

PA: Hello Gabriel and welcome to *Peripheral ARTeries*. Before starting to elaborate about your artistic production we would invite to our readers to visit <http://www.gabrielembaha.com> in order to get a synoptic idea about your works and we would start this interview with a couple of introductory questions. You have a solid formal training and after having earned your MA in Performance Studies from Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. You nurtured your education with a PhD in Cultural Anthropology that you received from the prestigious Columbia University. How did those formative years influence your evolution as an artist and help you to develop your attitude to experiment? Moreover, how does your cultural substratum and your apprenticeship with anthropologist and physician Michael Taussig as well as your part in the Detroit punk scene direct the trajectory of your current artistic research?

Both the faculty and students in Performance Studies at the Tisch School were, I would say, made up of about a 70/30 mix of people with professional theater experience in New York and elsewhere, and persons with none who were interested in studying types of performance in different cultural settings for a wide variety of interesting reasons. My own cultural setting was West Africa, and Nigeria's Niger Delta region in particular. I was given an amazingly generous introduction to masquerade performance and its related devotional performance for ancestors and elders in this part of Africa by both James Ndukaku Amankulor at NYU and by the Nigerian writer and director Henry Bell-Gam, as well as others. I also had some great experiences with local water spirit healers. Unfortunately, the politics of funding and military occupation of the area kept me from spending a much time there as I had intended. The courses of writer/director/guru Richard Schechner at NYU were full of knowledge and connections between performance forms, especially in relation to Asia.

I moved with Michael Taussig to Columbia with a mandate to help create a new kind of anthropology department, open to new forms of writing and theatrical forms of presentation. The idea was to keep doing things similar to what was possible downtown at the Tisch School, but without NYU's need to justify Performance Studies as a job-oriented, academic discipline. At that time, in the early 90s, the people in Anthropology were very much opposed to anything new, and especially the mix of theatrical performance and the traditional reading-of-written-papers-aloud genre. What I was doing, and what Taussig was supporting, was a kind of experimentation that had for years seemed normal to me. This way of doing things was a part the Detroit punk scene I knew when I was a teenager in Michigan 1980 and 81. We were all trying to do something different that was not just music or rock. The best creations of punk in this time and place came in reaction to those who wanted to tell us what being an artist or musician "really was." Most all of us appreciated that what we were doing was actually art, theater, serious play. An ever-present part of this was collage and a Dada-like form of social critique. Most all of the anthropology people really did not like that either. Looking back, I remember my first term paper for Taussig as an

undergrad at University of Michigan in Ann Arbor was a series of photomontage images and distorted, cut-out quotes from texts that I made with photocopy machines.

Your artworks often display such a rigorous sense of geometry and symmetry to create such a coherent combination between sense of freedom and unique aesthetics. The body of works that we have selected for this special edition of Peripheral ARteries and that our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory pages of this article has at once impressed us for the way you provide the viewers with such a multilayered visual experience. New York City based artist Lydia Dona once stated that in order to make art today one has to reevaluate the conceptual language behind the mechanism of art making itself: do you create your works gesturally, instinctively? Or do you methodically transpose geometric schemes? In particular, what importance does spontaneity have in your daily routine?

Recently, I was flattered when a former student of Josef Albers was unexpectedly enthusiastic about my recent work. I was happy that it could reach across traditions in that way. The geometry involved is mostly rectangles imposing upon and within one another, amounting to the layering you mention. My use of geometry in this sense is less method and more feel. In some of my work there are frames out of frame, so to speak—photographic images, often of paintings or drawings, whose borders are unseen, that extend beyond the image you see against the wall or onscreen. The geometric element that exists within all frames, figure-ground, image-on-wall or screen, is something I play with a great deal. It's a kind of serious play. When it comes to conceptual language, I sometimes see what I am doing as quite modernist, in the sense that my conceptual base is in a kind of realism whose own base is in old masters. You will see a lot of portraiture and posed scenes in my work, as well as the old play with darkness and lighting. In modernism, much of the latter was restricted to surrealist work. I see this part of what I am doing as unusual in the sense that in many ways I am repeating the conceptual language that was there from the 16th through the 19th centuries.

We have really appreciated the vibrancy of thoughtful nuances that mark out your artworks, and we like the way they create tension and dynamics: how did you come about settling on your color palette? And how does your own psychological make-up determine the nuances of tones that you decide to include in a specific artwork and in particular, how do you develop your textures?

Working with so many found objects and photography as part of my mixed media process, much of what do is dependent on how I perceive and choose objects based on the colors, textures and arrangements as I am directly confronted with

them. In flea markets, for example, I will actually take digital photos of objects I find and these images themselves sometimes become a second step in deciding whether it has a place in my work or not. My palette has odd influences—some of them long-standing, such as oranges. These tones have an origin in an old store on Canal Street in New York's Soho area where I lived in the 1980s and early 90s. It sold thousands of mostly translucent plastic objects for artists, designers, jewelry makers and the like. Their translucent oranges bedazzled me. The rest of my palette grew out of this. The colors of East German socialist design are also important. In terms of composition, it's mostly pre-1870s, but in a mother tongue that is modernist.

Using photography in mixed media presents as many frustrations as possibilities when it comes to getting the textural elements I can live with. I often paint canvases just to create textures, photograph them in different ways, and incorporate them into what I do. Textures are a constant source of worry for me. They bother me, and I want them to be right above all else. Without a fetishistic element of texture, I feel I am missing so much of what I need. From spending so much time people suffering from neurological illness, I appreciate how texture is itself can be a form of anxiety and contemplation.

Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco once remarked that "artists' role differs depending on which part of the world they're in. It depends on the political system they are living under": as an artist particularly interested in exploring the social and cultural aspects of truth and reality, how do you consider the role of artists in our globalised and media driven contemporary age? Moreover, do you think that your artistic research responds to a particular historical moment?

I would agree with this statement by Orozco, but only in a way that appreciates what these entities we call political systems are and what these persons, places, and things called "governments," elected representatives, and powerful people actually do and do not, as well as can and cannot do. A political system is usually another term for a particular state. A government or an executive leader of a state is often a metonym of that particular state. When, for example, someone says "Trump" is doing this or that in terms of policy and implementation, one is talking about something bigger. "Trump" is a metonym for what the US state is doing it, or a people are doing, collectively, and the economics of what is being done is state-driven. It is money and influence being arranged by the money the government is taking in and giving out, and the kind of state-supportive behaviors expected when using that money. So, in this sense, the artist's role in Orozco's formulation would differ depending on how a state is handing out money and influence and what is expected in return from those benefiting.

Much of the investment-driven narratives of the contemporary art world are actually engaging the current political system in this way, blending supposed

artist lifestyles with neighborhood urban real estate investment. I see the state itself as a metonym for humanity and not a political system defined by the borders of a country or region. Therefore, my work proceeds from an understanding that as human beings we all live within the same “political system.” The key is to make “the political system” work for artists and help artists help others coming from all social and geographic or historical strata. More artists should be tied into open professions, like nursing, programming, or engineering for example. These professions could ensure a source of financial stability, even if only by contract or part-time work. It could place artists in positions of collective influence. The light-flooded loft space that artists are supposed to live in needs to be made real through professional organization and the resources that come from it. Educational systems should help make this possible, instead of leaving the dreams and hopes of so many wonderful people to wither into a kind of resentment where the worst of people start to make sense to them. These professions could greatly benefit from being populated by artists. Their labor could do so much more than simply pay their bills.

I see historical moments as little more than parts of historical strata or markers of value. So much history is about levels of extractable worth or promise of certain parts of humanity, often referred to as peoples, classes, and nations. It is a kind of narrative that tells complex, just-so stories in terms of just-so dates, people, and things. The fact of history’s ties to peoples in comparison to one another has been recognized in philosophy since at least the early 19th century. The old story telling how sometimes a people (or nation, or whatever) is up and sometimes down has never been true. No people or nation was ever one or the other. If anything, they are just more or less open to such fake narratives being put on them, often according to state systems of financial allocation—sometimes in the form of colonialism and imperialism, sometimes as the result of conflict, and so on. This includes periods of general illness and health crisis, as well as their devastating effects on the overall wellbeing of families. This has been expressed in my work on what I call “the Ruins.”

The media moment of contemporary world history has to do with the historical status of “political systems” “nations,” or “peoples” in places like China, Russia, the EU, and the US. It is about the levels of extractable worth or promise of the peoples living within these regions. Beside this is a global political system, the one state called “humanity.” This state we call humanity, and not that called peoples, nations and the like, should be the serious play space of art, as it long has been and still is for many artists.

Marked out with such unique lyrical beauty on the visual aspect, your artworks deeply struck us for the way they incite the viewer to make new personal associations. Austrian Art historian Ernst Gombrich once remarked the importance of providing a space for the viewers to project onto, so that they can actively participate in the creation of the illusion: how important is for you to trigger the viewers' imagination in order to

address them to elaborate personal interpretations? In particular, how open would you like your works to be understood?

The visual make-up of the pieces themselves, especially the drawn aspects, makes it possible for the viewers to actively participate in what they can see and discuss. While this kind of appreciation is primarily what I intend, I am also aware of how art history and related critical approaches tend to work. I am especially aware of the fact that because my work also involves film and writing, as well as a great deal of participation and observation of many things, it can lend itself quite well to biographical approaches to interpretation. With this in mind, my work has a specific goal of diverting if not subverting biographical interpretations. The stories behind it are fictional and alternate-reality-game-like. I seek to have interpretation get lost in these stories and play set-ups. I have come to see this as something like mythology, in the sense that the stories are about human beings doing things under the sometimes curious and playful eye of, and with ambiguous interference from, non- or half-human forces. Instead of working with and alluding to the forces found in the Ancient Greeks, Egyptians/Africans, Mexicans, Romans, the Bible, or other sources—as has been very common at least since the Renaissance—I have built my own kind of somewhat free-standing, pedestrian mythology. These stories and figures exist within a kind of theater whose players can be seen in my film *Masks in the Sun* as well as in other video and written work. It can be seen in the incorporation of stills and other images related to them. This myth-like base has nothing to do with heroes, tragedies, and similar expressions of mythic beings. It has a great deal to do with families and similar, everyday social relationships. There are many interesting aspects to how appropriations of ancient Roman, Egyptian/African, Mexican, and Greek religion—and of other societies since then and right up until recently in Anthropology—have been so limited and limiting to artists. One of these aspects has to do with an almost exclusive focus on Olympian-type gods and all that comes with them, while ignoring a vast set of sacred practices and stories seen in every home, and business, and other areas of ancient life. My world has much more to do with ancient kitchen and living room spirits than some all-powerful Jupiter or Zeus living large. Interpretation of my work could be done through an honest and not-too-obscure comparative anthropology of family, professions, trades, hobbies, and general work-life.

You are a versatile artist and your multidisciplinary mixed media practice involves acrylic, graphite and digital imagery, as well as performance and film. We'd love to ask you about the qualities of the materials that you include—or that you plan to include—in your artworks: contemporary practice has forged a new concept of art making involving such a wide and once unthinkable variety of materials and objects. In particular, photographer and sculptor Zoe Leonard once stated, "the objects that we leave behind hold the marks and the sign of our use: like archeological findings, they reveal so much about us": are you interested in the use found objects, too?

I seek out and include found objects in a great deal of my work. My relation to such objects, including old snapshot photos of persons, is basically one of total appropriation. I choose them and use them without any real concern for their previous places in the homes or decorative lives of others. I make them a part of the pedestrian story world I was just talking about. My subjects are unheroic, local theater actors, government workers, a clerk, a cemetery groundskeeper, investigators, a judge, and so on. For some time now, I have strategized combining found objects and writing or film, making such objects into something like keys to other stories or parts of stories. This would have to involve linking these objects to systems of information that are currently in common use, but probably not be in some future time before or after I die. The fetish nature of an object would need to be seriously altered by me for me to consider it worth keeping and using in such a way. But I also know from experience that there is some direct connection to the making of kitsch in doing this. Altering the mass-produced is a key element of kitsch over the past few decades, and something so-called “folk artists” have been doing worldwide. I do have plans to infuse found objects with information through artistic manipulation. Let’s just leave it at that.

The exercise in making art through which one lives on after death is a kind of personal challenge to take vanity seriously—as a problem. I tend to agree with so many Dutch still life, vanitas paintings, in that we should try our best to meet this challenge and accept the fleeting nature of our own persons, places and things.

Primarily figurative and marked out with such a powerful narrative drive, your artworks feature such effective combination between reminders to reality and captivating abstract feeling, whose background create such an oneiric atmosphere: how would you consider the tension between abstraction and figurative in your practice? In particular, how does representation and a tendency towards abstraction find their balance in your work?

When it comes to persons, places, and things, many people tend to still want to say there are real depictions and abstract images of persons, places and things that can be determined through a kind of memory or naming test. When we ask who, what or where a picture is of, and a great many relevant people can at least name the types of person, place or things in it, then it is figurative, I suppose. They either make (or name, or remember) an association between their own physically-present experiences of the type of person, place or thing, or with other images they have seen of such persons or things.

My hope is that push-pull between abstract and figurative in my work leaves one to have to accept that there are no pure figures in my work. In flea-market snapshots you can basically forget judging how well the figures are rendered. In

images of actors from my films, and of myself or family, you would also need to prove that there are true persons, places or things there to which you could do a memory or naming test. The authenticity or quality of rendering these persons, places and things are not things you can judge, so it is all abstract in this sense. Few people know me, my family, my actors, or snapshot people intimately, and you need this knowledge to truly say what is abstractly and figuratively real. Seeing the original photographic and other images of persons, places and things I work with will also not get you there. I believe that abstract feeling you mention might be the result of this lack of intimacy, and I believe there is truth in this. There is always some need in art criticism to want to know intimate details of persons, places and things seen in artwork. So many want to know who or what the person in the work of art is or was to the person who made it. Too often, however, this truth has more to do with the artists' fetishizing the persons, places, or things in works of art they create by creating a fetish object. This fetish object was or is supposed to be a symbolically or allegorically figurative or abstract rendering "of" a real series of encounters with a real person, place or thing/idea. The problem is that the fetish objects the artist creates too often get pushed out of frame, so to speak, and the quasi-photographic, real, memory-and-naming-test content "takes center stage" alongside the supporting cast of allegorical, historical, biographical, and symbolic content.

Whether in the 16th-century or today, artworks that one can potentially touch, including actors on a stage, and maybe scenes from films, are things whose main value and appeal is as fetish objects and not as the personal, mantelpiece possessions of figurative or abstract depictions of any intimate person, place or thing that once belonged to the artist. Although a paint-stained jacket owned by Lee Krasner gains value in such a way, her individual paintings have so much more to offer any collector or viewer. In fact, why not just admit that we have no honest and true, always complex, contradictory, nuanced, knowledge of any intimacy concerning any painter at all. I think this may be more liberating to art historians and critics. Instead of what she was doing when, where and with whom, what novels she was really reading, why not what if she was a Russian spy, alien, or fast-food entrepreneur? If biographical and historical reality is the game we are playing, then alternate reality or historical fiction should also be valid approaches. A story about Abraham Lincoln as a vampire killer stands to convey as much about whoever, whatever and wherever Abraham Lincoln "was" as could a ten-hour documentary. Either film would—figuratively or abstractly—be "about" other pictures and stories that bear no honestly intimate truth about some human being whose body was buried in 1865. History or biography do not ensure their subjects any more dignity than art.

Like so many humans, Lee Krasner's dignity now lies in the preservation of her grave (for a time) and the fetishes or artworks she created. These artworks, even if destroyed, would still be a part of her dignity. People talk about dignity and think they have a grasp of it, but I can tell you after working with the old and disabled for years that most people do not truly appreciate what it takes to

ensure human dignity.

Manipulation in visual arts is not new, but digital technology has extended the range of possibilities and the line between straight and manipulated photographs is increasingly blurry. How do you consider the role of digital technology playing within your artistic practice? In particular, how does your skills in digital editing inform your practice as a visual artist, in general?

If you qualify the snapshot as a kind of intimate moment, then I am kind of a ghoul, some kind of character from Gothic fiction. I think it is more complicated and that our "true" faces and intimate moments do not exist in the public sphere into which photos cannot help but be absorbed. All of my faces are masked or masks anyway. If all you are left with are pics of those you loved and who are now deceased, that is so sad. So many classical, painted images "were people." Yet, this is not a pipe. These images are not these people and do not contain their souls, or something similar. Most depictions of persons, places and things are manipulations of whatever the brush, pencil, pastel, machine and person controlling the tool produced. To further this process by further manipulation is just more of the same. Again, I would say it all has to do with some idea that the user of the tool has "the eye," "the ear," "the sense" to somehow convey the essence of something beautiful, sublime, campy, and so on, and that post-capture manipulation is there to make the buyer or viewer feel the real. There are some people who are stuck on the notion that there is a magical trick element in art photos or figurative work in other media, and that digital manipulation either takes away the magic or is the product of someone who has not paid their dues as an apprentice. I myself have been happy with the interest in my work from persons who identify as photographers and from curators of this art form. I really do not think I have editing skills when it comes to photos, skills akin to designers or portrait photographers. I just work pics, textures, standard filtering, and light balance into, out of, and back into frames without doctoring things for the sake of clarity or realistic enhancement. Finally, when you look at and compare within the vast scope of "figurative art" done by humans in time, place, and subject, it may be misleading to consider any photography as purely figurative. Photography is a relatively new art form, and digital manipulation is a part of it. If anything, maybe the kind of digital work I am doing, if considered as photography, makes photography figurative.

Over the years your artworks have been shown widely in several occasions, including your recent participation to the group exhibition, CTAO Exhibition Room, in Lavagna, Italy: how do you consider the nature of your relationship with your audience? And what do you hope your audience take away from your artworks? In particular, how do you consider the role of emerging online technosphere in creating new links between

artists and worldwide audience?

I hope people take away a lingering, positive and curious feeling—nothing more really. I would hope they would want to view it again. I also hope some might approach the work as a whole as something like an alternate reality game, a playful series of meditations that are as real as formal, philosophical, scientific, and political discussions usually are.

When it comes to the online technosphere, I often am saddened by the fact that some of the most skilled and open-minded promoters within this sphere are promoting the worst or banal people, place and things humanity has to offer. Artists are left to the side as impractical and too long-term in regards to payoff. I spent a good deal of time among transmedia gurus a few years ago and all wanted to be taken up by Hollywood or massive tech concerns. Art was never an interest in what they were doing; it was just there to give the real feel of a big budget picture or digital game. Many people want to change definitions of art to enhance their own financial and career status. On one hand, this involves the idea that everyone online is doing art and, on the other, that artists and art critics are little less than annoying people from some bygone era. With this in mind, my art and its pedestrian, genre-like stories of technosphere absurdity, banality, and offensiveness are a kind of direct confrontation with these people. I am currently working on a sister-story to my film *Masks in the Sun* that fits the definition of a “techno thriller.”

We have really appreciated the multifaceted nature of your artistic research and before leaving this stimulating conversation we would like to thank you for chatting with us and for sharing your thoughts, Gabriel. What projects are you currently working on, and what are some of the ideas that you hope to explore in the future?

The techno thriller story I just mentioned is now called “The State: A User’s Guide.” It involves hundreds of pages of text and hundreds of mixed media pieces. It brings together what are often thought of as two disparate realms—the military industrial complex and the long-term care industry. While much of my mixed media work has centered on the state’s role in arranging and maintaining the fixity of persons, places and things, it has equally focused on reality in senses of unfixity that stand in contrast to this maintenance of fixity. The unfixity shown to us by various groups, from those with PTSD, to those with Alzheimer’s is presented as a challenge to begin to see and appreciate how an essential unfixity that is an important aspect of reality is being fought against on a global scale. The State: A User’s Guide stems from the story in my film and theatrical vehicle *Masks in the Sun*. It takes the very local political and spiritual or religious world and its characters depicted in the film into wider, global arenas, where the local actions of these characters have unknown and uncontrollable effects on international affairs and violent conflict on a global scale. The story involves such diverse things as high-altitude drones, US veterans on hallucinogenic camping

trips in a fictional South America, nursing home funding schemes, homegrown US militia groups, military intelligence, local theater groups, the use of algorithms in military operations and criminal investigations, PTSD, Alzheimer's, and psychological conflicts within medicine and nursing.