

DON'T GO SEEKING ANSWERS IN THE EARTH

Collapse and rebirth
in the sculptures
and performances of
Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa
by Matthew McLean

What colour is a ghost? White? Grey? How about bright blue? That's the colour of the figure whose hand Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa holds in the photograph *Fantasma Amigable* (Friendly Ghost, 2014): a good half-metre shorter than the Guatemala-born, Canada-raised, Berlin-based artist, the diminutive personage is covered – hair, arm, shirt, belt – entirely in blue, as if dunked in a viscous copper-sulfate solution. It's an otherworldly, synthetic, juvenile colour – the blue of a child's attempt to render the sky in crayon – but it burns through the scene.

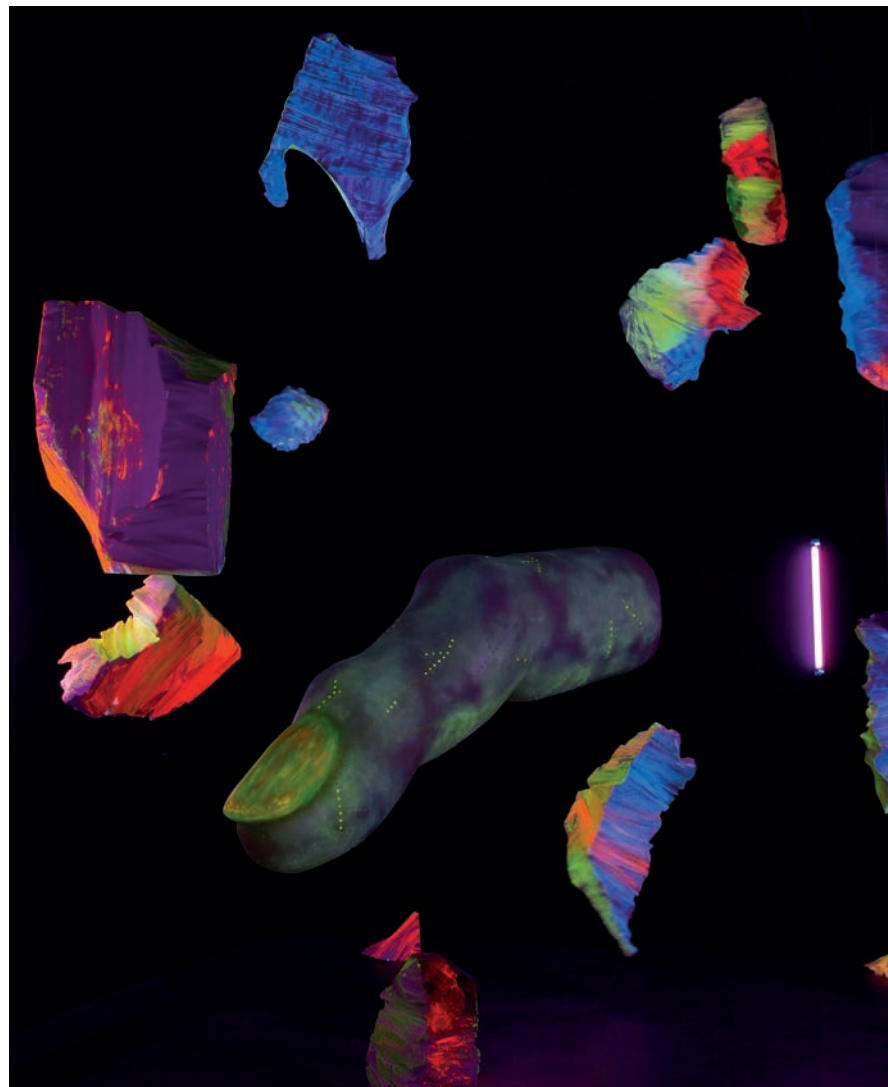
Childhood, loss, landscape: many of the primary themes of Ramírez-Figueroa's work – which encompasses performance, sculpture and print-making – are gathered in this image, as too is the unfussy, almost guileless directness with which he approaches them. Imagine a *Punch and Judy* show performed by a 1970s utopian commune and you'll get something of the joyful and unsettling impression of these works. During a conversation with the curator Catherine Wood at London's Tate Modern in 2015, the artist recalled how, during his childhood in Guatemala, the progressive theatre scene his family were involved in was forced – as a result of government pressure – to shift its focus towards comedy and family plays. As a result, the same actors who once participated in radical drama had to perform for kids. The image of children's entertainment, which carries with it the shadow of social upheaval and state violence, makes a fitting emblem for Ramírez-Figueroa's work.

Take, for example, *Illusion of Matter* (2015), the simultaneously gleeful and disturbing performance that was commissioned for Tate Modern's Performance Room.

Ramírez-Figueroa created a passage out of upright, parallel sheets of cheery orange and yellow card from between which long poles – shaped like a spoon, a claw and a stalk – protruded: it recalled the hallucinatory scene from Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965), in which hands sprout from the walls of the apartment corridor. The poles were wire-cut from polystyrene, a material commonly used to make stage props, which the artist frequently employs. A jangly skeleton of polystyrene bones emerged, legs and arms dangling from its body by chains. Holding it by the waist, flush against his own body, the artist walked between the projecting poles down the corridor. Six children, whom the artist audibly directed ('Switch props ... Go to the middle ...') appeared, holding aloft polystyrene animals: a penguin, a frog, a snail. They then disappeared behind the screens and, after a pause, the artist's voice was heard again off-stage. 'Destroy,' he commanded. In response, the children re-appeared and tore down the screens, merrily breaking up their animal props. Once complete, the lights went dark and, under a UV black-light, the skeleton emerged again to review the jolly destruction – more spectral now, slightly blue-hued, but still oddly jaunty.

There were echoes in this sequence of the medieval Dance of Death, which often featured a skeleton proudly surveying a wrecked domain, as well as something of the 1964 Hammer Horror film version of Edgar Allan Poe's short story *Masque of the Red Death* (1842), in which a mysterious figure stalks a plague-ridden ball. Yet, something in its movements made the ghostly form seem disconcerted by the wanton ruin – as if it had





woken, perhaps, confused from a dream. (Throughout that performance, Ramírez-Figueroa wore midnight-blue pyjamas.)

It can be more unsettling, sometimes, to wake from a dream that's seemingly innocuous than from one that's identifiably a nightmare. *The Print of Sleep* (2016) – which was commissioned by the Amsterdam-based collective If I Can't Dance I Don't Want To Be Part of Your Revolution and debuted at its Edition VI programme in January (presented again in April this year at Berlin's KunstWerke) – also dealt with slumber and its transformative interruptions. Seven performers stood in neutral-coloured clothing by a series of bare, metal-framed mesh beds, each lit from beneath by white neon tubes. The artist moved between them, applying paint with a roller onto the beds' flat surfaces. Each performer then lay down on a bed before standing up again with an imprint of the paint on their skin and nightclothes. The patchiness of the marks rendered them like botched ghosts.

One way to read *The Print of Sleep* is as a reference to *The Conditioning* (1973) by the late French artist Gina Pane, for whom Ramírez-Figueroa has professed great admiration. For her performance, Pane lay on a metal bed over burning candles. It is typical of Ramírez-Figueroa's relationship

Previous page
Incremental Architecture,
2015, HD film still

1
God's Reptilian Finger,
2015, fibreglass,
fluorescent pigment, resin,
UV blacklight

2
Illusion of Matter,
2015, performance
documentation

Courtesy
previous page the artist and
Galerie Sultana, Paris •
1 the artist and Gasworks, London;
photograph: Andy Keate •
2 the artist and Tate Modern,
London

to the canon of body art that his work should eschew the flame, with its frisson of physical harm, for the more relatively harmless medium of paint. Similarly, for *Feather Piece* (2013), performed at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Ramírez-Figueroa attached black feathers along the length of one of his arms via acupuncture needles. It was so delicately done that no blood was lost and the artist swerved the potential for a Franko B-like display of dramatic self-violation in favour of something more magical, even innocent. In a video interview with *One Torino*, the artist cited his inspiration for the piece as the bird-like reptilians 'Skeksis', the villains of Jim Henson's 1982 fantasy film *The Dark Crystal*.

A different example of Ramírez-Figueroa channelling the avian was displayed at Berlin's Galerie Barbara Thumm earlier this year. The sound piece, *Cantos de aves extintas previamente desconocidas por la ciencia pero recuperadas a traves de sesiones espiritistas, #3* (Songs of Extinct Birds Previously Unknown by Science but Recovered by Spiritism, #3, 2016) is a recording of a séance the artist held to communicate with supposedly extinct birds, giving voice to their songs in the form of long, cooing vowel sounds. It was displayed alongside yet another nominally supernatural work, *Tres fantasmas* (Three Ghosts, 2014). In this video, Ramírez-Figueroa sits on a stool in a grassy yard by a pile of watermelons. He cuts one open, its red flesh slinking to the ground like viscera. The remaining hard rind, hollowed out, becomes a sort of helmet, into which the artist incises two eyes and places it on his head. The act is repeated three times, each vacant, sentry-like face stacked atop another to form an increasingly wobbly column, which eventually falls to the floor.

The work's title, the gallery text suggested, may reference the three spirits that comprise the highest powers of the syncretic, Santería-esque Venezuelan folk religion: María Lionza, a tribal goddess and the religion's chief protagonist, as well as Guaicaipuro and Negro Felipe, respectively a chief and a black slave, who were murdered by colonists. If, in this way, the artist invokes something of the hybrid European and Amerindian identity referred to by the somewhat catch-all concept of *mestizo* (literally, 'mixed'), the work also complicates the idea that an appeal to such traditions offers easy access to cultural 'authenticity'. Look closely and each of the watermelon 'ghosts' takes the shape, down to their wavy lower outlines, of the antagonists from the Pacman arcade game (also colloquially known as 'ghosts').

Fruit is a recurring presence in Ramírez-Figueroa's works and his use of it has a similar dynamic to the one sketched above. He often draws on an established tropical imaginary, while at same time exposing it as a more complicated, indeed sometimes devastating, narrative of cultural interference, exploitation and exchange: see the typically blunt *Molotov Tropical* (2011), a watermelon filled with gasoline, ready to be lobbed. Natural produce also played a central and often disturbing role in the artist's earlier

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performances: in *Para ti el banano madura el peso de tu dulce amor* (For You the Banana Ripens to the Weight of Your Sweet Love, 2008), he slept in a gallery, curled around a bunch of bananas, for 20 days. At one point during *The Sun Is Crooked in the Sky; My Father Is Thrown over My Shoulders* (2005), for which Ramírez-Figueroa performed for 100 hours without sleep, he peeled beetroots and then gathered them under his T-shirt so it distended, like a tumour, the red juices bleeding into the fabric, before letting the pile slip to the ground like organs from an animal's slit belly. Meanwhile, for *Original Banana Republic* (2002), he bound thick layers of cut banana stems to his legs and then attempted to walk on his newly massive, hobbled limbs – a typically brusque image, suggesting the fruit as both support and encumbrance.

As attested by Vicente Albán's 'Fruits of Ecuador' series (c.1783), on display at LACMA in 2015 – a proto-ethnographic survey of colonial *castas* or 'types' posed alongside tropical fruits and flowers – the imagery of *mestizo* culture has long been entwined with natural produce. From Carmen Miranda through to Pablo Leon de la Barra's exhibition

'Museo Banana' (Banana Museum) at TEOR/Ética in Costa Rica in 2012, the banana has been pervasive at many levels of visual culture. In 1904, the American writer O. Henry coined the term 'Banana Republic' to describe the political instability and corruption associated with export agricultural economies typical of Latin American fruit, coffee and sugar producing nations. In Ramírez-Figueroa's Guatemala, this socio-economic model has been vitiated by the investment of the United Fruit Company (UFC), whose plantations have determined, to a large degree, the country's social structure for much of the 20th century. Indeed, agitation on behalf of the UFC by powers domestic and international is widely understood to have precipitated the bloody Guatemalan Civil War (1960–96). This was the conflict in which Ramírez-Figueroa's grandfather fought and in which his uncle was assassinated, thus leading to the artist's refugee status at the age of six, moving with his remaining family first to Mexico and then to Canada.

'When the trumpet sounded / everything was prepared on earth, / and Jehovah gave the world / to Coca-Cola Inc.' are the opening lines of Chilean poet-diplomat Pablo Neruda's 1950

satirical poem 'La United Fruit Company', in which the titular company reserves, in their originary land grab 'the most juicy piece [...] the delicate waist of America'. Something of these lines' bizarre mash-up of eschatological and consumer registers was at work in Ramírez-Figueroa's 2015 solo show at Gasworks in London, 'God's Reptilian Finger'. The eponymous installation's title was inspired by Mormon pseudo-archaeologists, who have sought (in Central America and elsewhere) for traces of the Tribes of Jaredites, Lamanites and Nephites described in the Church's holy book. A darkened room, lit as in the final sequence of *Illusion of Matter* by UV blacklight, was filled with a galaxy of rock-like fragments of polystyrene, suspended from the ceiling, their shapes a puzzle of jagged and eroded forms, liberally doused with lurid clashes of fluorescent paint. The effect was both impressive and flimsy – the momentary wonder inspired by the installation quickly giving way to a sense of its insubstantiality. The piece combined the po-faced literality and ridiculousness of an archaeological fraud, like a creationist fossil signed 'God'. As with Neruda's poem, Ramírez-Figueroa's installation indulges a fantasy in order to expose its absurdity. Among the rocks of *God's Reptilian Finger* hung a large finger with a yellow fingernail, pointing – somewhere, nowhere in particular.

Don't go seeking answers in the earth, Ramírez-Figueroa seems to say with this work, as it holds no foundation for meaning. Instability is also dramatized in *A Brief History of Architecture in Guatemala* (2010–13), for which the artist and two other performers





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Ramírez-Figueroa exposes the established tropical imaginary as a more complicated, sometimes devastating, narrative of cultural interference, exploitation and exchange.



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1
Tres fantasmas (Three Ghosts),
2014, video still

2
Para ti el banano madura al peso de tu
dulce amor (For You the Banana
Ripens to the Weight of Your Sweet Love),
2008, performance documentation

Courtesy
1 the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta,
Guatemala City • 2 the artist,
Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin, and
Galerie Sultana, Paris

wear costumes of corrugated white plastic in the form of iconic vernacular Guatemalan buildings or building types. These include a Mayan ziggurat, a classical tomb of the sort found in Chichicastenango, and the Banco de Guatemala in Guatemala City, with its faux-Mayan carvings by Roberto González Goyri. It made me wonder if the artist has ever seen the picture, from the Beaux Arts Ball in 1931, of New York architects dressed as skyscrapers they had designed. A troupe of musicians plays a chirpy tune on the marimba and the dancers bob and twirl about, bumping into one another until their costumes come apart and they stand naked. In the related *Incremental Architecture* (2015), the artist wears a series of columns of modular boxes, made from the same corrugated plastic and emblazoned with a mish-mash of architectural features – a decorative window, or a sculpted relief. The artist stacks three or four boxes atop one another and then begins a gentle dance, again to a marimba soundtrack, until his movements bring the shaky towers down.

If it risks reductiveness to frame these works in the context of the Civil War, it seems fair to say that collapse is an image which Ramírez-Figueroa can't shake. His 2014 joint show with Federico Herrera at Galerie Sultana in Paris, 'Zipacna, The Creator of Mountains', was even named after a Mayan god who was killed when a mountain collapsed on him. Yet, the final impression is not one of tragic lamentation or sublime awe, but of a form of exultant emancipation. 'If it's kind of funny,' the artist told Wood in his 2015 interview with her, 'it's a good work I've done.' Ramírez-Figueroa's contribution to the 2014 Gwangju Biennale, *Props for Eréndira* (2014), was named for a 1983 Gabriel García Márquez-scripted film, which was one of the few videos he owned as a child and consequently watched repeatedly. It tells the story of a beautiful young girl who is forced into becoming an itinerant prostitute by her grandmother. Though the artist has articulated parallels between the character's story and his nomadic experiences, as well as comparing the asylum-application process to a kind of performance akin to the sex-worker's self-exploitation, it is the film's closing lines, uttered by Eréndira as she flees her grandmother with all her accumulated wealth, which strike me as a key to this artist's dark and colourful, exuberant and ravaged practice: 'No voice on earth could stop me. And no trace of my misfortune was ever found.' ♦

Matthew McLean is a writer and editor based in London, UK.

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa lives and works in Guatemala City, Guatemala, and Berlin, Germany. His work is currently included in the The 32nd Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil, which runs until 11 December. Earlier this year, he had a solo presentation at 'If I Can't Dance I Don't Want To Be Part of Your Revolution, Edition VT' Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and his work has been included in shows at Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin, Germany; Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo; Les Abattoirs, Toulouse, France; KW, Berlin, and Nixon, Mexico City, Mexico. He will have a solo show at CAPC musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux, France, in 2017.