

## The Highlights - Doa Aly and Juan William Chavez

The prospect of curating an online exhibition most appealed to me for one particular reason: the irrelevance of geography. While there are some formatting sacrifices, the fact that people all over the world—from as far away as, say, St. Louis, Missouri, or Cairo, Egypt—can view these artworks and consider their potential relationships more than compensates. It was my aim to bring together two artists from outside the New York art scene, and to help foster a dialogue between them and the wider viewing public. That being said, some artworks are best appreciated with a live audience, as I feel is the case with the video works of Doa Aly and Juan William Chávez. To that end, and to add a 3-D element to this Highlights project, we will be conducting a screening of Aly's *48 Ballet Lessons* and Chávez's *Drawing CWO* at Harris Lieberman Gallery, 89 Vandam Street (between Greenwich and Hudson) on the evening of Friday, December 12th from 6:30-8:30pm.

Doa Aly's drawings, videos, and paintings reveal her attempts to express and overcome the Cartesian dichotomies between mind and body, inner and outer, self and other. She picks apart the processes of self-improvement, examining the quest for perfection and focusing specifically upon the liminal state between aspiration and accomplishment.

In his *Drawings from the Cave* series of drawings and videos, Juan Chávez strives to transform himself into an artistic cipher, transmitting what he observes directly onto the page. Whether his subject is the view of Chicago through the windshield of his car, or scenes of savage satire from Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, Chávez's depictions all maintain a hyperreal quality that forgoes quotidian, rote life drawing in favor of highly subjective and energetic renderings that convey the psychological and emotional state of the artist during his creative process.

Aly and Chávez work across varied media to encapsulate and express the slippery space of transition separating our inner and outer worlds, our emotional and cultural selves. Their works elucidate the sometimes frustrating, and sometimes thrilling, result of their efforts to interact with and respond to the world around them.

INTERVIEW WITH DOA ALY



Doa Aly, *Drawing 17*, 2007. Pencil on paper, 14 ½ × 11 ½ inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris.

ALLISON KAVE: When discussing your work, you reference the idea of a liminal state between the past and the future, in which a person, body, (and perhaps, an artwork?) is undergoing a transformative process. It seems that entangled within this moment is an aspiration for positive evolution and a simultaneous awareness of the impossibility of true change. For you, how does physical movement embody this stasis, and how do your drawings represent this pivotal moment?

DOA ALY: Hypothetically, there's an interruption targeting bodily awareness and growth at a pubescent stage, one that directly affects bodily identity and movement. I see those abstract mental and emotional processes, which occur then, as having a direct impact on the bones and joints. Initially the body is in full flight, evolving towards the fulfillment of its potential. Once the interruption takes place (usually an external factor) bodily identity is lost, distorted, wasted, but it is still growing in yet another direction, one with a different set of rules; the body develops an alternative language to match the new state, the Alternative Glossary of Access. In that state, there's a wide range of options, assimilations, variations. How we develop between these two pressure points is mainly expressed and seen through movement and body language. Once this theory is in place I set out looking at the body parts directly responsible for the structure of movement, while I imagine the registered interruption and juxtapose it with the external image, the carnal pocket. My drawings are a basic combination of the inside (bones/structure) and an external image, which has a definite and conform identity, one that has its place in collective imagination.

AK: How do you see the relationship between exterior and interior, both in terms of the individual and the public, and the interior physical anatomy and the aesthetic surface of the human body?

DA: When I look at the surface I mainly search for signs of "superiority," assertive bodies which stir aspiration or desire and invite assumptions about freedom, beauty and access. I'm mainly concerned with certain types of identities, such as dancers or circus acrobats for example, ones with conformist qualities and a common history of rigorous training, compliance, and systematic growth. The clash of the final image of unleashed potential with the history of struggle, registered in every bone, muscle, and joint, is what I decided to delve into in order to explore ideas related to constrained movement-the frustration and inability to reach certain emotional or physical ideals. I'm taking the growth process of one of these "superior" identities and reversing it, in order to match the outside with the inside, translate every emotional or mental failure into a dysfunction in movement.



Doa Aly, *Drawing 19*, 2007. Pencil on paper, 14 ½×11 ½ inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris.

AK: You have mentioned that identity, body image, and physical mobility are intrinsically linked. Do you believe that a person's physical agility, flexibility, and strength is directly proportionate to her sense of comfort with herself? Is physical mobility another way of discussing issues of power and agency?

DA: Definitely, more agility is more power. However, what's interesting is that it doesn't work reversibly: more power doesn't indicate more agility or flexibility, but it definitely translates into comfort, a comfort found in stiffness even. Habits of behavior are the usual dictators of comfort or discomfort; the daily occurrence of certain activities makes some tasks easier to perform than others. One is more "at home" when they are used to a certain set of movements, the more it varies the less confident and self-assured they become. A wide range of mobility means a wide range of confidence, again in relation to movement not generally. A ballet dancer is different from a farmer in that sense; they both have a totally different set of physical activities on a daily basis and a different range of mobility. The comparison however is only interesting on the physical rather than social level.

AK: In your video "48 Ballet Lessons" you document yourself undergoing classical ballet training, and we see you develop a new set of physical and mental abilities through repetition and diligent concentration. After finishing the process of this artwork, did you find yourself to be more expressive as a person and an artist?



Doa Aly, *Drawing 36*, 2007. Pencil on paper, 14 ½×11 ½ inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris.

DA: I started ballet because I had all these theories about the body and movement, and I thought that the best way to understand physical frustration in practice is to put my own body (that of a 27-year-old person who never danced) through a frustrating process that challenges its established comfort. I had no idea what I was putting myself through, what the outcome would look like. When I managed a grand écart, or a proper rond de jambe, I was ecstatic. I was on a detox diet, I let my hair grow so I could tie it in a pony tail, I put on weight, and I was watching the growth of my muscles day by day. All my being, mentally

and emotionally, was focused on physical growth and achievement. After I finished I realized that there was more to the theory than just juxtaposing extreme ability with disability-I felt I had to tell a story with it, state the frustration subtly and keep it hidden in a bigger context, just like it is in life. I don't feel the need to put myself through a similar process again, and if I still use my own body in certain works the approach and aim are quite different.

AK: Ballet in particular has such a rigid, proscribed language of movement. In showing the initial steps of learning this language you strip it of its polished, finished artifice and demonstrate the physical struggles inherent to its realization. Did you consider the idea of this de-glamorization prior to your creation of the video? Do you see the training process as an embodiment of the impossible pursuit of aesthetic perfection?

DA: Exposing the conforming qualities behind a seemingly beautiful form of art was inevitable. I was more interested in the outcome of trying to learn such a rigid set of rules and variations, the hybrid image that could be created. Aspiration is a fantastic process when translated physically-it's endearing, very clear and honest. The project wasn't just a documentation of a failure to reach an ideal of perfection, it aims at the stage prior to that: the validity and relevance of aspiration altogether.

INTERVIEW WITH JUAN WILLIAM CHAVEZ



Juan William Chávez, *Drawing CWO*, 2007. Charcoal, watercolor, and colored pencil on paper, 12×9 inches.

ALLISON KAVE: In discussing your work, you mention the importance of the present-of the current moment-in the creation of your drawings, and the hyperreality of documenting a moment as it originates. Do you feel that this direct method of creation, in which you are not allowed time to pause, contemplate, or self-edit, allows you a more direct connection to the subliminal, unconscious creative processes of your own mind?

JUAN WILLIAM CHAVEZ: Most of my subject matters are time-based, meaning they have a point A and a point Z. To experience them in their entirety you have to sit and watch. In other words, there is a beginning and an end. Because of the nature of a moving subject, you have throw yourself into the deep end to get it done. You're right, there is no time to contemplate and self-edit and as of yet the subliminal and unconscious have not come into play, at least that I'm aware of. It is more about the collaboration of the eye and the hand fueled by the environment the subject creates.

AK: Which is more important to you-accurately representing the visible image that you are documenting, or representing the emotional and intangible social atmosphere of that moment?



Juan William Chávez, *Drawing CWO*, 2007. Gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, 24 × 18 inches.

JWC: The social atmosphere is more a part of the process. It fuels the drawings. If the energy of the social atmosphere comes through that's a bonus, but in the end my goal is to create a moving still life of the subject.

AK: You choose as subjects for your drawings both actual real-time occurrences and events and scenes from films. Do you approach these differently? How do you understand the relationship between them?

JWC: I don't approach them differently. They are all moving subjects, which I am viewing through some type of frame. For example, *Drawing on LSD*, where I was driving and drawing on Lake Shore Drive, is a real time event; however, the front window of the van served as a frame. All of the other projects were viewed from monitors. I believe you are referring to my abstract expressionist style and my multi-drawing animations.

The abstract expressionist approach is usually the result of an on-shot scene with little or no edits. My animations are the result of multi-edits and scene changes, close-ups zooming in

and zooming out, background changes, etc.



Juan William Chávez, *Drawing CWO (Study)*, 2007. Collage, charcoal, graphite, and colored pencil on paper, 20 × 26 inches.

AK: You have titled this series *Drawings from the Cave*, citing the chiaroscuro of shadow and light on the cave wall as an important concept in the creation of your work, as well as the movement of form and the effort to capture it in a fixed image. Do you feel that the hurried, intuitive gestures of your drawings have a primitive element, one that exists outside

of technical training? How do you reconcile your obvious education and awareness of the context of art history with this idea of a gut-based form of expression?

JWC: The drawings are not gut-based. I am looking at my subject matter while I am drawing. There are some intuitive elements regarding my choices of mediums and variety of mark making, but those decisions are influenced by the visuals. The context of art history, especially in Drawing CWO (A Clockwork Orange), plays a big role. The project was initially inspired by Goya's Disasters of War, however you can see many other influences in the 117 drawings.

AK: One series of drawings within Drawings from the Cave depicts scenes from Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange, in particular scenes of violence and sexual assault. What was the motivation behind this selection?

JWC: This is the signature scene in the film and the most challenging to draw-it's running on all cylinders. The scene is visually rich, incorporating interior design, fashion, performance, comedy, horror, violence, and sex, and it is accompanied by a contrasting soundtrack. If I was going to go up against any scene, this was the one.