

Interview conducted  
in Cambridge, Massachusetts,  
Spring 2005



*Purging Rome*

## Interview with Ross Cisneros

JAE RHIM LEE

JRL: So how are you?

RC: Very hungry.

JRL: This is so perfect you have your horn and your food.

RC: Two things essential to life.

JRL: It's like a wire structure covered with plastic.

RC: Taking it to the wax pot, dunking it and then taping it up again, it's almost like mummification how they have gauze and the tape.

JRL: Like a modified paper Mache with wax.

JRL: So something that I am interested in hearing about is how you became interested in the ghillie as a point of departure, as the crux of everything.

RC: I'm trying to remember when the ghillie came into my life

JRL: How did you meet the ghillie?<sup>1</sup>

RC: Well it's going to take a second; at this point it's just a part of me that I don't remember when I wasn't thinking about it.

JRL: You don't remember a time when there was no ghillie.

RC: You know, I guess it was that I was intrigued by the image that must have come up in movies or something of a sniper—and this sniper had this veil, or this costume, a camouflage that mimicked the landscape. The sniper was always precise, thoughtful, and graceful because he had to move with the landscape and use that ghillie suit to his best advantage and operate under this cloak all for the sole purpose of extinguishing the Other. I found it ironic that the sniper assumed the façade of twigs and trees, (the gentle things of nature) as the ultimate veil for a violent agenda. It is like strange betrayal because the Ghillie would put on his eyes of nature to be a destroyer. It was quite the Trojan horse.

JRL: Was it so unlike nature? As if something had to die...

RC: The costume itself was so hypocritical and deceptive that I thought, "Oh that could be art." By wearing nature you gain the omnipotence of nature and you then can determine who lives and who dies.

JRL: When you put the ghillie suit on, do you see yourself embodying these attributes?

RC: I wanted to give the ghillie a sense of doubt or maybe even guilt and have the desire to be seen and the desire to produce and manifest rather than to take and be invisible. This I found to be similar with what a poet might go through after a monastic period of writing—one must come out of his or her surroundings and be vulnerable—creating an anxiety or grief of loosing the transcendental world of ideas to the world of manifest objects. This is when the Ghillie just

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<sup>1</sup> For those not familiar with the term, a ghillie suit is an overgarment covered with strips of burlap and other materials that in the wild simply disappears from view. The name comes from the suit's inventors: ghillies are river guides and wardens in Ireland, and they are charged with the responsibility of stopping poaching on their lands. Today, ghillie suits are used by many military special forces personnel, particularly snipers.



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starts vomiting. In that moment of desperation these cities are born from the shapes that come from the bowels of fantasy.

JRL: Is the digestion understood?

RC: How I see it, it was formed inside and this vomiting is more like a birth.

JRL: Like an immaculate conception?

RC: Yes, immaculate—as I believe all things to be. Again the Ghillie is embodied in nature. Like the seahorse, it regenerates without the need for the opposite sex—though it has indeed partnered up with nature. I think it is useful to think like a seahorse as an artist. The Ghillie is not specific when it comes to gender.

JRL: It's asexual when parts of you get sloughed off.

RC: Not asexual in this case but rather unspecific. The Ghillie interests me because it seems to embody both understandings of nature, being feminine, and the brute force of war connoting the masculine.

JRL: So these are symbols for you. Did you see this ghillie and these municipal buildings as being part of your language? What does that mean for you

RC: I think people should make it a point to find whatever language suits them best to fulfill self-mastery. What I produce and the images that look back at me are my tools by which I can make progress to understand the world and myself. So, I'm not saying artists only need to make their own language, but a preacher needs his language just like a chemist needs his language.

JRL: But yours is particular whereas chemists share a common language, and the development of a new language is when invention occurs.

RC: Regardless, it is about the development of the self. My favorite scientists all happen to be wrapped up in a mystical order that smells like art practice. It wasn't that the science they were doing was their defining language, it was in the after hours that they studied the real stuff. Francis Bacon was a great Rosicrucian who practiced through the language of self mastery—the discipline of the self first, science later. Edison had great interest in metaphysics and the transcendent language he developed was not of his craft but rather developed as an artwork lived through science. It should not be surprising then to remember that his dying words were not about hard science, but of aesthetics. "Its beautiful over there."

JRL: But specifically what is your language? I feel it comes up a lot; it's sort of a nebulous thing

RC: So long as the artist makes a commitment to the path, one has the ability to suggest new social orders, to perceive the world in such a way that brings new knowledge to the world, or engage viewers/listeners in the productive hypnosis that cannot be known through ordinary means. I work impulsively when I feel hypnotized by an idea.

JRL: How did the ghillie develop? Before that you were working on returning to the pure visual.

RC: I feel like I just woke up to a very benign realization that an artist needs to provide images for the world. Not to discredit the strong important history of text work that Haacke set up for us, but in the end I think that I felt like I had neglected the responsibility of the artist to bring images or suggest scenarios that affect the retina. I feel that art is a retinal practice and I think that the elimination of the discourse of beauty is evidence of beauty becoming taboo- beauty in exile.

JRL: It's almost passé.

RC: You have to be among friends to talk about beauty.

JRL: It's really trite in fact. How you can talk about it in a new way?

RC: The Futurists were, to my knowledge, a group that wanted to speak of beauty in radically new way and had the fascist program to carry out this destruction of 'archaic beauty' and crown a new king. The beauty within their activity was in their rebelliousness—and that was exquisite in a way—but also dangerous. But then, I like art that is dangerous.

JRL: What were you doing before that awareness about the eye?

RC: I was just trying to be this artist scholar. But, I wouldn't lift my hand until I had read too many books and lost the immediacy of the action—the hypnosis. I don't attribute that to my misguided studio practice but rather the effect of expectation from an academic institution.

JRL: Were you already in that mode?

RC: Well right before I came here I was living on a mountain in a trailer so I had few materials and was just playing with free things. I remember I came down from the mountain to show people in New York City what I had done on the mountain. I had some of my best crits as people would say, "wow Ross this is crazy." I guess I started making "crazy person" art.

I was trying to find myself as an artist after being under the tutelage of Haacke for so long which really challenged my ethics as an artist. All of us were scared to present at any given moment cause you never knew what you didn't think of.

JRL: Do you find yourself still doing that? Is it still an aspect of your practice?

RC: It's an aspect, but I'm moving towards the opposing ethic. I think recklessness is good...

JRL: But then it becomes intuitive since you've worked it out.

RC: Maybe you're right maybe this year all that training has settled in so that I don't have to think about.

Well I say recklessness is a positive thing, while I say that artist has the right to lie, so long as its beautiful and brings light back into ‘the cave’. Art doesn’t have the right to be boring. Don’t bore me with boring art because that’s over. I think banality is *out*. I don’t want to see any more work about banality because art is what brings us *out* of that gray reality. Actually, it disturbs me when I see work that makes an effort to illuminate something banal in our life and it is itself a banal translation.

JRL: So you’re saying we’ve moved on.

RC: Well I have.

JRL: Not everyone has obviously, but in the discourse it’s done, it’s history.

RC: Well you saw like in the 90s everyone was reading Dave hickey and Elaine Scarrey wrote on beauty and... Well the point is that there was a kind of moment where all these books starting coming up on beauty and aesthetics. It was almost 19<sup>th</sup> century and people were talking about the sublime and beauty and painting and how we should consider beauty with our contemporaries

JRL: I think it’s a cultural necessity. The emphasis comes back when there’s some lack. It’s a palliative to what’s going on in culture. And hopefully there’s a new perspective on it.

So in terms of aesthetics, do you envision the Regarding Evil conference as a project? Is this a part of your practice?

RC: Aesthetics can be thought of as an idea—as the elegance of an idea—of a system or assembly of people—a situation—an intervention—or a provocation.

JRL: Can you talk a bit about how the conference started?

RC: Well different people would say different things so it becomes a relative subject.

I talk about evil because I was talking about The Good so much at these theology classes at Harvard. The preacher brings the Good News. What about the Bad News? My professor said that the every preacher must remain at the spiritual edge in order to write—to hone the edge I felt I need something dangerous to challenge me.

JRL: What’s the edge?

RC: The edge is somewhere where you're transparent, terrified, you're in awe and you're magnificent and these terms may be collected or swept into the word 'sublime'

JRL: Is that a state and a position—a state of being and a location?

RC: For me it's a psychic edge.

JRL: So how did you choose the other people? Were you looking to shape the definition of the term evil by selecting participants who would provide opposition to the previous selections? Did you have specific people in mind?

RC: I had them in mind—and I knew that Ronald Jones had initiated a project in remaking a garden that was operational at crematorium two. I knew he was thinking about evil.

JRL: What was crematorium two?

RC: Death Camps. People were led through these beautiful gardens as their last image of the world before death.

Death by design or architect of death, these things just clued me into Ronald's interest and it seemed like he would be a good case. Julian LaVerdiere—I chose him we shared in the experience of watching downtown NYC burn and fall apart and he was one of the artists to have an artistic response to the attack.

#### **Regarding Evil**

April 3rd, 2005  
MIT, Cambridge MA  
Building 10, Room 10-250  
Free and open to the public.

The transnational summit, Regarding Evil, will be called to assembly with the simultaneous sounding of the trumpets in six sites around the world projected simulcast. In collaboration with the six individuals who were issued the instruments, each will announce their particular state of emergency and will converge at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a seventh blast. Gordon Smith will assume the role of 7th piper.

Artists and scholars of international reputation have been invited to present visual and discursive material confronting the elusive and immeasurable subject of Evil, its transpolitical behaviors, charismatic aesthetic, and viral disbursement in the vast enterprise of simulation, symbolic power, and catastrophe. Panel discussion and audience participation will provide a public forum to expand this dialogue.

Engaging in the discourse of ethics as a codal system by which we can only hope to define a subjective good, continues to undermine the intelligence of Evil and fuels the perpetual orbit around exotic 'otherness' as an opaque foreigner situated in an archaic Other World of saboteurs.

How then can we speak to/of evil while choosing to sidestep the subject using rhetorical strategies at the risk of sacrificing symbolic power? Must we rely on the performative death act to regain this symbolic power? Including ourselves within the equation of Evil is necessary for a richer appraisal of our condition which may in some cases, require the invocation of such an unwanted guest directly into our universe.

— Cisneros

And course there was a murmur of its resemblance to the Nuremburg rallies and fascist aesthetic. Albert Speer used this imagery and Julian knew about it so there were challenging ethical questions.

JRL: He knew?

RC: Oh yeah, I was younger and dumber and asked Julian have you heard of this guy Albert Speer, “What you think I’m a dumbass, yes I know who Albert Speer is!”

Jodie Dean had done a chronology of evil used through the ages in political rhetoric, and Boyd Rice is basically a real prankster, satanic, dark, noise music, personality but by many he is considered evil incarnate.

JRL: So where do you go from here?

RC: Well I am going to keep making art and I’m thinking after a year or two I’m going to apply to theology schools. In many ways it doesn’t make sense—but in so many ways, I can’t help it, it keeps coming back—it’s an extraordinary source of ideas and I still keep in touch with people from the divinity school. I just like the discourse of sacred things.

I mean this space is one of the ugliest spaces that MIT has to offer—its pure utility. If we need a cable, punch a hole in the way and there. NO GLAMOUR.

So my first idea was to take classes at Harvard. They like oak panel rooms and there’s a reverence for the humanities that allows students to talk about Robert Frost as a model for poetics. Unembarrassed and nothing under quotations-right, “Poetry.” I found that refreshing. Part of it is that I couldn’t stand these awful spaces. It’s so atrocious, it’s so patched up.

JRL: It really works for me, this industrial, exposed pipes aesthetic.

RC: Yeah these cold aseptic rooms with really fluorescent light and polished slick floors and dry wall... and then down the street you have this oak room with amazing stained glass and book cases with books in them and porcelain sinks...

Well this has something to do with the larger topic of art and discourse—for if we held our crits in living rooms it would be much different.