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PEPÓN OSORIO

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FOREWORD

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Born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, in 1955, Benjamin “Pepón” Osorio is one of the world’s foremost installation artists, noted not only for his exploration of form across diverse cultural registers but also for his commitment to an artistic process grounded in social justice, collaboration with disenfranchised communities, and blurring of the institutional boundaries for artistic practice and exhibition. Jennifer González, in her in-depth and eloquent study, describes how Osorio’s experiences have informed these aspects of his work. His childhood in Puerto Rico, his college studies in social work and art education, his stint as a social worker in the Bronx, and his current position in the community arts and art education programs at Temple University—all contribute to what González calls “a form of skilled discourse that lies somewhere between investigative journalism and social work, eliciting stories and perspectives on the everyday world of urban life.”

Osorio situates his work across art and non-art spaces—museum, art gallery, public space, community setting, and home—refusing to presume the authority of a native or insider status in any one of them. In reference to his installations in museums and other public venues, he explains that “from the very beginning, everybody knows that I am squatting.”¹ His work has used theatrical staging to introduce an idea of the Puerto Rican home into artistic discourse: *La Cama* (1987) and *El Chandelier* (1988), created from common household furnishings, were originally set properties for performance pieces; *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)* (1993) presents the interior of a Puerto Rican apartment as a site of domestic, social, and cultural violence. In *I Have a Story to Tell You...* (2003), Osorio’s first permanent public art installation, a *casita* (little house) serves as a community photograph album. *Casitas* are a familiar site in urban Puerto Rican neighborhoods, where they occupy vacant lots that have been transformed into community gardens. Constructed of glass panels printed with large photographic images, this *casita* is also a gathering space at a community-based organization. Large-scale installations such as *En la Barbería No Se Lloro* (No Crying Allowed in the Barber Shop, 1994) and *Badge of Honor* (1994)

Pepón Osorio, *En la Barbería No Se Lloro*, 1994. Mixed media and video installation at 481 Park Street, Hartford, Connecticut. Collection of the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, San Juan.
Commissioned by Real Art Ways, Inc., Hartford, Connecticut.
Photograph by John Groo; courtesy of Real Art Ways, Inc.



have occupied both community and gallery settings, brokering a dialogue where none had existed before. Other installations have reimagined, or “displaced,” institutional spaces in a gallery setting: *Face to Face* (2002) re-creates a social service agency, *Trials and Turbulence* (2004) a courtroom. In the “Home Visits” project (2000), Osorio turned private residences in different cities into exhibition sites for a small sculpture—a *casita*—that represents a family home lost in a Philadelphia flood. Osorio explores loss and death in many installations, including *A Mis Adorables Hijas* (1990), *El Velorio: AIDS in the Latino Community* (1991), and *Drowned in a Glass of Water* (2010). Rather than “representing” a community,” as González concludes, “Osorio’s installations offer an opportunity for unplanned discourse and reciprocity across communities. The installations are symbolic representations of institutional and social relations—relations founded across the thresholds of defined spaces.”

Osorio refers to his work as “social architecture,” which suggests a synthesis of concepts emerging in the 1960s that emphasized the aesthetic dimension of social change: the urban planning notion of “placemaking” and Joseph Beuys’s “social sculpture.” In that regard, Osorio’s approach offers a critical engagement with similar concepts, including relational aesthetics, social practice, collaborative art, and community-based art. González identifies Osorio’s method as materialist, dialogic, and collaborative, proposing the term *counter-site* for his installations and finding in his work a “collective artistic praxis” and “dialogical aesthetics” (concepts developed by Miwon Kwon and Grant Kester, respectively) that serve as the basis for an art of social process. For Osorio, social process necessarily pushes in many directions, rather than aligning on one side of a conflict. His work is attentive to placemaking, but it also imbues place with a sense of mobility and exchange—through the circulation of the artwork and its viewers, through the institutional displacement and incitement of discourse occasioned by an installation, and through plotting the links between the private and the public, the specific and the universal. Thus, even as Osorio draws attention to social justice, gives visibility to marginalized communities, and taps into melodramatic discourses about families, his work insistently embodies contradiction as well as the ambiguity of multiple narratives. There is injustice, to be sure, but coming to terms with it is neither easy nor simple.

Pepon Osorio, *Lonely Soul*, 2008. Wooden crutches, fiberglass, Styrofoam, wood, resin, photos, metals, human hair, 1,000 pins, hair clips, and rotating wheelchair wheels, 108 × 31 × 49 inches.

Photograph courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com.

In *Lonely Soul* (2008), a *piragüera*, who sells shaved ice, sits inside her pushcart surrounded by colorful bottles filled with different fruit-flavored syrups. Stylized red flames border the inside of the windows. The pushcart evokes other makeshift structures: the *casita*, and an improbable vehicle for human transport complete with rearview mirrors and two wheels from a wheelchair. The entire multivalent structure—pushcart, *casita*, and vehicle—rests upon dozens of wooden underarm crutches. Their haphazard arrangement makes the structure appear to careen slightly forward and to the right. *Lonely Soul* was inspired by an Afro-Caribbean woman Osorio saw selling *piraguas* (cones of shaved ice) one hot summer day in North Philadelphia. For Osorio, her ministrations to the overheated conjured up the Anima Sola, or Lonely Soul, of Roman Catholic tradition. In artworks and widely circulated chromolithographs, the Anima Sola is usually depicted as a woman surrounded by the flames of purgatory, her chained arms and reverent gaze reaching upward. Indeed, a figurine of the Anima Sola stands inside the cart. It is an image, as Ezra Pound writes in his 1908 poem “Anima Sola,” of “Exquisite loneliness:/Bound of my own caprice.”² Her sins are variously reported as sexual transgression or refusing to offer water to Christ upon the cross—in either case the corresponding punishment is unbearable heat and thirst. The Anima Sola is also found in Afro-Caribbean Santería and in Vodou—both products of the syncretism of an imposed Catholicism with West African and indigenous religious beliefs.

Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta transformed this syncretic Anima Sola into a time-based action in Oaxaca, Mexico, in *Anima: Silueta de Cohetes* (Soul, Silhouette of Fireworks, 1976); she commissioned an Anima figure made of cane and strung with fireworks, set it afire, and filmed the figure blazing and then crumbling into embers. Osorio, by employing “Lonely Soul” rather than “Anima Sola,” the Latin and Spanish term, presents the syncretism not as the object of cultural reclamation or timeless archetypes, but as part of an overpowering, contradictory, and discomfiting cultural presence that remains largely invisible in the mainstream US imaginary.

The cultural specificity and the apparent kitsch in Osorio’s work are often taken as ethnographic display, rather than a calculated intervention within the formal strictures of contemporary

art. Like Ai Weiwei's *Grapes* (2010), a sculptural morphing of wooden stools from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), *Lonely Soul* frees the found object—the crutch—from its original function by grounding it, quite literally, in its functionality. The stools in *Grapes*, which radiate from a single stool resting on the ground, are most stool-like in this extreme instance of their three-legged stability. But in only supporting themselves, they are also freed from their role as either useful object or artifact of the nation's past. The crutches in *Lonely Soul* are most crutch-like in that their stability depends on supporting something else—in this case, not an injured human, but a metaphor for injured humanity. If crutches provide support and aid mobility during a temporary injury, here their utility—like that of picture frames or pedestal bases—resides in temporarily “carrying” an artwork derived from Afro-Caribbean references into the white cube of the gallery space. But Osorio offers no easy “translation” beyond the title itself; his work is not about equivalences but about dialogue with an absent interlocutor. The viewer must grapple with a conceptual conceit that represents the purgatory of downward mobility for working class and non-white Puerto Ricans on the mainland, while it also opens up a global dialogue on human rights.

Just as *Lonely Soul* conjures up *Anima Sola*, it overlays another, more contemporary, figure onto the *piragüera*: Amina Lawal, a



Pepón Osorio, *Fear and Denial*, 1997. Mixed media, 92 × 96 × 32 inches. Collection of the Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Photograph courtesy of Pepón Osorio.



Pepón Osorio, *My Beating Heart*, 2002. Fiberglass, archival paper, acrylic, and sound, 72 × 65 inches. Photograph courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York/www.feldmangallery.com.

Pepón Osorio, *Ascending/Descending*, 2008. Pearl-tip pins, photographic prints, and sandals, 11 × 9 inches; mirror base, 19½ × 19½ inches.

Photograph courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York/www.feldmangallery.com.

Nigerian women sentenced to death by stoning under sharia law in 2002 for adultery and having a child out of wedlock.³ *Lonely Soul* signals not just the syncretic religions of the Americas—both as a cultural fact and as a heuristic applied to intractable racial formations—but also the religious tensions between Christian and Muslim in West Africa and a global struggle between religious and cultural practices and sexual and reproductive rights. On the latter point, *Lonely Soul* pivots on the common ground vis-à-vis religious punishment for female sexuality outside marriage, and it is here that Osorio locates his allegory about Puerto Rican status on the mainland.

In addition to art that moves between community settings and the art world, Osorio has also produced sculptural works exhibited in galleries and museums. These works are often more personal than his installations, drawing inspiration from such sources as his mother's knickknacks (*Fear and Denial*, 1997), the sound of the artist's heart (*My Beating Heart*, 2002), or the ubiquitous sandals worn by a friend who suddenly passed away (*Ascending/Descending*, 2008). The oversized flocked cat figurines on a narrow table, the giant piñata-style heart, or the illusory doubling of sandals pricked by numerous pearl tip pins—all unsettle a sense of scale, order, and even comfort vis-à-vis mass-produced objects. And yet they engage viewers by moving them from the personal to the allegorical and back, by exploring the recurring contrasts in Osorio's work: high and low culture, black and white, body and soul, beauty and pain, healing and death. Like the *piragüera* in *Lonely Soul* who burns in purgatory while offering passersby shaved ice, the photographic insoles in *Ascending/Descending* prick the viewer with the poignant realization that we are, and are not, looking at our own fate. If Osorio's work is uneasy, it is precisely because it captivates viewers, drawing them into large and complex social frameworks wherein the self and the other do not have the comfort of distance through difference. Here difference exists as a necessary condition of our humanity.

NOTES

1. Pepón Osorio, "An Interview with Pepón Osorio," by Hans Ulrich Obrist, in *Pepón Osorio: De Puerta en Puerta/Door to Door*, exhibition catalog (San Juan, PR: EAP Press, 2000), 6.
2. Ezra Pound, "Anima Sola," *A Lume Spento* (A. Antonini, 1908).
3. The conviction was overturned in 2004.

