ARTNEWS

The Artist America Built: Daniel Joseph Martinez Visits Other Places and Other Histories in His Ongoing Critique of These United States

By Maximilíano Durón Posted 12/11/18 10:58 AM

Daniel Joseph Martinez photographed outside his studio in Los Angeles on September 23, 2018.
KATHERINE MCMAHON/ARTNEWS

It's a sight that no one who attended the 1993 Whitney Biennial is likely to forget, one that came to stand for the Biennial itself, with its provocative emphasis on politics: ordinary people of all colors walking around wearing pins that collectively read, "I can't. Imagine. Ever Wanting. To Be. White." If you wanted to see the show, you couldn't not wear them; they were the museum's admission badges, designed for the Biennial as a project by the artist Daniel Joseph Martinez.

Coming at the height of the culture wars, the exhibition was widely reviled and vilified. *New York Times* chief art critic Michael Kimmelman leveled a portion of his fury at Martinez's commission, titled *Museum Tags: Second Movement (Overture); or, Overture con Claque (Overture with Hired Audience Members)*. "[A]s if the people who go to the Whitney are so witless and backward that they need to be told that sexual abuse and racism and violence are bad. . . .," he wrote. "Or as if a Neanderthal would change his mind after being forced, like a penitent, to don one of the infamous admission badges." (Kimmelman didn't mention Martinez by name.)

"People went hyperbolic on it," said David Ross, who was director of the Whitney at the time. "I remember even former Mayor Koch, who had a radio show, accused the museum of fascism because he said we forced people to wear badges that declared that being white was no good. People just had completely bizarre readings of that piece. That piece became a real lightning rod."

Museum Tags couldn't win. When it wasn't being castigated as racist and antiwhite, it was blamed for setting back equality for people of color. The project's notoriety canonized it. "People used that work to illustrate their own thesis," Ross added. "The fortunate part about that is that it kept the work alive and made it even more emblematic of a show that was so controversial and contentious."

Looking back on *Museum Tags*, Martinez told me he remembers it as "an atom bomb that went off in the museum. Everything that everyone wants to do right now in terms of identification, this was the foundation for that. It's taken 25 years for those efforts to see any traction. What started then took until now to finally have a social and cultural critical mass. Look at how slowly it moves." Martinez, however, was just getting started—and he hasn't slowed down.

Admission tags to the Whitney Museum, 1993, including one from Daniel Joseph Martinez's *Museum Tags* project.
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Martinez's studio in the Crenshaw neighborhood in South Los Angeles is a nondescript ground-floor space that is slightly unkempt and littered with well-worn, dog-eared books. The artist himself, whose arms are covered with tattoos from the year he spent with the Maori in New Zealand, has hair dyed platinum blond and a commanding voice, and does not mince words when talking about art, especially his own. No artwork in the history of art, he told me, has ever been self-explanatory.

"The notion of the simplification of a self-describing image contemporarily is false," Martinez said. "Everything in art history, you have to have some piece of text to help you understand what you're looking at."

"I absolutely demand that people think when they look at my work," he continued. "If they don't want to think about the work, then they can fuck off. I'm expected to lower the rigor of my work to fit that contemporary model? I don't think so."

Martinez doesn't work in a distinct style or medium. Each series is a radical break from the one that came before. "I privilege experimentation over everything else," he said.

He starts with ideas, drawing from art history, philosophy, theory, pop culture, and science, and uses them to produce conversations around the resulting work, and inevitably, about identity. "I need to put all the questions of identity secondary to the production of ideas," he said. "The rigor of ideas must come first." His restless practice can make him hard to pin

down. “It’s not about creating one new genre,” he told me. “It’s about creating one after another after another after another. It’s about completely reinventing it over and over again.”

When I visited in late August, Martinez had just returned from a residency at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Center in Italy, where he’d begun work on a new series. *Beyond Flesh: Gray Obtuse Dangerous, or Our Will for Liberation Is Their Terror! To Resist Means to Breathe Together* is a group of black-and-white photographs showing Martinez striking lyrical poses in a variety of zombie masks, with a text-filled chalkboard hung from his neck.

Each discrete body of work Martinez creates points to three specific references. In this case, he’s drawing on the histories of the Italian film director and intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was murdered after completing his explicit film *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, which was censored in Italy; that country’s autonomous movements in the 1970s, as personified by the philosopher and sociologist Antonio Negri; and the 1920s American phenomenon of zombie-ism, a form of xenophobia that became a horror subgenre.

“Zombie-ism has always been a metaphor for the ‘other’: minorities, women, LGBT people,” Martinez said. “If Donna Haraway in 1985 writes the *Cyborg Manifesto* to completely retool feminism, what I’m doing is retooling zombie-ism as the most radical form of critical thinking and art making, as a means by which to completely rethink the concept of race in America.”

Martinez also used black-and-white photographs of his own body in a series begun in 2016 that was shown this past summer in the Hammer Museum’s “Made in L.A.” biennial. Shot against the starkness of a German winter, *I am Ulrike Meinhof or (someone once told me time is a flat circle)* shows him traversing the 103-mile border that once divided East and West Berlin. In each photograph, he holds up a different portrait of Meinhof, the German left-wing militant and cofounder of the Red Army Faction.

The movement of bodies, and by extension peoples, across borders has long been a central concern in Martinez’s work. A project he did at Cornell University in the fall of 1993—part of the “Revelaciones/Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence” exhibition at the college’s Johnson Museum—followed shortly after the controversy around his Whitney Museum tags. In the center of Cornell’s quad, he placed a large-scale set of tar-painted walls evocative of borders. The installation caused an uproar: some students defaced it with racial epithets; others, predominantly Latinx, tried to defend it by forming a human chain; they eventually took over the president’s office for a weekend.

“Revelaciones/Revelations” curator Chon Noriega, who is now director of UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center and adjunct curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, thinks the Cornell piece and the Meinhof series resonate today, in an era of vitriol around

building a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. "The use of his own body, the performative element of being in a particular space and mapping what is ostensibly a historical boundary as an act of remembering a particular history," Noriega said, "as a fact of retracing something that really isn't over—the political struggles, arbitrary boundaries. It's by no means a done and over history."

Daniel Joseph Martinez, *This was a tiny valley floor at the "Rudower Höhe". The park is located in the districts of Rudow and Alt-Glienicke. The Rudower Höhe was created from a 70-meter-high mountain of rubble in the 1950s. Further east, the Wall ran before the turnaround. Approximately 400 meters of the Wall can still be seen in the original. Since 2001, these remains have been declared a Historic Monument.*, 2017.
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Martinez's preference for working outside the white cube—his desire, as he puts it, to "reformat the field of art, as opposed to just make another object to go in a gallery"—comes from his artistic training at California Institute of the Arts in Southern California. He was born in 1957 in Inglewood, a city in Los Angeles County's South Bay region, and arrived at CalArts

in the mid-1970s, during the height of institutional critique. Among his professors were artists Michael Asher, John Baldessari, and Douglas Huebler.

“There was a categorical rejection of studio art making,” Martinez said of his time at CalArts. “We were anti-capital because that’s what Asher believed. It was all a project-based making of art, as an intellectual and experimental model, that was privileged above all other things. Nothing else mattered.”

After CalArts, Martinez, whose family traces its roots to Mexico, briefly joined the Chicano art collective Asco, which had been staging avant-garde performances throughout the city’s Eastside since 1971. It’s an episode in his life that he’s disinclined to talk about at length. He parted company with Asco, and he also broke with any identification with Chicano art. He wanted to interrogate ways in which he could expand art as a whole and decided that working in that vein could only move the discourse about race and identity so far. To this day, he doesn’t claim Chicano identity. If necessary, he will say he is Mexican-American, but first and foremost, he’s an American artist.

“One of my ambitions is attempting to dislocate myself from a particular trajectory and reinsert myself into one that is unknown, which gives me the freedom to make the kinds of critical commentaries that I would like to make with the work itself,” he said.

Around the same time as his involvement with Asco, Martinez became an assistant for the German artist Klaus Rinke, who spent two years in Los Angeles preparing for an exhibition at the Flow Ace Gallery in West Hollywood. Rinke was a protégé of Joseph Beuys and it was through him that Martinez first encountered Beuys’s theory of social sculpture as a means to transform society, as well as Beuys’s practice of pedagogy as art. “Beuys never saw a difference between teaching and making work and I come from exactly that tradition,” said Martinez, who is a distinguished professor of art at University of California, Irvine, where he has trained nearly three decades of artists since the early 1990s. “Teaching is like breathing.”

Martinez sees his teaching as a way to continue to evolve his own ideas, positionality, and practice as a whole. “Young people hold me accountable to the discourse of their time and their age,” he said. “They expect me to know what they are concerned about. I have to have some understanding of them, otherwise I cannot engage in discourse with them.”

Alongside his teaching, he was developing the uncompromising aesthetic approach he maintains today. “I want to have the force of a tsunami and the precision of a laser,” he told me. “That’s why my position is tricky for people, because I want to reformat social identity. I don’t want to allow us to just be something that is merely an image of the self that we see in the mirror that can be replicated.”

Daniel Joseph Martinez, *Museum Tags: Second Movement (Overture); or, Overture con Claque (Overture with Hired Audience Members)*, at the 1993 Whitney Biennial.
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Martinez conceived *Museum Tags* on a cold day in the early '90s, while he was standing outside the Art Institute of Chicago, in the shadow of the lions that guard the museum's entrance. He came up with the words as "a response to the conditions of the society that I found myself living in. . . . I must have heard a million times people saying how they didn't want to be minorities. Well, why do you think we want to be you? Why do you think that whiteness is the pinnacle of success?"

"What happens if you [don't] want to be white, if you categorically reject that? The only strategy that made sense to me was to flip whiteness back on itself," he continued.

"That was the power of the tags," said Juli Carson, a professor at University of California Irvine and an art historian who has written about Martinez's more recent work. "It placed white as a construct. No tribe—no race, no ethnicity, no gender, *nobody*—gets out of those tags alive."

It still irks Martinez that no one seemed to understand the complexities of the piece, beyond the words printed on the metal pins. For him, more than anything, it was a way of examining the nature of language itself, and how its context, when it begins to be arranged and mutated, can fall apart—or create new meanings. To that end, he split the sentence into five parts to print separately on the tags: I can't. Imagine. Ever Wanting. To Be. White. He instructed clerks at the admissions desk to make a judgment as to which tag to give each patron. (He's not sure how closely that was followed.) But the gesture of the work was to see the phrase intervene throughout the museum, on various bodies, white and nonwhite alike. He points to one image that captures a racially ambiguous woman wearing a T-shirt that reads "GAY BOYS MAKE ME HARD," with the "Imagine" tag clipped to her shirt's neckband. He finds that juxtaposition hilarious to this day.

"At that exact moment of recognition, you realize that any previous interpretation of how we construct our identity is gone," he said. "It's been erased because a new proposition is in place, which suggests that all of these things are moving all the time. It suggests a completely new paradigm by which to see."

The artist Glenn Kaino, who studied with Martinez at UC Irvine, sees *Museum Tags* as a breakthrough—and not just for Martinez. "Daniel helped shape and inspire a generation of artists because he was able to show the world that that type of work and that type of art making was possible," Kaino said. "Before Daniel, no one had challenged the system in quite that way. The arc and the history of art is a story of challenging certain systems, but Daniel's challenges came with a certain level of sacrifice."

That sacrifice took the form of a kind of alienation. Prior to that Biennial, Martinez felt his career was on an upward trajectory. (Paintings of his were also included in that year's

“Aperto” section of the Venice Biennale.) Afterward, he couldn’t get a show in New York for five years. (His art would appear in the city again only when art dealer Christian Haye opened his short-lived Project gallery in Harlem in 1998.) “Everybody wants freedom,” Martinez said. “The problem is there’s a price for it. Freedom has never been free. It always comes at a cost. The price to tear this down and rebuild it means everyone has to give up their luxury. I have lived the politics that I say I am . . . and I’ve paid a consequence for standing up for those rights. It did not come free.”

It may have been partly out of disillusionment with an art world that claimed meritocracy in name only that Martinez turned to collaboration. In 1997 he cofounded, with Kaino, Rolo Castillo, and Tracey Shiffman, the artist-run space Deep River in Downtown L.A. That neighborhood is now packed with galleries, but back then Deep River was on its own. The project, which from the outset was to have a finite run of five years, was Martinez extending his inquiry into Beuys’s concept of social sculpture. For Kaino, it was a “symbolic access point to an unseen group of artists that existed in the city,” as a way to “provide and create opportunity.”

“The logic was the logic of inclusion,” Kaino said. “The artists we collaborated with, we felt, created work that was important and needed. Most of them, if not all . . . , were not being represented in the institutions around the city.” Mark Bradford and Ken Gonzales-Day are among the artists who got early support from Deep River, and it drew the attention of a mentor. “The only time I got a compliment ever in my life from Michael Asher is when he came down for a show once,” Martinez said. “He said, ‘Daniel, this project is perfect.’ That’s all he said.”

The ideology of Deep River and its commitment to artists served as the inspiration for another nonprofit space that would open in the city a few years later: when Lauri Firstenberg founded LAXART in 2005, she saw Martinez as a collaborator, and asked him to create an exhibition inaugurating the space. (When LAXART moved from Culver City to Hollywood in 2015, it christened its new space with an archival exhibition on Deep River.)

“Through teaching and his artistic production and through opening a space like Deep River, there’s such a generosity,” Firstenberg said. “Something fundamental to him was artists supporting other artists. There is a generosity in spirit, and I see so much of his work and his teachings when I go to artists’ studios. I see Daniel’s influence everywhere.”

Daniel Joseph Martinez, *Self Portrait #9: Fifth attempt to clone mental disorder; or, How one philosophizes with a hammer, (Nietzsche) after Gustave Moreau, "Prometheus," 1868, and David Cronenberg, "Videodrome," 1981*, 2004, from the series "Coyote: I Like Mexico and Mexico Likes Me (More Human Than Human)."
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Social sculpture in the form of Deep River wasn't the only way in which Martinez was channeling Beuys. In the late '90s, his work took a dark turn. For a 1999–2002 photographic series titled "Coyote: I Like Mexico and Mexico Likes Me (More Human Than Human)," after Beuys's famous "I Like America and America Likes Me," Martinez created a series of self-portraits using prosthetic makeup that visualize his body in various forms of dismemberment. One triptych shows a deep gash in his abdomen. Over the course of the series, Martinez reaches into the wound, finally pulling out his entrails. Other images show a cut-out tongue, a freshly slashed throat, and the top of his skull stitched together as if following some ghastly surgery. An additional entry reimagines the Biblical scene of Salome receiving the decapitated head of John the Baptist from Herod; here, Martinez receives his

own head from an unnamed woman. (His image flips the composition of Caravaggio's famous painting of the story.)

Next came two sets of animatronic self-portraits. In *To Make a Blind Man Murder for the Things He's Seen (or Happiness is Over-rated)*, completed in 2002, Martinez, wearing a navy worker's uniform, attempts to slit his wrists. The piece is meant to be displayed in the corner of a white room, facing away from the viewer. *Call Me Ishmael: The Fully Enlightened Earth Radiates Disaster Triumphant*, his commission for the U.S. Pavilion in the 2006 Cairo Biennale, features Martinez again, this time clad in white with a silver belt buckle reading "Ishmael." The figure convulses at random intervals, drawing on the climactic scene in *Blade Runner* where the tough-as-nails replicant Pris, played by Daryl Hannah, short-circuits after being shot.

"To put my brown body constantly in the work," Martinez said of those pieces, "to transgress the body, to dismember the body, by constantly reusing the body, I am in effect, politicizing my body."

"He's always drawn our attention to these really hard issues of, especially, the complicit nature of the state in violence, genocide, and the mechanisms and systems of power," said Pilar Tompkins Rivas, director of the Vincent Price Art Museum. "He's not one to offer the how-to in the work. I don't think he necessarily offers a strategy out. He offers it for you to look and form your own opinion about."

Violence continued to interest Martinez in the mid-2000s. In 2004 he completed his installation *The House America Built*. The work is simple on its surface, a brightly colored wood cabin that is split down the middle, Gordon Matta-Clark style. The cabin, however, is uniquely American, a replica of the one that Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, built in rural Montana, modeling it on Thoreau's in Walden Pond. The colors Martinez used are that season's palette from Martha Stewart's interior paints collection. There's a conspiracy theory logic here: both Stewart and the Unabomber are Polish-Americans, born within a year of each other, and both were eventually arrested (Stewart on charges of lying to investigators in an insider trading case). The ideological extremes they represent, Martinez said, become "an implication of the normalization of politics and hyper-capitalists, even terrorist positions, within the United States itself."

"Across all of those references, he's run the gamut of all these different directions that the country could have taken or has taken," said Tompkins Rivas, who included *The House America Built* in the recent "Home—So Different, So Appealing" exhibition at LACMA that she co-curated. "When he does something like that and says, 'This is the house America built,' it's poking at all these different areas and saying, 'we have a tendency to think about

ourselves as one thing, but here's what the country has actually produced.' Within one work, he's synthesizing all these complex questions of what it means to be American."

"How do you comment on the time that we live in?" Martinez asked me. He says that most artists might opt to focus on "what is happening in the United States itself," but that ultimately leads to work that begins to look identical, "where people have the same conversation."

"When I talk about Italy or Berlin in my work, I'm not talking about Italy or Berlin," he said. "I'm talking about America. These are scathing critiques of America, but I use history and . . . other places to build on political and aesthetic trajectories."

Daniel Joseph Martinez, *The House That America Built*, 2004, installation view in "Home—So Different, So Appealing," at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2017.
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In 2008 Martinez was invited back to the Whitney Biennial, to which he contributed a room-size installation of text-based canvases called *Divine Violence*. The 172 paintings draw from a list of more than 1,700 groups that use violence to enforce their politics. Each canvas lists one organization in black letters on a gold background. He places groups like the Ku Klux Klan, Blackwater, and the KGB on the same level as the Black Panthers, the Jewish Defense

League, and the CIA. "Somebody that you think is good, next to somebody you think is bad," Martinez explained, "reveals the binary there, the flaw in the thinking. You don't get to say one person's violence is acceptable, and another person's violence is not acceptable. That's hypocritical."

Martinez's work is more visible now than it has been since *Museum Tags*. The Whitney acquired *Divine Violence* and put it back on display in their recent "An Incomplete History of Protest" collection show. This past August, the Hammer Museum gave Martinez its [$25,000 Career Achievement Award] for the Meinhof series, his contribution to "Made in L.A. 2018." History has conspired to make his work newly relevant. "There's so much going on politically right now," said painter Julie Mehretu, who first met Martinez when he was a visiting artist during her M.F.A. program at the Rhode Island School of Design in the '90s. "There's a real need for a different type of rigorous thinking, and Daniel has been doing that from the beginning. Young people and artists are looking for work that deals with these issues in complex and complicated ways that are not reductive or expected."

He still hasn't had a mid-career survey in the United States, though a show of his photographic work was held in 2001 in Mexico City. And in 2009, Hatje Cantz published a monograph, *A life of disobedience*, that featured his best-known works. Now he and Carson, the UC Irvine art historian, are at work on a new book called *Leaves for Burning: Transpositions of a Past Not Worth Living (Reflections on Daniel Joseph Martinez)* that deconstructs the very idea of a monograph by presenting three "case studies" of recent work: the zombie *Beyond Flesh* work, the Meinhof series, and a 2016 sculptural installation in which Martinez has reimagined himself in Jacques-Louis David's famous painting *The Death of Marat* as both victim and killer. To be published by the Miami-based press [NAME] Publications in 2020, the book, Carson said, is a way to "consider the means by which we might live our lives in a curative present vis-à-vis our collective imaginary relationship to poisonous past events." The text (by Carson) and the images respond to, and reflect back on, each other as a way to "resist the hierarchical structure—latent within many art monographs—in which art historical narrative either subjugates itself as a mere *description* of an artwork or, to the opposite effect, dominates the artwork as its final *word*."

For better or worse, Martinez may forever be notorious as the artist who created those museum tags. For many in the art world they resonate today in ways they didn't 25 years ago. "I think it continues to feed subsequent generations about the possibilities inherent in art," said Phoenix Art Museum chief curator Gilbert Vicario, who curated the 2006 Cairo Biennale pavilion, "either for social change or to even begin to establish a conversation for how that can be achieved."

Martinez has moved on, pondering what to make next. “There’s timing to ideas,” he said. “There are moments when ideas have an opportunity and moments when they don’t. It’s about listening and looking and being sensitive to these moments and understanding history. Then the necessity of the work lays itself bare.”

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