



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Pepe Coronado,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Pepe Coronado on August 31, 2020. The interview took place at Coronado's studio in Austin, Texas, 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: Hello, Pepe. Welcome, um, to this virtual room.

PEPE CORONADO: [Laughs.] Yes.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much for joining me for the interview. Um, this is an interview for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. Uh, and this interview is for the Pandemic Project. Uh, my name is Fernanda Espinosa. And I'm interviewing Pepe Coronado. And, uh, he's in his studio in Austin. Um, so Pepe, again, welcome. Can you please, um, introduce yourself and just let me know how you've been doing.

PEPE CORONADO: Yeah. Uh, well, first, thank you for having me and for inviting me to be part of this project, a very valuable project to document this, uh, situation. So, um, my name is Pepe Coronado. And I'm currently in Austin, Texas. Um, just moved my studio here from New York about six months ago. And, uh, that process took a while to, you know, one, decide to move, and second, to move all the, uh, the content of the studio. And, you know, my studio is kind of a combination of my work, and then I collaborate with a lot of other artists making prints. So, uh, you know, moving the archive of all the artists' works and my work and then, uh, the idea of coming to Austin, where I used to live back in the '90s. I actually started printing here, uh, and eventually moved to DC, and then New York.

Uh, so I'm back. And, uh, my idea was to start a link between Austin and New York. Uh, so I came in December, set up, and started working by the end of January or so. But then the, uh, the pandemic hit, and all the plans changed. I left a small studio in New York with a sample of the archive and a lot of work that was already, um, moving around in shows and exhibitions. So all that got taken back and then eventually moved out. So I had to close, uh, temporarily that that office, uh, studio in New York, uh, until we figure what happens with this situation.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah. There's been, um, so many changes, uh, for everyone. Um, can you tell me a little bit more about, uh, in addition to the impact of you having to close your studio in New York, how have you been taking it, um, as an artist? And, um, you know, if you wanted to share at a personal level as well.

PEPE CORONADO: Yeah. It's, um—I think the dialogue has to now always have some personal aspect, right. Uh, pre-pandemic, we used to talk about our work and our studio practice. Uh, but I think now that because of the virus, uh, life is very intertwined with the practice now. So, um, so personally, in the—in the art part, um, it was really hard because, um, you know, everything just got—everything stopped. Uh, so, uh, you know, I had a—I was supposed to have an exhibition in May in New York, uh, with an organization called Hi-ARTS. And it was a two-person show. One of my—uh, one of the artists that I have collaborated for a long time, over a 10-year span, we were having kind of like a big show of all our collaboration. Carlos Jesus Martinez Dominguez and I.

So that was the first shock, you know. We were actually in the middle of producing that work. Um, you know, the work encompassed, like I said, 10 years. But we were, you know, finishing some pieces and adding some work and archiving, and documenting all the stuff we have done and, uh, what we have there and what we have here. And then, you know, that's tough. And so that was a big hit because we had been working on that for a while, were looking forward to that.

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And then a lot of other smaller projects that were, uh, you know, being talked about, um, had to be postponed, and who knows until when. And then, uh, then there is the part of, let's say, kind of more of like the business side of—you know, sales, and sending things, and producing things for other people, uh, that also, you know, got affected by that. So and that's a big deal because then that brings the issue of rent, you know. Uh, we have to survive. We have to pay rent. I have to move here. Uh, and, uh, I'm in a complex with other print studios. And the bigger landlord of the building, itself, was not willing to accommodate the process of the moment.

And then there was just like this looking around. How do we find resources? You know, what can help? Um, and of course, um, because of the way that a lot of artist studios are, uh, set up, let's say, we don't qualify within a lot of the small business structure, right. Uh, as an entity, and then, uh, then personally also because I don't work for anybody. I get paid by different sources. And so all that became very stressful, and a lot of work went into that, you know. It's filling out grants, and filling out proposals, and filling out information. So there was a couple of hard months of trying to figure out, uh, you know, how to get some kind of support, relief. Uh, and, uh, and then on top of that, you know, you try to stay active. Uh, but it's hard to be productive when, you know, you walk into your home—and I have two adult kids—uh, and, you know, walk in there, and one of my sons lost his job. And, you know, my daughter was still working, but then she eventually lost her job. And then how do we, uh, as a unit, and how do we support each other?

And so it was—it's still hard. I mean, uh, we're still—we're six months into this, and, um, you know, we're still technically closed down to people. Uh, in the studio I relied a lot on events, you know, uh, open studios, artist demonstrations, artists talk. That's the way we connect with the audience, uh, and engage the audience so they can then, uh, you know, be aware of all the prints and all the work we produce. Uh, so, you know, that is not happening. So we kind of lose that connection.

Uh, and then we have to—we have always had a presence virtually, you know, Instagram, uh, social media, websites, and stuff. So then how do you retool all that? You know, that's another set of, uh—another thing that you have to now pay attention and devote time, and resources, and, you know, there's—there is a learning curve to be—to that be your only source to, you know, uh, link with the audience.

And so, um, so anyway, there are some other projects that have been able to happen. But a lot of it is still very hard. And then again, I collaborate with a lot of artists, and, you know, it's a lot of worry. Some artists are doing okay because of their situation, uh, worked out. But a lot of artists are not. And so, you know, it's hard to—when you talk to somebody they have lost their studio, or have lost their apartment, or have to move. You know, it puts in a tough, uh, road ahead of creativity. You know, how do we talk about a creative project when they have to run [laughs], you know, because they lost their apartment or their studio?

And, uh, so all that is—it's just kind of part of the environment right now, uh, when we think about creating work or we think about doing a project or how to make it, you know, how to—I feel I'm in a, you know, this space of, you know, as we talked earlier, one, it's difficult to plan. Uh, so what kind of move you make you to maintain certain—to buy time. I feel that all I'm doing right now is buying time, you know, uh, until when this is, uh, going to stabilize a little bit. And, uh, and that's, you know, that's personally, that's the practice.

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And then, on top of that, we are in a very tough situation socially. So then you have that on top that requires attention, that requires participation, right, uh, so politically and socially. So these—all these racial issues are very important to my practice, to me personally, and a lot of the artists here at work. So we have always produced work about, you know, uh, putting a voice out there that has been either marginalized, has been either not looked at or not heard. Uh, so that's creating, you know, a lot of stress in the situation because we still feel we have to put out, uh, the voices, and then we have to support what's happening, right. So there was a period of time when—it's still happening that I produce a lot of work for, uh, supporting, uh, the outcry towards the Black Lives Matter through images, and posters, and stickers, and things. And then, then in my own work, there are some works that are—some work that I have produced that are not really that different to where I was doing, but now it's a different sense of urgency to go to that voice.

So, uh, so anyway, so that's an added thing that it is compromises to be part of this, right. Uh,

and but then, like I said earlier, you know, you have the social issues, you have the political issue that we're trying to almost defend ourselves from. Uh, and but then, you know, then there is the personal issue, like, uh, you know, a lot of people are doing—they are going through hard times. Uh, and some—there are some people that might be okay, but it's very fragile, you know. I can talk to you today, and then next week, I'll see you again, and you have lost your job, or you have had to move. So that's stressful, right. And, uh, and then how to manage and stay afloat, right. Like, uh, you know, how do you still pay rent on a studio that is—the production has dropped? You know, we can still be making work, but we don't have the same outreach we had six months ago.

So that time period is very critical, uh, because a lot of us can, uh, be affected by that lack of access to the public, you know. Um, and the audience and the public is stressed too. So, you know, there are some people that are doing well, and they're supporting artists and projects. But, um, you know, that's—all that's temporary. And you can't rely on, like, somebody bought a print or a piece of work from you, that doesn't mean it's going to happen again next week, you know. So it's very stressful in that sense.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah. Um, it sounds like you've had to, uh, really restructure everything, um, because it's so connected also.

PEPE CORONADO: Yeah, yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, I'm interested in hearing a little bit more about, uh, these changes from when you were doing work around the issues that we're talking about these days, um, and how you're approaching that work now, uh, if you are, uh, producing more of that, how are you—what are you talking about, uh, with—what are the conversations with other artists?

PEPE CORONADO: Yeah. It's very interesting because, uh, you know, uh, in my practice, I will say half the work that I produce was about historical issues. Uh, and the reason I was interested in history—and that's why my show with Carlos was going to be very important because we kind of lined up on that, uh, framework that we had been looking at and, in this case, uh, finding, you know, historical events that happened 10, 20, 50 years, 100 years ago that have an effect on our social standing at the moment. Uh, and, uh, for example, being from Dominican Republic, I will look at a lot of historical events where the U.S. and Dominican Republic, you know, crossed paths. And those historical events have an effect on our life now, right, one as an immigrant group and one as how we fit in this, uh, you know, uh, in this society.

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Uh, so it brings a lot of clarity to this path. And at the same time it challenges our mission because, as we know, history has never—or not always we've been told the way or different perspectives can be looked at that moment. So I think that bringing light into certain issues, uh, helps a lot on your understanding at the moment. So that was really impactful to me because, you know, if you look at the issues that we have at this moment, this racial tension, a lot come from the fact that history was not told the right way, right. So, so it's very impactful because that is—to me, that's such a key element, uh, that I use in my practice, is that clarity, you know, how this event can be looked at. And different groups, you know, Dominican people, American people, a lot of them might have known, or they don't, didn't even know about it, right. So they have formed this image without that knowledge.

And that's one of the things that is happening now. A lot of—a lot of white people are saying, "Oh, I was not aware of all these issues that happened 100 years ago and how American society, you know, blocked Black people from certain things," you know. So they were not aware of it. So they formed their life and their image of that relationship in a different way because they didn't have that information because systematically that was blocked, you know. So that's, to me, very telling because that's what I'm interested on, is once you reveal those realities, then how do you now make up your mind about it, right? Because now you have evidence; you have knowledge. And not even that. Now you know that you weren't told that, you know what I mean? So that's even tougher for a lot of people to accept, that they were not informed, you know, because probably they were not alive when that happened, or their parents' generation didn't talk about it because it was convenient for them not to mention it.

And my feeling is that—and I have—a lot the artists that I work, they have, you know, that deals with other issues. People have been talking about this. And socially the, you know, the Black community, the Mexican American community, have been talking about these issues for a long

time. And that was the deal. It's like, see, you were never listening. You know, we were expressing this at all kinds of levels: uh, educationally, in the workplace, in the art world, in the—so now all that is kind of collide—collapsing together.

So there is this massive amount of feelings, uh, and information, and points being brought up that, you know, we have created this very tense moment. Uh, and, uh, so how do you support that even if you're not from that group? You know, how do you deal with your privilege when you see so many injustices happening? So that creates, you know, some good things, but at the same time, it's very tense, you know. So, uh, so, you know, there are artists putting out work that they have done two years ago, five years ago, 20 years ago, that is so relevant to the moment. But that work's been around for 20 years. But that voice was never heard or paid attention to, uh, and again, socially, also.

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So I think that, you know, that combination of now nothing is in a vacuum anymore, you know. The art world, uh, is so intertwined with the social world and the social reality of what people are living through. Uh, and it's very tricky space right now, you know, because, like I said, you have to be—either you have been affected, your community has been affected, uh, or you have not, but you are very aware and sympathetic to that. So what role do you play, you know? How do you, uh, put something in, you know? Como una aporta algo de valor a esa situación.

And it's very important because I was just in an interview, and they asked me, like, you know, do you have a message for young people [laughs]. I'm like, "No, I don't," you know. My message is, I'm all about supporting what's going on. And there is—there is an energy and a drive that the young, uh, people are executing. And they're doing it in a very good way. So my role as somebody that's a little older is I just want to support that drive, right, because they haven't experienced—if I bring in my experience from when I was 20, it might not be relevant because the moment is so different. They have experienced something—they're facing something that, uh, it's not that it's new; it's just there is a—it's a different dynamic socially, politically.

And of course, because of the social tension on top of the COVID-19 issue have revealed this stuff and intensified that because, uh—and I have, again, I have a 22-year-old and a 24-year-old. So they are in the middle of that. It's affecting their lives, right. Their experience at this moment right now, I almost cannot even understand because, uh, it's a different path. Life right now is different, you know. Uh, we are enclosed in our spaces, in our city, travel, you know, engagement, jobs, life. Uh, all that stuff is so in flux right now, you know. So that does affect your practice, you know, your focus, uh, in terms that—I don't believe that—and in my case, it's not that it changes me that much. It's just that it rechannels energies in different ways, you know. There are some ideas or projects that I probably was engaged to that, right now, I'm comfortable putting it away.

And I—also another question that has been brought up a lot is, like, what are you doing right now? And it's almost like I'm doing some stuff, but really I'm just telling myself to step back and, one, to listen and, one, observe, and almost let the process itself happen, right, rather than trying to push certain edges, that, "Oh, I need to stay productive in this or in that," or "I can't put that idea away." Yeah, I can. I can put it away. It's not going to go—uh, you know, we're going to be back. I don't know at what level and what it will look like, but for right now, it's like—uh, you know, it's like introspective space, uh, and observing, you know.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Pepe, thank you so much for giving me such a wonderful overview of all of these connections that we're all, um, I guess, realizing right now in different ways. Um, before, um, we stop this interview, I wanted to ask if there's anything else that you'd like to say?

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PEPE CORONADO: Um, no, I mean, you know, again, I think that, um, the one thing is that a lot of artists are sharing these experiences also behind—among ourselves. And I think it's very important that we do that because, like I said earlier, um, we as a community, as an art committee, and people that you know, uh, everybody is going through a little bit of a different situation. And I might still have my studio right now, but next month, I might not. So what I'm saying with that is that at any moment, we could be in somebody else's shoes, you know. So I think that that solidarity, that awareness, is very helpful to be aware of what people are going through, uh, and create that spirit of sharing information, support, whatever that can look like, you know, so.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Okay. Thank you, Pepe. I, um, I really appreciate, uh, you for taking the time for this conversation. And I look forward to staying connected.

PEPE CORONADO: All right. Thank you so much. Yes.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Okay.

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