTE: I think everyone sort of assumes you're going to take a screen—everyone's kind of like you know tightening and smizing—

[They laugh.]

—and fluffing and doing their best to look nice. So, this the interior of my bunker, and you know, as you can see, it's really—it's serviceable, but um, it's, you know, it's been lonely to some degree, at times, but um, here I am, and I'm doing my best. Let me just take you for a quick

little tour. Oops.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Are you alone in the bunker? You don't have a quarantine crew?

NAO BUSTAMANTE: I have a pod. I have a pod. I have my friend Marcus Kuiland, who is an artist, and then I have my other friend, Sandy Guevara. So, I do have—I do have a pod happening right now. Um, this is the dining room, so—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Amazing.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yeah, it's you know—we're chilling out.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: It's hollow though. It's like [laughs]. No. Okay, I'm going to stop this now and get serious. I'm going to pull up a—this is a background of a—this is from a film I made called *Tableau*.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: It's the opening scene—the opening swim scene from—in upstate New York where I lived for 15 years, but I think, um, you know, I think like everybody, I've been having a lot of ups and downs. I really admire those people who, you know, really get on a routine, you know, and who've—even people who are like, "I'm coming out of this pandemic better than [laughs] ever," you know? Some people are really like, you know, "I wake up. I have my oatmeal and then I do my workout and then I, you know, sit down at my desk and write." And it's not been like that for me. It's kind of been more sporadic. Like, initially really trying to hold it together. Um, I teach, uh, at USC-Roski, and so—where I'm the director of an MFA program, and so, I really, you know, initially was trying to hold it together for the students to, you know—because they do a lot of anxiety.

And then, yeah—and just kind of—yeah like, this kind of holding it together and coping is a pretty good state of mind, in a way. It's when you—when things kind of—there's a moment though where it kind of shifts, and it's like a crack or a chink in the armor. You know, like the coping is kind of an armor, and then something happens, like, uh, you know, like—let me get a sip of coffee. For me, it's been kind of tapping into grief.

[00:05:12]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NAO BUSTAMANTE: And that's been hard and also the grief of, you know, all the people dying, all the scared people, but also, you know, like May 25th when we—when George Floyd passed, and I think, you know, the whole world kind of heralded that call, and you know, it's just been hard because I belong to a vulnerable group of people. I don't want to go in the streets and march.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NAO BUSTAMANTE: And so, I'm kind of having—I'm kind of having to feel all this and, you know, I can't really, um—I just—it's hard because I don't want to, like—it's like I don't want to—I think, you know, people in 100 years are probably going to be like, "Why didn't she just take that pill, the happy pill?"

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: One of the many options of happy pills.

[They laugh.]

NAO BUSTAMANTE: There will be many options in the future, but um, I mean there are many options now, too, but I guess I've just been living with this sort of roller coaster. At different times, I've had art projects that I've had to work on, and that's been really good because I'm able to kind of, you know, have something to focus on, to obsess about. Mostly, I've been obsessing about cooking—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NAO BUSTAMANTE: —and gardening. So, like yesterday, I went and got a dwarf Meyer lemon tree and dug out this giant succulent in front of my—because now all of a sudden my office is at home, so like, I'm looking out the window here in my house, and I'm thinking like, oh, you know what would be really nice? A dwarf Meyer Lemon Tree right there and then—[laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: And then, you know, you stand in line with your personal protective gear, six feet apart, you know, and, uh, you know, go and um, do some retail shopping therapy and then come home and dig a big hole, and you know, kind of—I get, you know, get up a sweat like that and um, yeah, I mean I guess that's been sort of my happy place is the gardening and the cooking. And I don't really know about happy, but definitely finding some real moments of joy, you know, in the space.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Um, but when I'm making work, I did this project where I did this ASMR sourdough video.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I watched it. It was great.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Oh [laughs], thank you. It was really hard to do. It was really hard to do. It was like—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you mean like emotionally to work, not the actual—

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Well, yeah, I mean, kind of all of it, in a way, because, you know, we conceived of these ideas in January, and in January, we were supposed to be doing a performance project. It was me—it was Lupe Rosales—Guadalupe Rosales, invited me, MPA, and Rafa Esparza, and Zackary Drucker. Matthew Shum curated it. It was part of LAND, Los Angeles Nomadic Division.

And, the um—we were supposed to do a performance, and then, you know, worldwide pandemic. And then we decided we would do videos, which seemed, you know—which was stressful, but I kind of am used to working under pressure in a way that, like, I know part of my process is that I will, kind of, procrastinate a lot, put things off a lot, until I'm at this place that I call beyond decision making, where I have to then, you know, take all the resources I have, emotionally, mentally, and otherwise, and, like, squeeze, you know, something out, like I have to shit out a diamond at that point, you know?

And so—but I also sit on ideas for a long time. So, like, they'll be stewing for quite a long time and then, the kind of—the ideas are sort of waiting for the right opportunity. So, in this case, I'd been wanting to make an ASMR video for a long time, and I can't really remember what it stands for right now [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah [laughs].

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Aural, sense—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Autosensory—

NAO BUSTAMANTE: I know there's something "meridian" is part of it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah, it's when something causes you to feel the tingle.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: When something—yeah, the tingles.

[00:10:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Whether visually or tactile, yeah.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yeah, you know, it's that thing when you were a kid and people would go like, "I'm going to break an egg on your head," and then they'd go like that, and then they'd do this, and you'd be like, "Ew, an egg!" Anyway, so, yeah, a lot of it whispering and close sounds, and you know, like mouth sounds, too. And um, everyone seemed to be really getting into sourdough baking, and it was sort of, to me it was kind of like the, you know, almost like the white, liberal version of buying toilet paper. You know, buying too much toilet paper, like

everyone went and bought a bunch of toilet paper, and then a bunch of other people started baking sourdough bread, and there was like a big flour shortage in LA. Like, you couldn't buy all-purpose flour anywhere, um.

So um, anyway, I have a cousin who is a baker, and he dropped off a starter, and he dropped off some flour, and before I knew it, like, I was, like, part of the craze, you know, and I was like riding that wave of like, sourdough breadmaking, and really thinking about it this way and like, you know, people are doing these kind of activities. I also started, kind of, a victory garden, like, whenever I would eat something—so, if I ate a lettuce, I would save the bottom of the lettuce and put it in water. I ate a potato, I'd save a piece of potato and put it in water. So, I planted this whole garden just based on stuff that I had eaten: celery, you know potatoes, lettuce. I had some tomatoes, I just threw them in the ground and just let them sprout up, the seeds. Um, so it's been really fun and interesting. Yesterday was the first day I actually went out and bought plants for the garden.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Because I was like, okay, well, you know, there are certain things I'm sort of obsessed with, like edible flowers, that I wasn't really able to grow, so I ended up going and getting some more herbs and some fancier things, but um, with the sourdough—I have the bread here, so let me introduce you to it while I talk about it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Is this the one made in the video?

NAO BUSTAMANTE: This is the one that was actually made in the video that—oh, it's really sour smelling. Whew! This is the—I would like to donate this to the Smithsonian, actually.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] We'll try to figure that out.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: We'll have to call our art curator [laughs].

NAO BUSTAMANTE: This is the actual bread that was made as part of the video, but I had a, um—ooo, it smells kind of good actually. It smells very sour. It's very hard.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I like when it disappears into the filter. Nice.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: You can probably hear. Yeah, it's very hard. It's got great undulating waves in the front, and um, yeah, it's very sour, but this was the one I made. Wow, it kind of has like a little—it's like—has some, like, vaginal openings.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Totally.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Also, it's a very, like, feminist video art bread, as you can see.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: It's kind of amazing. It's taken on its own caricature. Anyway, this is the one I actually made, but we got a prop bread from this fancy bakery that does really—or a fancy store that does really great breads and then my team that was working with me, Marcus Kuiland-Nazario and Heather Acs, who—Heather was in my pod before, and she helped with the video. but since she's out of the pod now, but she—They went and got this stand-in bread that's like, really much bigger. Like that bread is like this, and the stand-in bread is like, you know, like this, just like totally huge.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: And, it's also sourdough but it was, like, professionally made and everything. But, in the course of making the video, as you know, movie magic, you know, you kind of have to fake it till it's real, and you have to cut it where—you know, like I was actually making it. It was a process over several days, but then um, the actual filming of the bread didn't allow it to have, like, the correct kind of loft, and so, I knew we would have to have a different bread, and then there's like—different things kind of came up in the filming.

I had a basic score of just making the bread and talking about the bread, but a lot of things didn't make it into the film so, like, talking about the bread baking as, you know, people's way of

taking care of themselves and trying to feed others and a kind of misplaced fantasy or delusion of like, you know, that this was going to somehow, like—they would be able to feed the world, kind of like that moment where everyone was doing, like, Makerspace on every corner, and we were going to all digitally print our, you know, whatever, our insulin shot machines or something. Like, there's always been this kind of, you know, kind of post-postindustrial fantasy that we'll be able to return back to a kind of like simpler time or something, where we'll be able to, you know, survive and thrive, and you know, it's not unlike a hippie fantasy, you know, which, you know, I didn't grow up as a hippie.

[00:15:52]

I grew up, you know, as, like, you know, just like, a good, Mexican Catholic girl in a family that was involved in the United Farm Worker's Movement, and we're very civic minded and very volunteer minded. And so, I sort of grew up in a kind of activist political environment, and so I think when I rebelled, I sort of went more towards like avant-garde existentialist [laughs] kind of philosophy vibes and sort of, you know, did like a—like, you know, out of my, um—that was, I guess, my way of rebelling. But anyway, so back to the bread video.

[They laugh.]

This is what happens when you haven't slept for a couple of days. I'm so sorry.

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Don't apologize. This is, um—these are what they are, that's what great about these. They're not produced things. But, I know the bread myth in the LAND talkback you also talked about thinking about creation myths, uh.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yeah, that part did make it into the video and some—many, many years ago, I read some—a creation myth from, um—I'm sorry, I don't really recall, but it was from a Native American indigenous sort of practice where this—where the creator woman, you know, the mother was so lonely that she cried and cried and cried, and then she made enough snot to create a mate, and you know, the name of the man that she created was called Snotboy. That was the translation word, Snotboy.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mocososo.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Huh?

JOSH FRANCO: Mocososo?

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Well, no, it was like translated from some kind of Native American language. So—but yeah, mocososo. That, you know, like, from her grief came this materiality that she could form, which is very much like the Christian myth, you know, this idea that God was lonely, in a way. You know, he created all this splendor, but then, you know, he didn't have anyone to relate to, so in his own image, he created man and then, you know, from the man's rib, he created woman, and so—and then this other origin margin myth the woman was so lonely that she—or the goddess was so lonely that she, you know, created a kind of materiality that she could, you know, like form a mate. And, yeah, so I talk about that in the video in the process of making the sourdough.

But the video got really hard, because, you know, we—at the time that I came up with the idea, we weren't quite in the same level of this, like, really intensifying racial struggle that we're in now, and then it seemed like my video then took on this kind of pallor of—I don't know, like it just didn't—it didn't seem contemporary anymore, all of a sudden, which is so, you know, just so bizarre because it was so, like, okay, we're just making it now, and now it's not even, you know—I tried to, kind of, do something that was a little bit of the moment, and then it just felt so out of step and um—but, I had to kind of keep going because I had this contract and luckily they had—And when I say contract, I mean there was a literal contract, but I mean more a social contract.

JOSH T. FRANCO: A promise, yeah.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yeah, an artistic—yeah, a promise. A promise to these folks that I would do something. And, there also is this kind of way in which I don't need to speak for the movement, because there are so many fantastic leaders out front, so it wasn't even my place to try to, you know, make work about the movement or something along those lines. But anyway, so, it

became really difficult to finish the video, and luckily, we had an editor on board, Chelsea Knight, and a sound guy, Matthew Jinx, and they helped me finish the project, because I think it just became so, like—at first it was great to put all your energy into this thing, but then it became so laborious to try to actually, you know, spit it out in a timely manner so that it could be viewed, um—

[00:20:34]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, but I think with, um—you know as a group—because it was a group of works, too, you know, it's work that was a group of works, and it all came together really nice because there were also the footage of coming up to the police and going to hot spots of—

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —racial tension and marches in LA and sourdough isn't not a part of this year in a major way; it just really shifted after George Floyd.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So these are so quick now. So, I'm going to ask you a last question to wrap this up.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: So soon?

JOSH T. FRANCO: I know. That's—you know, that's why we want to have so many of them.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yeah, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's like a weird catharsis experience we'll all have when these come out. But what do you think—this has really changed how people think of what their job is as an artist, or really affirmed it for some people. What do you think that's happened now to the idea of what an artist is in America will stick? And so, 10 years down the road, how will artists behave that was a direct result of this crazy year?

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Oh, god. That's a really hard question.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Or how the MFA program might change, maybe that's a—

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Well, I thin, um, you know—I think it's kind of cutting both ways. Like, I saw some, you know, whacky poll on Instagram or something, that listed artists. I don't know if you saw that. But, listed artists as like—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Least essential? [Laughs]

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yeah, the least essential profession, but then someone was like, "Oh, that was like a poll of a thousand people in Singapore," or something. Like they had some, you know, way to brush it off. Um, but it think that, you know—I think I've been struggling against that since I started calling myself an artist, where I typically found that there was a little bit less—well, there's a lot less support in the United States for that role than in other places I would travel too, but um, I think maybe the promise of art has extended beyond the kind of, you know, contemporary art market, so that art is now embedded in almost every aspect of life.

I think that promise, you know, that the Situationists kind of started to spur on with the idea that, you know, that everyone's an artist kind of thing, and um, you know, art can behave badly and do different things is kind of becoming fulfilled, and I see that a lot of artists, especially representational artists, are able to really speak to this moment and people are finding a lot of comfort in art in kind of representational art, poetic art, and then they're also finding a lot of escapism in different kind of art, like storytelling, literature, television, movies, um, that kind of thing, and then, of course, I'm being asked to produce a ton of content right now.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Yeah, exactly, and you know, I'm mostly doing—I'm mostly just working with people that I have a touch point with already. You know, I'm trying not to—I'm not trying to expand my world right now. I'm just trying to, kind of, follow-up with friends and people that I've already had contact with, and that's kind of how I'm approaching things. But, I think that I don't—you know, the artists in 10 years, I suspect it will look not that dissimilar to right now.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Um, just having been an artist for 30 years, from my perspective, the art world doesn't look that different than when I first started making art, and we also—I've also been through civil rights struggles and pandemics, you know [laughs], and bad presidencies.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: So—and economic downturns, and so, I think that one thing I'm really just praying is that the market will kind of shift their eye away from investing into real estate as a place to park money, so that it can revitalize homes for the working class and also space for artists and other entrepreneurial type spirits to be able to start up, you know, their own, like, miniature sourdough um, baking, you know, um, taco stand or whatever. Um, but I think, you know, I think that the role of artist is kind of more widely acknowledged, and there are so many different art worlds that I don't even know about, you know, that I don't even participate in, and I think there's just so many slices to the art world that it's so embedded, and that it's never going to go away. I think it's from the beginning and it's going to be to the end. Art's going to be there.

[00:25:40]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Art's going to be there. I love—let's end on that. Thank you so much, Nao.

NAO BUSTAMANTE: Thank you.

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