

A Conversation Between Nicolás Dumit Estévez Raful and Jessica Lagunas

NDER: Jessica, thank you for allowing me to sit with you during your office hours at El Museo del Barrio. The time that I spent at your space helped me become familiar with some of the exchanges between you and those visiting the current exhibitions.

You are working with hair at El Museo, and so I can go on and on about the story behind *mi pelo*: curls, peroxide, relaxers, cornrows, and the new grey strands that I am growing, among others. I want to hear your hair story.

JL: My mom tells a funny story that one day when I was around 4-5 years old, before leaving for preschool, I asked her to have her hair dyed the same as the mom of a classmate. And when I came back home, I had a temper tantrum when I saw that she had the same hair as always. Hahaha! You can say that I was very hair conscious from an early age...

Most of the time, I have always worn my hair either very short or very long, probably more years now wearing it long, which as a teenager caused me some trouble with my parents. They complained that because of so much shedding I clogged up the vacuum cleaners at home and ruined a couple of them.

Regarding hair styles, I didn't do too much overall, except for a perm in my late teens, which I remember having a very weird feeling about, as I looked myself in the mirror and thought how much I looked (and felt) like a sheep with all those curls. And another time in my mid-twenties I colored my hair in a reddish-copper color that fortunately washed away pretty fast.

Since my late twenties I began having some gray hair; I was horrified by it and began pulling them out; I didn't want those signs of growing old. In my early thirties I was having the dilemma of what to do with my hair, either to start dyeing it or letting my gray hair grow. I knew that I didn't want to be a slave of the beauty salon or of retouching the roots at home, like I saw my mom doing every few weeks.

I remember vividly playing with my hair and thinking how thick it was, and how much it resembled thread. That moment I had this idea to solve the issue of the gray hair: I would do an ongoing life project where I embroider my age with my gray hair, that way I would be getting rid of them. So when I turned 33 years old I began my *Forever Young* series, each year embroidering my current age, I'm working now on the 44.

This is the beginning of my interest in using hair in my artwork, but what I didn't know then was the power of art to transform me. Around two years into the project and because the meditative quality of embroidery, I began noticing how my attitude towards gray hair was changing, until I accepted growing old and having gray hair. I totally love my gray hair now!

NDER: I grew up in the Dominican Republic where most people's minds were colonized to worship straight hair. I am curious to learn about the collective hair narratives related Guatemala, the place where you were grew up.

JL: Until coming to New York, I hadn't heard this notion of regarding hair type as either "good" or "bad", as in the Caribbean, except for my sister always complaining about her hair and straightening it.

Most of the population in Guatemala is indigenous and they have straight and very luscious black hair, usually the women would wear it long and in a braid. The Ladino population, which is a mix of Spanish with indigenous, also have straight hair overall. There's a very small Garifuna population in the city of Livingston in the Atlantic coast, they're of African descent.

I would say that in Guatemala there is not much discrimination regarding your hair type, as there is in the Caribbean, but it is more about class and racism.

NDER: You have a basket full of donated hair at the entrance of your studio. What are some of the discussions that this item is generating?

JL: Gut reactions include awe and amazement that the work is being created with hair and that I'm collecting hair, almost in disbelief. Very few people have commented or asked how can I work with hair referring to the yuck factor.

Once people realize that it is hair, they are very determined to donate theirs or not. Most of the public donates, except for balding men, or women that have short or thin hair, and they apologize. The longest hair donated was from Karen from Florida with one strand of her 60" white hair! She hasn't cut it in 30 years.

The basket collects all the hair that people donate for the project. It evolves every day as more people donate. In the beginning one person cut a chunk of hair and this motivated a lot of people who also wanted to cut a piece. Some precious donations include some dreadlocks.

The majority of the people who donate want to start a conversation about the project: "Why hair? Why weaving? How this idea occurred to me?" And although I appreciate everybody's comments, the ones that I treasure the most are their personal stories and the conversations about hair, and all of the references in which people mention either another artist who works with hair, a memory from their childhood about hair, a cultural or tradition referring to hair, or a book. I have been writing down all this information to do research after I finish my residence.

There are so many stories! Esther, the Jewish woman who happily asked for scissors to cut a piece of her wig. Barbara, Nieves and Francis who recounted their chemotherapy and how their hair was falling out during treatment. Sherene, the young African American who was so excited and couldn't believe that I wanted to use "her hair"! Various older women recognized the pressure of having to color their gray hairs. There is also the excitement of young students that wanted to cut chunks of their hair. The people who wanted to participate because they "want to be part of an artwork." Or Virginia from Mexico, who told me that she sees me as a "weaver of life." All of these stories and so much more fill me with humbleness and emotion.

NDER: Hair, like nails, carries profound power in different cultures. I recall reading Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, a novel where hair is used to concoct a dangerous hex. Have any of your donors talked with you about some of the implications behind trusting another person with one's bodily parts?

JL: So far only three people have mentioned or asked about this. Two of them, whom are artist friends, commented way back when I won this residency two years ago: one was afraid of DNA

cloning issues, the other one about *santería*. Only one person asked when she was cutting a strand of her hair, kind of just making sure that I wasn't going to use it in a ritual of some kind...

For that reason it is very important to me to talk to people, explain the project, and give them the assurance of the exclusive use of their donation for my project. Also, the fact that I have on display, when I'm in the studio, the first weaving I did during my first three weeks at the residency, helps to give reassurance, and people can see the quality of the work.

NDER: How are current fashion trends affecting the concept as well as the aesthetics of your piece? I am thinking about all of the blue, red, purple and green hair that I see in the streets these days. I am also thinking about the use of wigs as a fashion statement.

JL: I have a lot of different colors, including so many varieties of light blondish hair, a lot of dyed hair, red, pink, and also this fashion of "ombre" hair—where people dye only the ends in a lighter color and the roots and top parts remain darker—, a couple of wigs, and I got a bluish gray strand from Erin (NY), and today I got my first green one from Emma (MA).

NDER: The act of weaving hair from such a diverse pool of people makes me ponder on the ancestral tapestry that you are creating. This must contain materials from every location on our planet as well as the cosmos. Any comments about this?

JL: I have been greatly enjoying conversing with the public and El Museo's staff. One of the things that I'll ask other than their names is where they come from. And there is such a varied geographic scope as to where everyone comes from. It's fascinating! A lot of people are of Latin American origin: from Mexico, Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua) and South America, whom sometimes I would recognize from their accents (Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina); from Europe (Great Britain, Ireland, Belgium, Switzerland, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Hungary, Georgia); Asia (China, Japan, Thailand); the Middle East (Israel, Iran); Australia, West Africa, Nigeria, South Africa, the Caribbean (Dominican Republic, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Guadalupe). And of course, a lot from all across the United States: (New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Washington D.C., Vermont, Massachusetts, Montana, Florida, Texas, California, Washington); and from Canada.

NDER: I personally think of hair as being energetically charged. How does your body react to the interactions between your hands and the donated material?

JL: I honestly have to say that I haven't felt anything at all from the hair. However, the first weaving involved chunks of hair and that made up a very personal connection with all the people that donated hair during my first three weeks as a resident, which was the time it took me to weave it.

As in contrast, the second weaving has been very impersonal as I don't know the great majority of the strands donated, which have come from the basket. This is group of anonymous strands. On the other hand, I do feel the energy from the people in our conversations, and in the case when they cut a strand of hair I will think of them when I weave it into the piece.

NDER: I feel that although we have been talking about an art piece, we have not addressed art

in a direct way. I like that. Art can be a hairy subject!

JL: Hahaha, I love that phrase!

I also want to mention that other than why I'm creating this piece and the why of its significance, this piece is much about drawing and line, which in this case are done with hair.

Overall, in my art practice I like to use unconventional materials, hair being one of the materials that is always recurring. I do this to represent a self-portrait and, in the weavings at El Museo, to create a collective portrait of the community.

I also like to think of this project as painting, especially with the second weaving I'm working on, where I am combining different colors and varying the thicknesses of the lines (of hairs) to create new patterns and textures, harmony and repetition.

And lastly, I want to thank you again, Nicolás, for creating your *Office Hours (OH)* project with the *Back in Five Minutes* residency at El Museo. Without you, none of this would have been possible! And I also want to especially thank all the people who donated hair for my project, without their trust, enthusiasm and collaboration these "hair weavings" would have never existed! ¡¡¡Muchas gracias!!!

NDER: Gracias to you, Rocío, and Sofía at El Museo, and to everyone at this organization who have put a *granito de arena* to make this residency happen. Thank you to the security team for their openness to art that talks, walks, and lives in the gallery space.

This interview is part of *Back in Five Minutes*, a residency program conceived by Nicolás Dumit Estévez Raful for *Office Hours* at El Museo del Barrio.