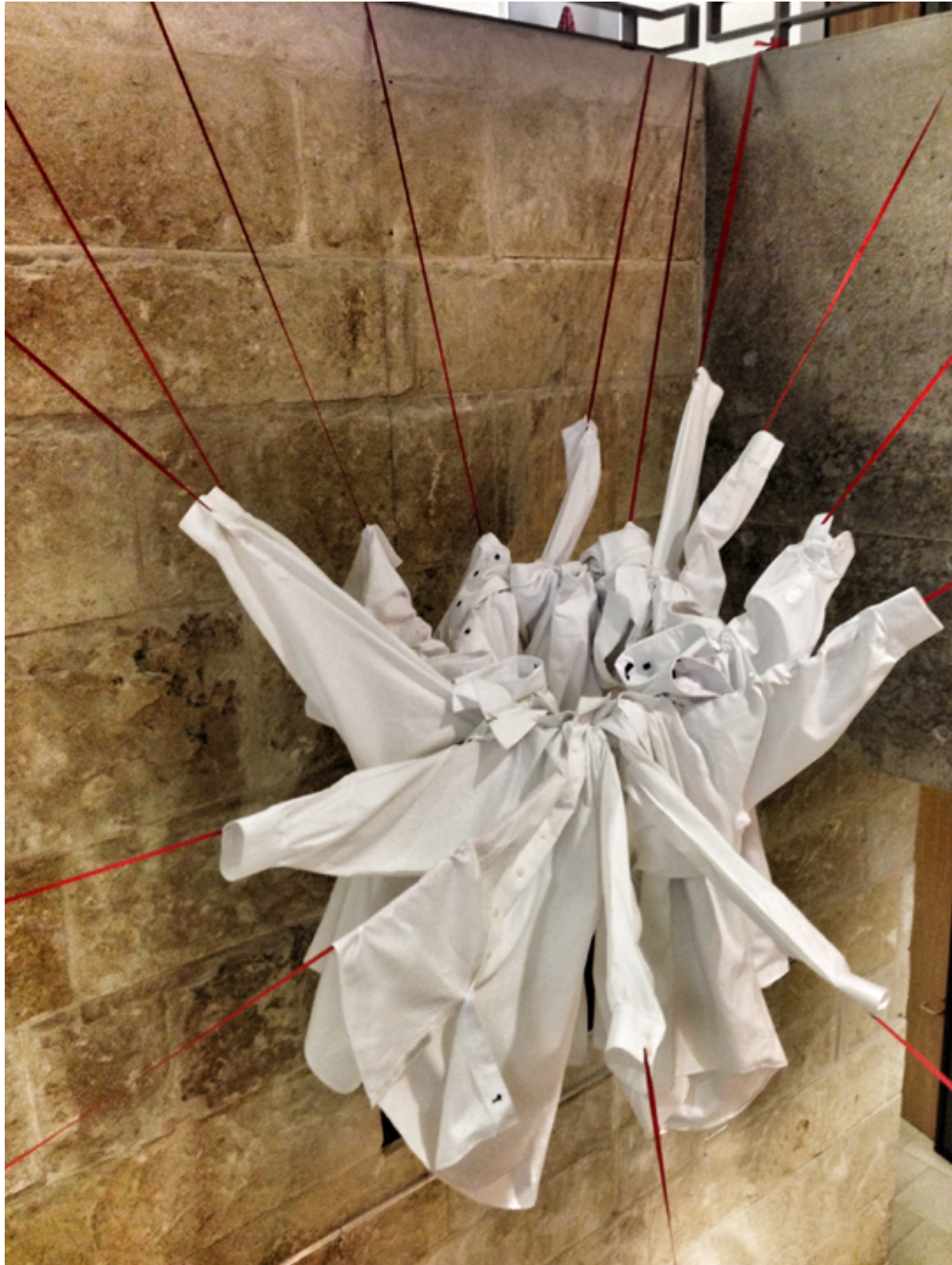


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## INTERVIEW: Michael Garcia



**Michael Anthony García** was born in El Paso, Texas, but has lived all over the state through the years. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art from **Austin College** in Sherman, TX in 1996 where he became an Adjunct Art Faculty member after graduation. His work has been seen throughout Texas, Mexico and Brooklyn, New York and although he has explored a variety of media, the bulk of his constructions are true to the traditions of found-object sculpture, performance art and installations. Most notably he has presented work at Mexic-Arte Museum, the Lawndale and in the **2011 Texas Biennial**. He now lives and teaches in Austin, TX and is a collaborating founder of **Los Outsiders**, a creative and curatorial collective that has organized exhibitions in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, Houston and Austin, TX. He was a recipient of the 2012 Austin Critics Table Award for best group show curation as well as being selected as the 2012 Austin Visual Arts Association's (AVAA) Artist of the Year, 3D.

**Interview by Josh T Franco**

**I'm glad we finally met. Seems like our worlds circled one another for a few years. To**

**business: you're a busy guy. This summer, you curated the 18<sup>th</sup> annual Young Latino Artists (YLA) Exhibition at Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin, had work up at the People's Gallery (aka Austin City Hall), and had a solo show at Red Space, also in Austin. Are you exhausted? Ready to get back to teaching in the Fall? And pre-kindergarteners no less...**

The summer took off like a rocket for me and taking on projects back to back the way I did, was very exhausting, but since then I have had the chance to relax and recharge my batteries. This summer I had the pleasure of living in an art world mirage by curating and creating/exhibiting my own work, but now I have to refocus myself on my day job in education. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a bit of a let down, a postpARTum dip, if you will, but these things always come in cycles so I have learned to adapt.

**We started at Mexic-Arte, walking piece by piece through the show. Off the bat, we got the question of identity out of the way, putting it very much in the way. The YLA has a different curator every year, and I assume the first question this person must ask herself is: What do I consider Latino/a? Yours is perhaps the most international exhibition to date. How did this end up being the case? (after some discussion with next year's curators, I want to be a bit chismoso and say, they are going in a very different direction!)**

In regard to your question about what constitutes Latino Art for me; in organizing the YLA, I was very conscious of what the public expected of it, and that wasn't necessarily the direction I wanted to go. Whereas many would be quick to assume that Latino Art has to be graphic in some way or somehow safe or traditional, I specifically wanted to go in the other direction. Mind you, my elimination of most of those elements is not a critique of those ideas, rather an exploration of "what else is out there." I am more than open to exploring those elements in future curatorial endeavors, but for this opportunity I wanted to turn expectation on its head. As I myself work in performance, installation and found- object sculpture, I wanted the focus on those mediums as a way of putting my stamp on this year's iteration of YLA. I hope it also helped to challenge the public's preconceived notions of what is expected in an institution like Mexic-Arte Museum.

You ask about the international nature of my YLA and I think it went in that direction because of my personal experiences with Latino Art abroad. As I have traveled extensively through Mexico over the years, I have made many connections and life-long friendships. These experiences have opened me up to art communities and individuals that reshaped my own expectations of Latino Art. And, it is through those friendships that I first approached the idea of making YLA more international. I started exploring the friendships I have made in Mexico and began reaching out to art world academia in South America to bring a broader perspective to the exhibition. In fact, one of the most rewarding aspects of the curatorial process for me has been connecting with fellow creatives either through Skype, email or Facebook as I assembled the group of artists in the exhibition. The artwork in the museum eventually comes down, but the friendships and conversations continue regardless of where we all live. Gotta love the internet for that!

**One tension of your YLA was the co-presence of abstraction and affect. So much abstraction is significant in this particular exhibition, as past works often narrated issues of ethnicity, borders, and immigration. But the warmth of affect still pervaded. Sometimes, they co-exist in one piece, such as Eureka by Daniel Adame (though accident has to be discussed here as well). This tension is demonstrated too by the stand-off between, say, Ricardo Paniagua's Unknown Source and [TITLE?] by Nelda Ramos and Javier Vanegas. The former behaves like interactive (for a studio assistant or privileged viewer), re-arrangeable logos. Logos with no corporate references. Eye candy. The latter video piece was difficult to watch for all it's saccharine crooning and indulgent editing of young love. But, if I remember correctly, I made it through the whole damn thing!**

As a viewer, you picked up on a different tension than the one that was more evident to me. Coming at this exhibition from the route of the curatorial process, I found the tension behind the creation of the work to be the most palpable. This is not necessarily experienced by the public, as they were not privy to the behind the scenes process, but by challenging the artists to work collaborate on new pieces as I did, there were huge swaths of time during which I didn't know what the resulting exhibition would look like. The unknown really amped up the

energy from my perspective! However, I think the tension really comes from the resulting artwork being physical manifestations of the artists' collaborative experiences and having all those relationships and conversations playing out in one space. Again, it's not necessarily something visitors to the museum can readily pick up on, but it's there nonetheless.

**I was struck by the quietness of the installation at Red Space following the rowdy exhibition we left behind. Your emphasis on site-specificity in conversation comes to mind. Here in this bedroom-cum-gallery, the bedroom is what is foregrounded. But not without artfulness. Beyond the selection of plaid fabrics—that pattern that moms inevitably get their sons as they send them off freshman year—how did you achieve this? Was it an aim at all?**

I'm glad you picked up on how important the spaces themselves ended up being in my projects. I have always been interested in exploring site-specificity with my work, and it just so happened that it naturally flowed through in many of my creative endeavors this year. Over at Austin City Hall, the idea behind my piece, *El Pórtico*, had been swimming in my head for a while, but when I was exploring the building for an area to install, the stairwell space leading from the first to second floor jumped out as the only space that fit the idea of the work itself. It is a nether-space, perfect for a piece about an otherworldly portal straddling a buttoned-down reality and an escapist-unknown-plane. And, in the YLA exhibition, because discussion about the museum's physical building has been a heated topic as of late, I was compelled to layout the work in a way that brought more attention to the architecture itself. But, it was with the installation I developed for Red Space, that the room where I installed was just so pregnant with its own identity, that I had to create something around that identity itself. As the space is traditionally used as an apartment bedroom, I had to talk about what happens in bedrooms and navigate the fact that there is a window in the middle of the far wall. It became a masculine (hence the plaid) boudoir. It became an installation about sexuality, attraction and exploration. Also, as a large portion of my work references the body through the use of clothing, I wanted to clothe the room itself in a larger than life "outfit" that captured both masculine and feminine traits. It's at once a private and intimate space and a stage on which one is expected to perform.

**I was taken with the precarious wooden constructions throughout. They're not furniture, but not exactly sculpture. They are structural support, but so exposed and undone?**

In that installation, the use of raw wood seemed a natural choice for some reason. As the piece itself is supposed to be a machine, albeit a useless machine that does not serve its purpose, I wanted a material that spoke to the notion of sturdiness but not permanence. Wood is a common material and much in the way birds build their nests with sticks, twigs or even trash they find, the wood is a readily available, familiar and not very far removed from its natural state.

**Finally, I want to think about a quiet signature of yours: red bows. (Did you know it was a signature?) They are present at Red Space, tied non-functionally—but not exactly decoratively—at the corners of the wooden frames. They are present on the work at City Hall as well. One Chicano to another, I can't help recall Amalia Mesa-Bains's description of *rasquachismo*: "Aesthetic expression comes from discards, fragments, even recycled everyday materials such as tires, broken plates, plastic containers recombined with elaborate and bold display...and even embellishment of the car. The capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado is at the heart of *rasquachismo*." I wonder if the red bows are your *rasquache* bits of string.**

As far as the "rasquache" ribbons are concerned, I began using red bows a few years back as the final phase of installing my work. It adds a delicate final step that makes the process feel complete. The idea that the work is tentatively held together by these precarious red flourishes appeals to me, because many of the ideas and concepts in my work exist in a similar intangible state. Undo the right ribbon and it just might cease to exist. And, in lieu of "rasquache", I would call them a "Mexicanada" -fixing something in a humorous, but not necessarily sensible, yet quintessentially Mexican way. They are used in the same vein as a mariachi decorates a "masculine" song with "feminine" gritos.