

JUAN ORRANTIA'S SUGARCOATED BLUES

Tracy Murinik

Tracy Murinik reviews Juan Orrantia's sugarcoated blues, recently on display in the Wits Anthropology Museum.

Juan Orrantia's subtly crafted installation in the paradoxically awkward, but elegant passage of a space that used to be the Wits Anthropology Museum, bares his notable aesthetic fingerprint: an almost (disjointed, although not jarring) filmic quality that draws one into a kind of unstated drama, poetically and engagingly delivered onto two adjoining walls, a cornice and an otherwise empty sheer row of wood and glass anthropological display cabinets.

Flouting linear narrative, Orrantia offers those experiencing the installation a series of vignettes and seemingly disparately captured moments through a careful accumulation of images, text and space that comprise (the correspondingly filmic title of the exhibition) *sugarcoated blues*, and which suggest or intuit connection rather than stating any definite congruity, fact or document – even though they encompass and reference a documentary mode, via photography and text.

But documentary is only one of several modes Orrantia strategically employs with the assortment of images – of people and places – varying in terms of their aesthetic and visual qualities: some richly cinematic, medium-to-large scale, deftly crafted, theatrically lit and imagined, providing requisite drama; others, equally cinematic, printed as image sequences in fold-out booklets with accompanying texts, displayed in the tall glass-fronted cabinets. Further

components of the installation comprise carefully refined portraits, amongst rougher snapshots, some bearing the pixellation and discoloration of a toy Holga camera; and even a digital phone pic, all coexisting in this environment that feels at once contemporary and archival; declarative while simultaneously ambiguous.

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These various tonal modes are strategic in that Orrantia's interests – broadly across his oeuvre, and indeed within this project – are concerned with questions of time, memory and movement, and in this particular instance, with his own experiences, recollections and piecing together of fragments to make sense of, and try to consolidate a greater understanding, of growing up in Colombia in the 1990s, amongst, what he terms “middle class imaginaries” of the narcotics trade that existed all around him. These disparate modes speak to this fragmented chronicling in an echo of how memory prompts, infers and often imagines – the gradual integration into narrative of emotions, remembered actions, experiences and visualisations that, when contextually adjusted to include fresh details of accumulated facts and context acquired over subsequent time, enable a visual movement through a type of fictive, yet personally charged psychic drama of suggestion.

Orrantia only began shooting this project several years after leaving Colombia, once he was settled and living in South Africa. He describes how his pervasive emotional memory of Colombia has always been punctuated by the presence of fear: he grew up filtering



Juan Orrantia, *Sugarcoated Blues* Installation.

the disparate, but coexisting realities around him of different forms of violence, some closer some removed, and an otherwise comfortable middle-class existence that incorporated any sense of threat that may have been felt, and ‘sugarcoated’ it, into a type of sanitised banality that rationalised that fear into an illusory sense of comfort and containment, softening retrospective memory.

The images he has captured towards this project document a process of his subsequent movements in and out of Colombia – returning to and from this once home space – both feeling estranged, and estranging himself in his act of revisiting, anew, but with the intimacy of memory still present. The images from these journeys of revisiting read as inconsistent, or rather paradoxical, in their movement between intimacy and insertion within those spaces, and simultaneously of distance and a degree of emotional detachment that they display, akin to that of a tourist looking in for the first time with curiosity but also with the type of dispassionate objectivity revealing of exclusion from that space and its history.

Orrantia describes the traces that remain for him of this paradoxical relationship as “leftovers” that demand negotiation and revisiting – episodes that he would have experienced that shaped his psychic landscape, that he would not have been able to document concretely at the time, and which *sugarcoated blues* seeks to revisit. He tells of going back to Colombia initially to photograph these memories of fear: his vivid recollections of a small farmers’ village – that ironically, or perhaps fittingly, bears the name of a blade – and which Orrantia came to know during his college years. The space was a central coca growing area, and as a strategically positioned location was a key point for cocaine production in the region, and distribution, and was presided over by a well-known – and well-loved (by many) and feared – paramilitary leader. It was a volatile, politicised space, with paramilitants that patrolled the drug territory making sure of no intrusion and no interference from passersby. There are snippets of this space that have been photographed and included in the installation – photographs he would never have been allowed to shoot at the time – and which in their new context, and in juxtaposition with other images, allow Orrantia to conjure hypothetical questions around the changes he perceived going back to the area, and his imaginings around what was and what developed, or stayed the same – a process which nevertheless still plays out in his imaginings thereof, and remains coloured by the fear that he remembers having felt there. That details of devastating abuses – violence, torture, as well as sexual violence, especially of young girls – have come to light since, further complicate the renegotiation of this space for him.

A fascinating, and chilling inclusion in the installation is a photograph of the paramilitary leader – seemingly a

selfie of himself on the phone from a US Federal Prison in Virginia – sent via WhatsApp to one of Orrantia’s friends, who worked under ‘El Patron’, bearing the message “The boss says hello”.

This friction of the fear that was once felt, and the fear that still maintains a presence, is taken to the point of absurdity in images recording a more recent visit by Orrantia to the ruins of mega-drug lord Pablo Escobar’s estate – once the site of the playing out of terrifying shows of tyrannical patriarchal power; now a bizarre theme park bearing giant sculptures of dinosaurs and mythological figures in various states of disrepair; Escobar’s menacing mystique made suddenly hollow and farcical.

And then a subtle fold-out booklet, documenting images and transcriptions retrieved from the black box of an aeroplane that crashed in New York City in 1993 takes the paradoxical tragedy and absurdity of the impact of the narcotrade and of narcotraffic to the extreme: the text follows and outlines the horror of the crash and its few survivors, one of whom was searched and discovered to be a Colombian drug mule, who, after miraculously surviving this near-fatal event, finds himself nevertheless arrested and imprisoned by US Federal Agents who, not unlike the Colombian elites, similarly expose and wield their own self-serving power to reveal the realities of class and socio-economic survival that underpin the history of the narcotrade, and of the economies that benefit from and control it.

Orrantia pieces these scenarios together in a shrewdly agile maze of affect and inference. They play off against one another as both echo and negation of the fear that exists for Orrantia, real and imagined, evoking that ‘afterlife’ of memory in all its complexity.