Will It Be Yes Or Will It Be Sorry: Alex Gartenfeld Interviews Manuel Solano

ALEX GARTENFELD: The title of your show at ICA Miami, "I Don't Wanna Wait For Our Lives To Be Over," was one that you had long planned to use for an exhibition. Tell me about that sustained sense of intention and planning, which is typical of your experience and your work.

MANUEL SOLANO: I knew I wanted to title one of my shows "I Don't Wanna Wait For Our Lives To Be Over" maybe ten years ago. I thought it would be for my first solo show. But I didn't feel like that title was ideal for that show—the show wasn't personal enough, maybe.

AG: The title comes from a song by Paula Cole that was also the theme song for the television series Dawson's Creek [1998–2003]. It's also an evocative phrase on its own, especially for a young artist to deploy.

MS: I was really into that album [This Fire, 1997] when it came out. My mom bought the CD and she would play it in the house. As a kid I was attracted to strong women's voices in music, like Paula Cole or Alanis Morrissette—or Shakira, when she was still doing pop rock. My mom would play that album, but my dad didn't like it. He called Paula Cole "an ugly girl screaming." Shortly thereafter, my parents got divorced, which I find funny. If your wife starts playing Paula Cole and Alanis Morrissette it means divorce is coming. A couple of years later the song became more popular because of Dawson's Creek. I never did see Dawson's Creek. I wouldn't even say I'm a fan of the song, but it has a special place in my memory. It's common to feel you are rehearsing for something else. Or waiting for your actual life, for the actual moment when you're gonna be alive. "I Don't Wanna Wait" is the last song on that album. But in the first song on that same album there's one line that says, "Someday I'll be born." And I remember that really resonated, even as an eleven-year-old. And then, slowly, as I've grown older, rather than waiting to be born it's become more like waiting to die. And so it's kind of weird that the first song on the album and the last song on the album come full circle—that also relates to my show. Sometimes in my work I get ideas that begin as jokes. Like titling a show "I Don't Wanna Wait For Our Lives To Be Over" or the idea of shaving my head and tearing up a photo of the pope as a performance. These ideas, first and foremost, they tickle me. And then they grow up to be something. Usually when I get the feeling that something is a joke but there's more to it, that's when I know that I'm on to something—like with the Sinead O'Connor piece, The Victory Of Good Over Evil [2012].

AG: Sinead O'Connor appeared on Saturday Night Live [1975–] in 1992, when you were five. There are a number of ways to map her appearance onto your biography and interpretations of your work—her androgynous appearance, her sense of herself as an outsider, her rebellion against Catholic traditions and suppressed cultural violence.

MS: That was the end of the most sheltered part of my life. After that my parents got divorced. My dad moved away to another city. I graduated from elementary school and went on to junior high. This was my first time being in a large school. It was a private school, but there were 150 kids in my year, rather than the same twenty kids I knew from age six to twelve. That was a shock for me, and so was hitting puberty. I didn't have a lot of friends. I was very shy and very angry.

AG: How did you start making art? Did it come out of that period of time?

MS: It was around that period, or shortly thereafter that I started painting for the first time. But I had always had an interest in drawing or sculpting things with modeling plasticine or making collages.

I was extremely into collage: I would lie on my stomach on the floor of my bedroom and cut out faces from magazines.

AG: What kind of images were you drawn to at that time?

MS: Photos from lifestyle magazines. Homemaking magazines. I particularly liked a publication released by Walmart in Mexico City called Siempre en familia [Always in the Family]. What I liked to do was cut out faces and place them on different bodies. And the advertisements in these magazines are—maybe you'd call them cheap? It's not fashion, where you see a model looking really serious; it's a woman in her thirties made up to look like an executive holding a new blender—and she's ecstatic about this new blender, right?

MS: That's one way to see it, but obviously that's not how I saw it then. Or even now. I did it purely for fun, in order to see these overthe-top facial expressions matched with different bodies. A tension between the action of the body and the facial expression. I wouldn't necessarily say I do that now in my work, but some of that is

still there. I still mix and match. I take a reference from a movie, then I take a reference from a music video, and I throw them together. The place where those efforts are directed has changed over the years, but to me it's the same starting point.

AG I met you first through the Mexico City project space Bikini Wax and a project you did there. As a student, what was your connection to your peers?

MS: The guys at Bikini Wax were really good friends with one of my classmates. I wouldn't say through school, but through a classmate at Esmeralda, which is the second of two art schools I attended.

When I graduated high school I went directly afterward to UDLA [Universidad de las Américas] in Puebla, two hours from Mexico City. I hated it. I was enrolled in "visual information design." I attended the fi rst class and dropped out.

AG: That's a visceral reaction! [Laughs.]

MS: Yeah! Then I enrolled in the art department. I wanted to express myself and I wanted to be in the work I was making. The people who saw it needed to see me and not the client or the product. And at first it felt very refreshing, like I had done the right thing, but very quickly it became obvious that it was not what I needed. The school was very small, or at least the art department was very small, with very few students and very few teachers. And it was paternalistic: you had no freedom to do anything except skills training and homework. For instance, we were made to learn how to paint using tempera, which is not current at all. Or taught to paint a faithful copy of Vermeer's The Girl with the Pearl Earring [ca. 1665]. And that was very frustrating for me. I wanted to experiment and I wanted to do crazy things. One of the fi rst things I did for a Photoshop and Illustrator skills class was design a box for a product. We needed to design the layout for the box and then print and assemble the box. I made a cereal box for the band the Yeah Yeah Yeahs with a made-up brand called Karen O's. I took a picture of it and I went to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' website and found the e-mail address for the webmaster.

For the fun of it, I e-mailed a photo of the box. And then, a week later, they got back to me and they were like, "Hi, I work with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and we showed Karen O your cereal box and she absolutely loves it. She wants to know if we can put it up on the website." That changed something for me. I had started something as a joke and got way farther than I expected. I got this person who

I admire to see it and validate it.

AG: It is striking that you talk so much about your reaction against skills training because, obviously, that has been part of your work over the last few years. Your earliest paintings I saw were done in a hyperrealist style and in previous conversations you've expressed pride over the fact that you are quite a gifted painter.

MS: That was also a surprise for me. Back at UDLA I had to make a composition and render it in oil. I looked up a photo of a hallway online, printed it, and started painting it on a piece of cardboard.

I hadn't painted in a while, especially not something out of choice. When I finished it, everybody was like, "Wow! Where did you learn how to do that?" I didn't know the answer because I couldn't say "here" because we were all there. That made me aware that painting and drawing are not so much a skill of the hand but a skill of the eye. It's not about how you move your hands; it's about how well you pay attention to what you are seeing.

AG: Your paintings from this period are continuous with your work 12 today, in some ways—idyllic landscapes that poignantly evoke Edenic scenes. They contrast with one of the fi rst videos of yours that I saw, Black Friday [2011], which is a turbulent montage featuring destroyed landscapes and disasters.

MS: That came right after I stepped away from the pristine landscapes. I was making the pristine landscapes only a month before, in Mexico,

Manuel Solano's cereal box design, 2008

in the fall of 2011. Then I moved to Lyon for a student exchange. Somebody at the school in Lyon gave me a crack serial number for Final Cut Pro and that opened the medium for me. Until that moment it wasn't easy to edit video. I started making this montage of videos that I downloaded from YouTube. It started as a joke. There's an episode of The Simpsons [1989–] that references the brainwashing scene in A Clockwork Orange [1971], when they're holding Alex's eyelids open showing him these very violent images. In The Simpsons they're doing the same thing to the dog—they're showing him violent images and among them is the Hindenburg crashing. I saw that as a little kid, not as an artist. I thought that was funny, because I wouldn't have thought to put that there. So I decided to do my take on one of those brainwashing videos.

AG: And did this brainwashing theme have anything to do with your personal life?

MS: Not consciously, but at that time I was very depressed. I was almost completely alone in France. I thought moving to France was gonna be my coming out. I've always been very lonely. I thought it was because of the context: I'm not in the right place. I'm gonna live, finally. And nope, I didn't. I got to France and I had no friends.

Nobody took my art seriously. The school hated me. The teachers hated me. So that video came from boredom, loneliness, and anger. And a lack of direction. I had no idea where the world was going. That video includes scenes of horrible things that happened that year—the tsunami in Fukushima and the subsequent nuclear disaster. But also tongue-in-cheek, quote-unquote disasters. Like, for example, there's a clip where Beyoncé is pregnant and she sits down on a couch and her belly kind of sags. And because of that people said she had a surrogate.

AG: At around the same time you began making short clips inscribed within a tradition of self-portrait and self-revelation that carries into your painting and video today, but are formally rudimentary. How did you start making such personal videos?

MS: A lot of them did not start as artworks. They started as me being silly in front of the camera. I would post them on Facebook and that would be it. From the beginning of 2012 until mid-2013 I must have made hundreds. In some of them I'm eating, in some of them I'm singing, in some of them I'm modeling, trying on an outfit, and walking. A friend I met in France suggested I start making videos. Back then I used to post on Facebook obsessively.

I thought that my thing was Facebook. Like, "Oh! What Manuel does is he posts a lot of Facebook statuses, like every hour." And they were always very stupid—or maybe they were serious, but there were so many that it became rather irrelevant.

And this friend of mine, Emily, said: "You need to move on to video. Instead of writing these sentences, just make a video where you're saying the sentence into the camera." I made one when I had just come back to Mexico in March 2012. I got in front of the camera and I said, "I have nothing to wear," and I posted it. And then I hated it. It felt too similar to things that other people were doing because by then YouTube was already a big thing, there were all these people who had become famous. And there was nothing in that for me.

AG: The Victory Of Good Over Evil, in which you reenact Sinead O'Connor's performance on SNL introduces the perception of androgynous or female-identifying people operating and rebelling within a paternalistic sacrosanct cultural milieu.

MS: Yes, all of those things are very much in that video, but I had no idea of that when I made it. I was gonna shave my head because all my life I've been in love with my hair. And every time I've expressed that to my family I've been showered with threats that I'm gonna lose my hair. My dad went bald at nineteen and everybody else in my family is bald. It sounds shallow—it is shallow—but it's been a constant panic in my life. And then when I was in art school my hair started falling out. My mother was like, "Oh, Jesus, just get over it. Everybody changes. Everybody's bodies change. You can't remain the same." And I was like, "Mom, I'm nineteen." She was like, "So what! You're still young and you're very handsome."

And I was like, "No, you don't understand... I feel like I can't be... me. Or any of the things that I wanna grow up to be, if **I** don't have hair." And she was very upset by that. She told me, "You should know that your worth has nothing to do with your appearance." I couldn't explain why I felt that way, because obviously I knew that I was on the path to becoming a visual artist. It doesn't necessarily have to do with how I look, but all that time I was picturing myself in the work. I was picturing myself performing, I was picturing myself singing. I

Manuel Solano, *Dilophosaur*, 2013

couldn't see any of that without the image that I wanted for myself. What I did was I got into modeling. First modeling for photos, but that quickly turned into acting for TV commercials, with the exclusive goal of making money so I could afford laser stimulation for my scalp. And I did—I got a gig in Hollywood for a Domino's Pizza commercial and with that paycheck I paid for the whole treatment.

AG: And it worked?

MS: Well, I have hair. But it stills falls out a lot and two years ago I lost

Manuel Solano, *The Victory Of Good Over Evil*, 2012

a lot. But the whole thing with the laser thing turned out to be a scam. The company disappeared. So you could say it worked, even though, officially, it didn't. It was not a real thing. But I spent that paycheck and I was blessed to have hair for a number of years again. And then, when I moved to France in 2011, I thought, "Since I'm in a new place, with new people, I should try something new, and force myself to see myself without hair." It became an obsession. That translated into an obsession with Sinead O'Connor. I had never really paid attention to her until that time. I forget who, but somebody commented, "But you're a man." And I remember thinking, "Oh! Yeah, that's a problem." I didn't think about it as a gender thing until that time. One of my friends back then ran a gallery, and he wrote to me saying, "I just had this dream that you shaved your head and performed as Sinead O'Connor and you tore up a picture of the pope." I thought it was the dumbest thing I'd ever heard. I don't do religion in my work.