

## José Luis Vargas

Este es mi mundo. ¡Entra!

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### Interview

Jose Luís Vargas discusses his practice with Lowell Ryan Projects, Owner and Director Virginia Martinsen.



Installation view, José Luis Vargas, Este es mi mundo. ¡Entra!

### Can you tell me about the use of the circus banners? How is appropriation important?

The circus sideshow banner is a popular art form that belongs to a very specific American tradition that has caught my imagination for many years. The magnetism of these objects challenged me as they became an invitation to, somehow, follow up on that tradition.

In 2007 I did my first own version of a sideshow banner by painting the portrait of Aravind Adyanthaya, a theatre director, performer and author of playwrights and short stories, in a large banner. In those days I was developing a collective project called The Museum of Supernatural History, and we did the first edition at his theatre in San Germán, in the southwest of Puerto Rico. He became one of the "attractions" of the project, and we had the banner hanging above a platform where he performed his short stories.

From that moment I felt that the sideshow banners are part of a human legacy that was there as an invitation for continuity and that could, somehow, trigger some responses upon its craft and purpose. The monumentality of these objects and the possibilities of creating my own set of strange and peculiar settings and situations have become an essential part of my visual vocabulary.

### What is the role of the shopping cart?

One element in my work that has become important is the shopping cart—a practical object for shopping, obviously, but also a very useful object for many homeless people. I have seen shopping carts that have been personalized, idealized—that illustrated the idiosyncrasy and eccentricity of a person. In my case, the shopping cart became the personal museum, an object for displaying my own idiosyncrasies, for creating



Jose Luís Vargas, Good Morning, 2020

narratives through the combination of elements. And this object combined with the other elements, create these alternative narratives—the “strange things” that the sideshow banner *Cosas Extrañas* advertises.

Shopping carts are a metaphor for survival and motion. They have been used in many ways, and every time I see how they are used in the streets of Puerto Rico, or anywhere in the world, they remind me of basic ideas of what humanity is about. What they contain is a priority for the person who is carrying them around.

For years, I have been doing small assemblages and objects in small scale and they needed a context to inhabit. One day, as I was walking around Astoria in Queens, NY, I saw a shopping cart on a sidewalk with many, many objects like a toy piano, paintings, stuffed animals, clothes, suitcases, and more objects. And it had white nylon rope

holding all those objects together—an epiphany right there, it was my salvation.

As a result, those objects I had created that were “homeless” in my studio, started to be integrated around the cart as an extension of the many narratives and poetic structures that are contained in my work. The traditional shopping cart, what it could hold, and the presence of a rope that tied up those objects became a kind of magical flow where I could give new meanings and, interestingly, observe with a different gaze the creative process.

### **How do the myths and symbols from Puerto Rico inform your work?**

History is a myth. With its many interpretations and possibilities, history, as an oral or written construction of reality, is an existential form that fascinates me, from a collective and personal viewpoint.

The seventies were very influential as they established a number of elements that dialogue with my imagination still. And growing up in Puerto Rico in the seventies was an exhilarating experience. The freedom, the fantastic, the supernatural, political crimes, a fugitive, puberty, science fiction and horror films were and are an imaginary platform that functions as a constellation for mythmaking.



Installation view, José Luis Vargas, *Este es mi mundo. ¡Entra!*

In the eighties, when I was in NY doing my art studies, I started to instinctively draw my attention towards creating a set of procedures for using historical elements as a point of departure for organizing emotional responses visually. Spiritualism, the supernatural, the portrait of a very famous criminal were all drawn into a personal mythology inspired by a collective mythology. I had to ask myself what was the reason behind me being a

producer of these objects designed to motivate a dialogue with myself and a potential audience.

### **Who is the Saint of Santurce?**

El Santo de Santurce is a kind of alter ego that, actually, is not that different from who I am. Inspired by the very famous Mexican wrestling legend, El Santo, I started wearing the mask with a silver cape in the mid 2000's and began a series of performances and apparitions. The first one was to support my mentor, Carmelo Sobrino, in an activist action he created to protect an area of a park in San Juan where many trees were going to be cut.

Afterward, I started to walk around with the mask on me in the streets of Santurce, a very important district of Puerto Rico, and I baptized myself as El Santo de Santurce. Eventually, and after doing other series of performances with some colleagues and doing some films, I decided to create sculptures with the mask, and integrating it in dummies that were later on in the shopping cart.

### **Can you tell me more about the Museum of Supernatural History? How is collaboration important?**

The Museum of Supernatural History is a response to what constitutes history and how we marginalize aspects of the human experience. As we all know, a museum is an institution that gathers objects and manifestations that explain specific aspects of human cultures. As I was very much interested in other narratives, I created this project as an invitation for other visual artists, performers, tattoo artists, film makers, musicians, photographers and sound artists to propose and develop an art piece that would be integrated in a two to three hour event.

This project became a hybrid gathering of ideas and art forms that became a concrete and specific way of demonstrating that our imagination and our perception of the world is not necessarily revolving around what we are told. It became a gesture on the premises that we all share a passion for those things that remain a secret, that are taboos and we fear sharing with other people. Such collaboration became a protective shield or bubble where we could celebrate things that are repressed most of the time, an event that temporarily gives the opportunity to tell a different "history" of ourselves.

### **How have the recent crises in Puerto Rico (Maria, financial, Covid...) affected your practice?**

The succession of phenomena like the economical collapse in Puerto Rico, the events during and after hurricanes and Covid are human and natural manifestations that reveal how vulnerable our species is, just as other species are. These devastating events are, at different levels, a part of a very complex chain of causes and effects that reveal whether we have the humanity and the capabilities to adapt and to expand our imagination and our idea of the present and the future. These events, and the aftermath, can demonstrate how dark human nature can be, as well as how illuminated we can be once again. This could expand emotional and existential responses based on the respect for the dignity of life.

My practice is geared, for almost thirty years, towards articulating aspects of how I respond to the memory of personal and collective experience, of how, as a human

species, we share visual codes and symbols, and how empathy could be practiced once we trespass given boundaries created by the fear of entering other human experiences and cultural fixed information. That's why I appropriate or rather contribute upon art forms and languages with the potential to create a set of images in which vulnerability is a common ground.

And those crises become windows to see both inside and outside ourselves, other cultural responses that have the potential to extend their own codifications and reveal deeper truths on the human condition. That's why the supernatural, the Haitian street paintings, the sideshow banners, the collaged images, sci-fi, the wrestling mask, my ghost image as a child, and "alien" figures are a natural way to reassemble and combine a sophisticated platform to see the universe.



Jose Luís Vargas in collaboration with Ariel Annexy  
Este es mi mundo., 2020

**You have spent much of your life living in Puerto Rico, but left to study art in New York, London and Mexico City among other places. How has your time abroad informed your work? Why did you choose to return home?**

The experience of living, being, traveling, falling in love, studying, and seeing how people live and the choices they make are what I believe is the basis for a broad human profile. I could say that those opportunities I gave to myself were challenges that I set in order to embrace a confrontation I had with mediocrity.

From early on in my life, I was able to discern certain aspects of life that were vicious circles and which created huge amounts of human suffering and confusion. And those menacing elements became areas of opportunity for reinventing my reality. And, as I decided to live and travel to these places, the personality and idiosyncrasies of these cultures permeated in my work.

New York in the eighties was exciting, very motivating, and at the same time had the drama and the loss of many human lives with the AIDS epidemic. My work since then

has integrated aspects of the memory of certain people whether it is their portraits or various elements of their lives. A melancholic nature in my work and in my life became a driving force. Later on, living in Barcelona, traveling to Switzerland and eventually being back in New York in the early nineties, being at the Skowhegan Program in Maine, and eventually moving to England were periods in which certain aspects of my work opened up renovated circles that strengthened and reinforced my work with more mystical, humorous, and colorful elements. Local issues and psychological languages became broader in their scope of understanding and meaning.

In the late nineties I decided to go back to Puerto Rico, but home is a tricky place. After making 'home' of all those places mentioned before, I know that the home in which I inhabit doesn't inhabit me. My country is no longer my country, as the world has become the point of reference and those diverse elements I use and incorporate from different cultures are my passport for human citizenship.

### **How is location important to an artist's practice?**

Location establishes certain parameters that create a set of cultural codes and frameworks. And my movement throughout the years has given me a certain outsider's vision of reality. Reading has always been a discipline that has shaped the philosophy behind my work. And reading has shaped and informed my sense of location and the potentialities of being there.

Human beings act and function according to beliefs of their identity and location, and geography is immensely influential. For an artist in the twenty first century, location is not only a physical influence; it is also a psychological and spiritual realm. If an artist's practice considers context as a point of departure, not an end on itself, then it can open a transversal dialogue that is both inwards and outwards. Location is a construction, as culture is, to be dislocated by natural and non-natural circumstances, by forces that sometimes are beyond our reach, but not our understanding. I believe those are essential elements for the practice. I would also consider the time element with location.

### **Are there any particular individuals who have been inspirational?**

My mentor, Carmelo Sobrino, has been both influential and inspirational. He gave me the first book by Octavio Paz, a book of essays. That book, *Signos en Rotación* (Signs in Rotation) was the beginning of a journey with one of the most analytical, precise and poetic minds ever.

My mom: a fighter, and her constant laughter  
Julian Schnabel: his freedom, ambition, his courage  
Neo Rauch: trust your intuition  
Louise Bourgeois: the perfect storm  
Rene Magritte: embrace darkness  
Max Ernst: hiding is essential  
Joseph Beuys: everybody is an artist

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