



NADÍN OSPINA: ENCOUNTERS WITH THE OTHER

LAURA ÁLVAREZ TRIGO
INSTITUTO FRANKLIN-UAH

Nadín Ospina (1960) is a Colombian artist who gained prominence during the early 2000s with pieces representing cartoons and toys from US popular culture (such as Bart Simpson and Mickey Mouse) in the style of pre-Columbian art. This combination of traditional art style and mass culture references is a clear example of contemporary critical thinking: a call for resignification and reappropriation of cultural elements and artistic traditions that, through processes of othering and plain racism, have occupied quite a different space within the world of museum art.

Ospina's current exhibition *Yo soy otro tú*, curated by Isabel Durán at the Anthropology Museum in Madrid, showcases this artist's ongoing desire to actively question the power of the colonial-imperialist cultural industry. Such interest is exemplified in his work through mass-mediated symbols – such as Disney's Mickey Mouse – that are quite telling regarding the power imbalance between a hegemonic culture and a colonized one. At the same time, it is a noticeable example of the capacity of art to challenge meaning-making processes through a postcolonial lens.

In combination with the pre-Columbian tradition, the inclusion of North American pop cultural references is a response to the tremendous cultural impact that media industries have in shaping behaviors and opinions. With a postmodern outlook on art, we can see that this process of political resistance and counter-hegemony has strong connotations that affect the presumed artistic and cultural value determined by privilege and racism.



Figure 1 *Encuentro* (Encounter). 2015. Painted bronze.

Yo soy otro tú situates the discussion on cultural exchange through encounter. To illustrate this, in terms of mainstream media culture, Ospina utilizes elements of space exploration science fiction and television series from the '60s and '70s such as *Star Trek*, equating the alien as extraterrestrial (Vulcan, in the image above) with the alien as an anthropomorphic Quimbaya figure. The pieces in this section of the exhibition, under the title of *Del otro mundo. Encuentros* (From another world. Encounters), highlights how the image of the Other has operated as a hegemonic element of power that defines the different as lesser. In some of his works, we can see how those who have been othered come together in a desire for understanding. These individuals, now sitting together on a bench, have all suffered from the gaze of the colonizer, and have come to be defined by the power behind the passive act of being seen.

In the same vein of seemingly friendly components of mainstream western culture, the toy is also a very important element in Ospina's artistic creations. Toys are a clear example of how the imperialistic dominant discourse "has economic, political, military, cultural and psychological consequences" even nowadays (Thiong'o 25). He decorates one of the rooms in the exhibition with a set of vinyl

reprints of bright color images of a Native American male toy. The “Indian” with his feathers, bow and arrow is probably one of the most widespread stereotypes produced by American television. It creates negative essentializing views reinforced through child’s play. Hence, the toy, along with the cultural context, has very strong symbolic connotations. They maintain the established status quo and gender roles by reinforcing the narrative of the male white hero and the savage Other. Undoubtedly, toys have a lot of significance in and of themselves, and they are capable of telling a story of the sociological and cultural past of a society that Ospina exemplifies with the wooden bow and arrow children used to play with. He argues that toys and their imagery – which he had previously used to talk about violence in Colombia – represent “an apparently innocent universe that carries a lot of weight” (Ospina).

The image of the colonized created by the western man has been criticized by numerous postcolonial authors such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. The power of the gaze and its inescapability can be observed in a series of pieces entitled *Fisculturistas* (Bodybuilders). These were inspired by an Internet meme that shows a montage of the body of a very muscular man with a *Moai* of Easter Island in the place of his face, and reads: “El gimnasio no te quita... la cara de artesanía prehispánica” (“The gym doesn’t take away... the face of pre-Hispanic craft”).



Figure 2 *Fisculturista and Fisculturista I* (Bodybuilder). 2015. Painted bronze.



Under the hegemonic gaze of the colonizer, the Other can never be pure enough. Ospina accompanies these hybrid figures with one of the ouroboros. This mythical creature is a serpent that bites its own tail, representing circularity and destiny: the eternal return that, Ospina argues, is “how artistic thought operates”. The search for self-identity is still ongoing and still personally calls him to continue producing artistic works that deal with this issue. His art, from an ironic perspective and the inclusion of humorous elements, aims to question how we can all access this otherness that we, instinctively or by tradition, appear to fear and reject. It prompts us to uncomfortably determine who this ubiquitous Other is and how we employ this conceptualization in our everyday life in order to understand art, culture and even toys. And, ultimately, how this can be recontextualized through the proposed ironic encounters that the artist creates.

In the room entitled *Retrato de familia* (Family portrait) Ospina tells the story of a family photograph that he found in his grandmother's attic. His German ancestor had married a native Colombian woman and with their family, they pose together with their visible physical differences. This apparently harmless picture had been hidden away. In the image, Nadín Ospina looks for self-recognition, for the ability to find yourself in your own culture when part of it has been codified as the Other by the gaze of the hegemonic colonial power.

The bronze reproduction of the picture, done in the same fashion as the *Fisiculturistas* above by combining human bodies with heads of different native figures in pre-Columbian style, along with the family portrait, is contextualized with a set of *pinturas de casta* (see Almeida de Souza, 2006). These paintings were created mostly during the 18th century in the Viceroyalty of New Spain. The objective of these works was to represent with extreme detail the result of miscegenation in most of the possible “combinations”. This part of the exhibition problematizes the perception of hybrid cultures, and the hybridization process itself, when it is retold, classified and defined from the point of view of the colonizer. Most importantly, these eighteenth-century paintings equate the mixing of races with a loss of purity. In this way, the context provided for *Retrato de familia* expresses the contradictory feelings of belonging and shame that establishing a hierarchy of people can cause in those who are unwilling participants in said classification, inevitably affecting the construction of a self-identity.



Figure 3 *Mestizo, Mestiza, Mestiza. Pintura de castas from Peru.*
 Attributed to Cristóbal Lozano, 1771-1776. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Madrid.

Finally, in a small dark room, we encounter the last section that encompasses the exhibition: *La medusa*. Inspired by *Le Radeau de la Méduse* (The Raft of the Medusa, 1818-19), a piece by French Romantic painter Théodore Géricault, which we can see reproduced on the wall near the entrance. This oil painting depicts a group of men in a raft in the aftermath of a shipwreck that took place in 1816 and became a widely known event, as those who survived recognized committing acts of cannibalism to save their lives. Inspired by the painting, Ospina creates a painted bronze figure of aliens (represented as the well-known little green men) on a yellow inflatable boat, set on the floor against the background of an audiovisual piece showing images of the sea and jellyfish. This piece directly targets contemporary problems dealing with migration, the hope for a better future, perceived threats and the fight for survival.

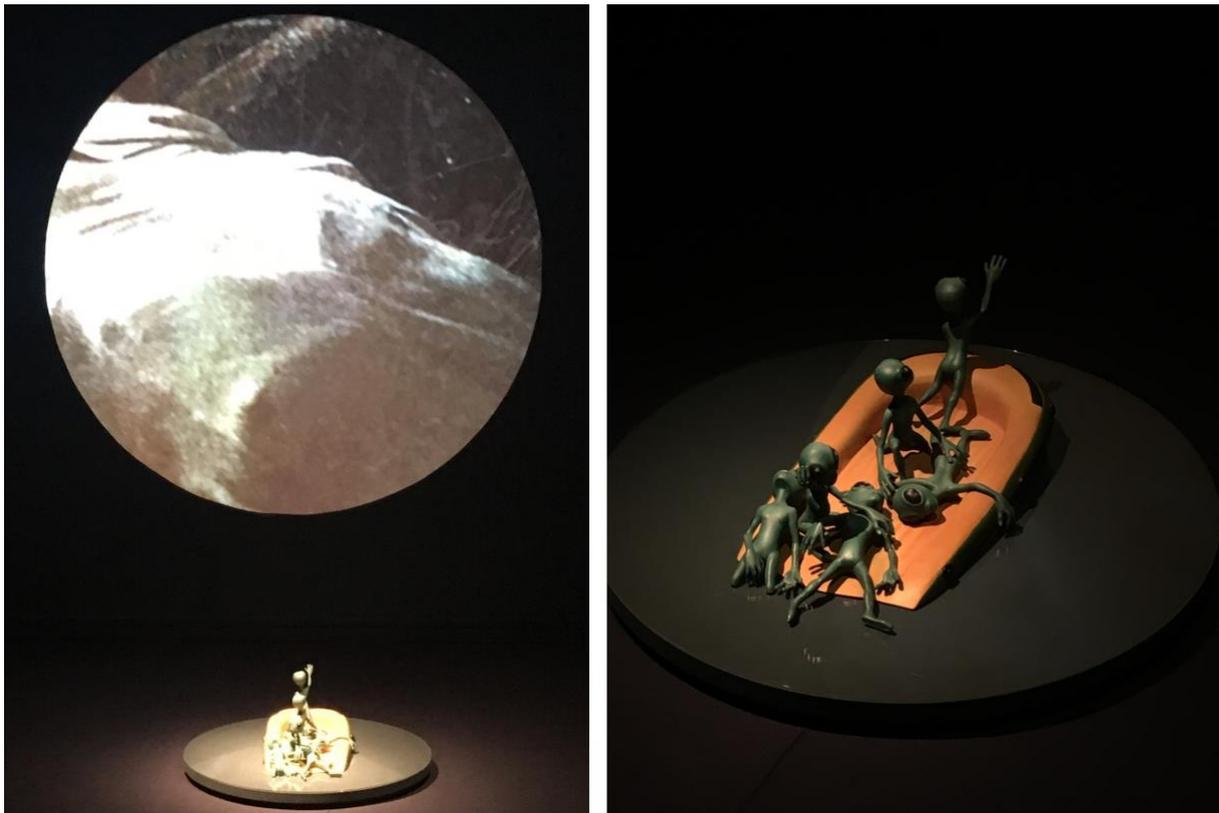


Figure 4 *La medusa* (The Medusa), whole and detail. 2016. Painted bronze and mp4 projection. 6'27".

Nadín Ospina, as he shows in this exhibition, is greatly preoccupied with the ways in which the indigenous in post-colonial art and creation is still heavily associated with the concept of the Other. It remains in the collective imagination as a kind of monstrosity through a constant process of othering and a hegemonic gaze that has yet to be changed. Ospina's art functions as an attempt at resignification that challenges our perception by highlighting how similar processes of detachment occur when faced with the Other in pre-Columbian native art, and the Other in western pop culture in the form of extraterrestrial beings. While the exhibition appears to be welcoming and fun thanks to the colorful pieces and characters that feel familiar, there is still a layer of pain and criticism that is very present for those who remain coded as different, that is, as the Other. In *Yo soy otro tú* we encounter, above all, the importance of art in providing context and analyzing meaning in the light of postcolonial deconstruction. It proves that this can be done not only through historiography but also by making use of pop culture elements that are pervasive in our daily experience of society.



BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Almeida de Souza, Juliana Beatriz. 2006. "Matices de negro. Pintura de castas en Hispanoamérica, siglo XVIII." In *Arte americano: contextos y formas de ver*, edited by Juan Manuel Martínez, 95-100. Providencia, Chile: RIL Editores.
- Géricault, Théodore. 1818-19. *Le Radeau de la Méduse*. Musée du Louvre. <https://www.louvre.fr/oeuvre-notices/le-radeau-de-la-meduse>.
- Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte. 2020. *Yo soy otro tú*. Obras de Nadín Ospina. <https://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/mnantropologia/actividades/exposiciones-temporales/historico/2020/nadinospina.html>.
- Ospina, Nadín. 2015. "Nadín Ospina: El papel del juguete y la ironía." YouTube video. Posted November 23. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POFcSPFg33k>.
- Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ Wa. 2015. *Descolonizar la mente*. Barcelona: Debolsillo.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Álvarez Trigo, Laura. 2020. "Nadín Ospina: Encounters with the Other." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published August 24, 2020.