

Gonzo Strategies of Deceit: An Interview with Joaquin Segura

Brett W. Schultz

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Figure 40. A slash to the wrist cuts the radial artery and will kill an enemy within two minutes.

Untitled (fig. 40). 2007.

The interview that follows is a dialogue between artist and gallerist with the intent of unearthing the artist's working strategies for a general public. Joaquin Segura is at once an anomaly in Mexico's contemporary art scene at the same time as he is one of the most emblematic representatives of a larger shift toward a post-national identity among its youngest generation of artists.

If Mexico looks increasingly like a foreclosed home burning to the ground, Segura could likely be the one walking away, charred matchstick between thumb and forefinger and shit-eating grin on his face. His corrosive attacks on institutions, ideologies, and power reflect a deep general distrust of authority, increasingly evident within the work of younger Mexican artists. It is perhaps most directly the result of President Calderon's deeply unpopular war against the cartels but no doubt equally the product of decades upon decades of rampant corruption and errant policy within Mexico.

Brett W Schultz (BWS): A recurring—if not dominant—theme within your current work and investigation explores ideological extremism in reaction to some perceived political and economic disenfranchisement, especially that espoused and practiced by right-wing groups in United States. That's exactly why I thought of you when I was approached to contribute a piece to an issue on the subject of the moraine—taken metaphorically here to signify a certain set of beliefs that have resurfaced within mainstream American culture

in the wake of a probably over-exaggerated political sea-change, marked by Obama's election.

You're a Mexican artist who now lives and works in Guadalajara, far from the border cities where such concerns would seem more likely to be relevant to a contemporary artist; of course, you're even farther from the culture that birthed this nature of extremism. What interests you so intensely about this movement, if we can call it that?

Joaquin Segura (JS): I think there are several seminal points that you touch on in this particular question. There's a very specific set of interests that make me address the socio-political issues I've been dissecting through my practice in the last few years. First of all, I don't really consider myself a 'mexican' artist. As I've made clear in the past, I don't really believe in the notion of 'identity' or the idea of 'nation', which I find totally laughable and heartwarmingly passé. I'm convinced that these are totally outdated models of understanding our differences and similarities, expanding our already immense and irreconcilable cultural abysses instead of bringing them together, thus resulting in their total dispersion among the complex and extremely arbitrary weaving of contemporary social nuclei. Pretty much a frankly bad joke, if I may say so. The fact that I live and work in Mexico is a completely random geographical and temporal factor, which of course affects what I think and what I do, but I've chosen not to be limited by this specific circumstance. In the past, while working abroad, I've taken advantage of this preconception of Mexico—to be more exact, pretty much all of Latin America—as one of the last barbaric bastions of western civilization. Totally amusing, if you ask me about it. I consider my practice to be, among other things, a gonzo strategy of deceit: there are quite a few roles you can adopt in this approach that may actually reveal themselves to be a privileged vantage point. In my experience, the gentle savage is one of the most effective ones to establish my standing position. Thus, I'm a mexican artist if I need it to prove my point. If it's not necessary in a specific circumstance, I'm not. Quite simple, I think. Said in other words, it's just an ace I can play to win a particular match. It has worked so far, at least for me.



Hey, America.... 2009.



The Inaugural Address. 2009.

I am interested in the nature of power and the rise and fall of totalitarian ideological and political apparatuses nowadays. But I guess, going even further, I'm essentially fascinated by the fissures and contradictions that have made these structures spectacularly crumble to the ground. I do believe extreme ideologies have played a crucial role in the globalization of socio-political crisis. In the end, our world is nothing more than a fading monument to all things gone wrong—the inspiring triumph of failure, in every sense. I see this as an exciting parable. And of course, it is an undeniable fact that the US, through their influence in world economy, international policies and general attitude towards the rest of the planet is the largest structure waiting to collapse. I think we are all secretly awaiting that moment of splendor, even americans. It'll be disastrous and as nasty as it can get, but it will also be liberating and incredibly inspirational. Not just because it's the US but because it'll prove that absolutely everything is susceptible to fall. And not only that, most importantly, it would confirm that radical change may actually be possible and not just one more of the unfulfilled promises modernity has left us to struggle with on our own.

BWS: I want to talk first about two of your works in particular: *Hey, America...* and *The Inaugural Address*. I feel like your more recent work has a subtle —or even hidden—sinisterness, but these two works are perfect examples of how brutally confrontational your earlier work has been. When we showed *Hey, America...* at Mexico City's Zona Maco art fair in 2010, there were at least a couple visitors to our stand who were absolutely ready to punch me in my gringo face for having done so. Certainly the shock value of these works is crucial to their central ideas, but can you tell me more about your intentions and how these works relate to your general oeuvre?

JS: So funny. Perhaps we do deserve to be punched in the face. I think that's what I'm sometimes looking for, but I hardly ever get it. I do think of such works as some sort of logical trap, a somewhat perverse ambush waiting for someone to walk into head-on. I think what I tried to do with those two specific works, as well as some other past projects, is just emphasize issues or themes that do disturb or make me uneasy and restless. I consider my essential intention a need to make clear that we do not have to look the other way, ignore or forget. We must address, understand and solve these manifestations of senseless violence and absurdity because if we don't confront them this way, they'll end up consuming us. In other words, I do consider these works as a personal need of coming to terms with the nonsense of the world we all are living in.

I don't particularly consider myself to be someone with a clear set of beliefs. Perhaps my only certainty would be that everything is there to be denied, demolished and obliterated—even my supposed unquestionability of that particular 'dogma.' My practice is a reflection of that paradox, and I do think that's how these two pieces relate to a wider body of work. Every democratic system and so-called developed contemporary society is deeply flawed on the inside, and that is because each has swept things under the rug. Of course, there's tolerance, good will and eagerness to make a difference but there's also hatred, pain and fear lingering all around. We must learn to relate to both sides of the spectrum. In a way, I approach the themes behind these particular works in what I think to be a non-biased, somewhat 'neutral' way. I do think there's an encryption process going on in the way I work, some sort of formal refinement of this somewhat outrageous content. A digest of infamy, if we can refer to it that way. It is up to the individual experiencing the work to decide which way these pieces lean. They can easily be seen from both positions and I'm ok with that. If you look closely at these works, there's nothing that establishes an unrelenting position—neither support nor rejection. I don't

of the world, mostly in the US. *Disturbance Scenarios* was started in early 2010, following a particularly intense period of traveling here and there that lasted for most of the year. I've always felt compelled by text, as I find quite intriguing the idea of how words can create equally intense evocations of what I call a mental panorama of uneasiness than those produced by aesthetically-charged imagery; of course, if handled right. I have a close relationship to print media—due both to my academic background and to my attraction to its ubiquity and almost unlimited influence, which in the end, is nothing else but power—so I found myself with a growing archive of newspaper headlines snapshots from cities like Melbourne, Auckland, London, and LA. Going through them, I noticed that they had in common a very specific thematic slant: they were all about some sort of conflict: energy crisis, political unrest, local episodes of domestic violence, you name it. So as you very well put it, I felt they all connected through this feeling of anxiety and anguish and I decided to start thinking of them as a body of work.

Basically, I felt an interest in creating what I think of as my personal fragmented prefigurements of the end of civilization. There were few elements on the shots that could give away its actual location, geographically speaking, and I liked that. I find this sensation of vagueness and uncertainty quite alluring. The more subtle, the more perverse. The formal resolution of the series—as photo-realistic painting—is linked to my intention of creating distance between me as the artist and the themes I work with. I rarely execute my own work, and that is more a personal choice as I'm more interested in the ideas I mingle with than in the actual outcome of that process, understood as an "art-object" with certain market value. I did some tests with light-jet prints of those snapshots and I found them devoid of that nightmarish, disturbing indistinctness that I felt was so important for them to be able to project the turmoil I experienced upon encountering them and in conceiving of them as a series. So I thought that photorealistic painting would be an interesting resource to play with, as I hardly had worked with that medium before because of my lenient animosity toward painters and their craft. So they were executed like that and I think it turned out to be just right.



Homemade (Napalm #2). 2010.

BWS: Though *Disturbance Scenarios* remains ongoing, it's an interesting contrast to another series of yours, *Homemade*, which are these beautifully banal photographs of the ingredients used to make improvised explosives. Whereas *Disturbance Scenarios* still confronts the viewer aggressively with its visual emphasis on loaded texts, in *Homemade*, you've dropped the surface-level bravado entirely. They're pieces that require explanation to someone not already versed in the fine art of amateur explosive-making. You weren't known for subtlety in your past work; why this change in direction?

JS: I'm personally convinced that these are just two angles of the same conceptual preoccupation. I mentioned before my obsession with the idea of encryption. I'm quite enticed by how these processes of translation can politically and semantically alter and deviate purportedly subversive materials such as the ones these works allude to. I do think subversion is futile. I was really troubled by that thought for some time, but I think now I understand that it's not really that important. What is really significant is to elaborate on these alternate views, to envision and refine possible escape routes. It doesn't really matter if they go nowhere, but that is because nothing really matters. A "mute" artwork is a notion that captivates me. When you look at the works you mention, you know there's something off, but it's not fully clear how and why that is. I rely on that insecurity—on that moment of hesitation. And that can also be achieved through an approach like the one I'm now interested in. Let's just call it a smoke screen, a surrogate ruse to get to the same point: to talk about impotence and defeat in contemporary life. The notion that readily accessible information is actually a weapon is a double-edged fallacy: sure, you can make use of whatever resources you can lay your hands on, but that doesn't set you free because freedom is impossible.

Still, that doesn't mean you can't blow up stuff up during the process, metaphorically or not. I didn't understand the nature of subtlety before. I used to think that you needed to be loud and manifest anger and unconformity in the most aggressive manner possible. Then I finally realized that you can actually permeate and rarify a battleground—because after all, this is low-intensity war—if you actually aim at silently building up the contradictions and making the symbolic value of ideas and acts clash within themselves. Or perhaps it is that I am just getting old. I guess I used to be an angry kid until recently. Now I think of myself as a disenchanted post-teenager, and of course that reflects in my work and my approach to art-making. Kind of a rite of passage and I laugh at it because, overall, it has been overwhelmingly fun. And that doesn't mean that I'm not ready to stick it in someone or something's face again if I feel like it.

BWS: You're now taking the subtlety of the *Homemade* series even further with your newest series, *Definitive Reader For a Botched Revolution*, in which you photograph a series of politically-charged books side-on, negating their content entirely—essentially reducing them to purely aesthetic objects in which the subject matter is only revealed in the title of the work. Can you talk about the ideas behind this series? Furthermore, is your recent interest in this idea of the "botched revolution" an indication of a general attitudinal or philosophical shift you've since adopted?

JS: This new series of works is the logical outcome of a brief period I went through. Probably the last couple years, in which due to a number of circumstances that don't really have to do with my art-making, I was forced to renegotiate my ideas, my beliefs and practically everything that surrounds me. It was quite distressful and turbulent, but in the end, I think it was also almost epiphanic. I came to terms with myself and now I'm calm and serene. That is, of course, my personal take on it but I mention it because I do think it's



Untitled (T.A.Z.). 2011.



Untitled (United States Marine Guidebook of Essential Subjects). 2011.

important to address this shift you mention. The idea of an artwork as a container for latent revelations enthralls me quite a bit. That's how I see these particular works: art as an incendiary agent. It's up to the artist and the spectator to do whatever they please with it. I think the detachment and almost surgical cleanliness from the *Definitive Reader* series is also my take at poking fun of the way some art is totally innocuous and uncompromising. These images may be pleasing to the eye, but there's something twisted and rotten within them, well hidden beneath. You'll either see it or not, but without a doubt, it will not cancel its presence. This series is intrinsically linked to *Homemade*. I'm pretty much horsing around with similar ideas and statements here. And well, yes, I do think any revolution is a botched one. There's nothing too heavy about their own downfall. Decay and breakdown are here and will not go away. Perhaps we must learn to embrace them in one way or another, for our own sake.

BWS: Finally, let's discuss the near future. You've got an upcoming solo show at the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros [SAPS] in Mexico City this summer. What can we expect from that? What else do you have planned?

JS: I'll go and get seafood as soon as I'm done with this interview. It's pretty good here in Guadalajara. That's my top priority at this very moment. About my solo project at SAPS, it's due to open in late July. I'm quite looking forward to it. I'm still closely working with the curator on the general feel for the show but I can say that it'll be more of a revision of past works that have not been shown in Mexico City except for a couple pieces. It definitely won't be a showcase for new projects, although we may include one or two previously unseen works. What you can expect is a rereading of what I've been working on during the past few years. In a way, that's exciting to me because for some reason I don't really care about, I'm not that active in Mexico City even though that's where I lived and work for years. I've hardly shown there after my solo project at Yautepec in February of 2010. It'll be nice to see how it all comes together and I'm more thrilled about it because I totally love the space and I think they're doing an excellent job with their programming and its direction. And in a certain way it feels like going back home.

About everything else, I need a period to reflect and fully understand what I've been thinking and working on. I've got a few group shows here and there: New York, San Francisco, and Melbourne are the ones happening soon. I will present my censored project *Untitled (Gringo Loco)* as part of the programming of the

Museo de Arte de Zapopan in Guadalajara, two years after being escorted at gunpoint from the installation site by police sent by the extreme right-wing mayor of the city, which I found pretty amusing for an otherwise typical Saturday afternoon. I'm also involved in a couple "curatorial" projects. In my case, "curatorial" means that I help put together stuff I like and I'm interested in. One of them will open in late September of 2011 at Arena Mexico Arte Contemporaneo, and I will work with three of whom I consider to be some of the best artists in a lively and active scene such as the one here in Guadalajara. But most importantly, I've been doing heavy research so there are also a number of projects that I've yet to finalize. That'll be my main focus during the rest of the year, even though I really enjoy procrastination. There'll be time for that later. Or maybe not.

We'll see.

About Joaquin Segura

The action, installation, intervention and photographic work of Joaquin Segura (b. Mexico City, 1980) has been shown in solo and group exhibitions in Mexico, the United States, Europe, and Asia. Some spaces that have featured his work include La Panaderia, Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Centro de la Imagen and Ex-Teresa Arte Actual in Mexico City; El Museo del Barrio and apexart, New York, NY; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, Spain; National Center for Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia; and Palace Adria in Prague, Czech Republic. In 2008 and 2009, Segura was an artist-in-residence at the International Studio and Curatorial Program, New York, NY and at the 18th Street Arts Center, Santa Monica, CA.

He is represented YAUTEPEC in Mexico City and by Arena Mexico Arte Contemporáneo in Guadalajara.

Further Reading

Joaquin Segura's website [joaquinsegura.net]

YAUTEPEC artist page for Joaquin Segura [yau.com.mx/artists/joaquin-segura]

Capps, Kriston. "ID-ENTITY: Washington, DC." *ART PAPERS*. 2009.