

Miguel Angel
Ríos: *Piedras
Blancas* (White
Rocks), 2014,
video, 5 minutes.
Courtesy Arizona
State University
Art Museum,
Tempe.

NOMADIC GAMES

**The playful images of animals and toys
in Miguel Angel Ríos's videos allude to complex
social realities, offering oblique reflections on
violence and poverty in Latin America.**

by Raphael Rubinstein

THE FIRST THING that Miguel Angel Ríos did when installation began for “Landlocked,” the survey of his work on view last fall at the Arizona State University Art Museum in Tempe, was to pick up a paintbrush and write in large cursive script the phrase “get lost” on a long wall at the show’s entrance. If some oversensitive visitor took this as a gesture of dismissal (as in, “get lost, I don’t want to see you”) he or she would have been guilty of a misreading. Instead, the Argentine-born artist’s statement was a concise suggestion on how to approach the show: “get lost” as in “lose yourself,” “stray into unknown territory,” “wander for a while.” The phrase also seemed to be the artist’s exhortation to himself as he and curator Julio Morales embarked on arranging a tightly packed display of over 300 drawings, photographs and documents on the four walls of a large gallery. This wraparound installation was a perfect prelude to the exhibition’s core—a darkened gallery on a lower floor where visitors could view projections of 10 of Ríos’s videos. While “Landlocked,” which the museum described as the first survey of the artist’s videos, didn’t include any of the pleated-map wall reliefs that Ríos (b. 1943) gained attention with in the 1990s, the show nevertheless offered an effective introduction to his artistic universe,

in which the often brutal realities of Latin American society are embodied in a distinctive combination of Post-Minimalist form and condensed, wordless cinematic narrative.

Even without the artist’s advice, it was impossible not to go astray while looking at the densely hung assembly in the first gallery. Although the ensemble was (by design) overwhelming and disorienting, it made one thing perfectly clear: Ríos is an artist with a generous and restless imagination who revels in the practice of drawing. The installation featured drawings made with graphite, ink or charcoal on everything from thick watercolor stock to paper towels to photo mailers. There were also collages, film stills, landscape paintings, elaborately cut-up paper works, color photocopies, photomontages and large photographs (one displayed on a lightbox). Tucked away here and there were a few drawings made directly on the wall (one depicting an eye secreting a tear), two plastic gloves (one sporting the phrase “agarrame si puedes,” which can be translated as “hold me if you can”) and a cardboard machine gun with the words “we trust” stenciled onto it (which could be read as an acknowledgement of narco power in Mexico or a comment on gun worship in the U.S.). Nearly all of the imagery related to the videos in the show, as did some spin-

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ning tops and plaster balls arrayed on a large plywood table resting on trestles in the middle of the room. Also on view in this encyclopedic installation was a pair of documentaries playing on flat-screen monitors, *Fuego Amigo* (2006) and *Behind Mecha* (2010), chronicling the making of two of the videos, and revealing just how demanding and often physically dangerous location shooting is for Ríos and his crew. In order to fully appreciate this wealth of art and documentation, it was, however, necessary to descend one flight further down into the building, a quasi-Brutalist bunker-pyramid designed by Antoine Predock in the mid-1980s, where the videos themselves were playing.

Video surveys are always a technical challenge, especially when sound is a central element, as it is with Ríos's work. The elegant solution in "Landlocked" was to project the videos one after another on the walls of a single large room. When each video came to an end there were a few seconds of quiet and darkness before the next one began screening on the adjacent wall. This meant that viewers, generally seated on four benches in the middle of the gallery, were compelled to shift their bodies slightly in coordination with each video. If one remained to watch all 10 videos, which took about one hour, it was necessary to turn around the room two and a half times. I've never seen this method used before, but it's a marvelous solution to the challenge of presenting numerous videos within a limited space without distracting audio bleed. Perhaps even more important is how it engages the viewer's body in the experience of seeing.

Having to turn 90 degrees as you begin watching a video is a subtle reminder that each artwork has (or certainly should have) its own distinct conditions: and with such intensely kinetic, precisely choreographed work as Ríos's, it seemed altogether appropriate to be made aware of your physical stance.

Not only is everything in constant motion in the videos—gangs of spinning tops, dogs in mad pursuit of prey, metal disks hurtling through space, balls rolling down hills, a pair of mules running up a mountain pass, whirling toys, a dancer moving furiously—but in order to create his videos, Ríos himself is always on the move, crisscrossing Latin America to find the perfect location, no matter how remote, no matter how challenging. *Mecha* (Fuse), 2010, was made in Bogotá, Colombia; *Room . . . Room* (2010) in northern Argentina's Calchaquí Valley where Ríos grew up; *Landlocked* (2014) in Bolivia and Chile; *Mulas* (Mules), 2014, in the foothills of the Andes Mountains. Ríos has also ranged through Mexico, where he resides for part of the year, to make other works—creating his widely seen trio of spinning-top videos (one of which was in this show) in the town of Tepoztlán, for instance, and the two closely related videos *The Ghost of Modernity tres Marias* and *The Ghost of Modernity (lixiviados)*, 2012, in Oaxaca and Morelos. "I have made the landscape my studio," Ríos explains in an interview in the exhibition catalogue.

In *Mulas* Ríos works not only in a landscape but also *on* it. As the video opens, we see a pair of roped-together mules making their way along the ridges and valleys of an arid



mountainous zone. The setting is so striking that one doesn't immediately appreciate the artfulness of the cinematography and editing. Views alternate between long shots, close-ups and shots taken from cameras attached to the mules. At times, the camera has been embedded in the earth in order to film the mules as they jump over it. Only about halfway through the piece's 6 minutes and 22 seconds does the real action start as a white powdery substance begins leaking from the bags carried by one of the mules. From then on, everywhere the animals go they leave behind an unbroken white line. Instantly, the barren mountains become an enormous drawing. Clearly aware of the precedents for large-scale Land art (including, perhaps, Richard Long's 1972 piece *Walking a Line in Peru*), Ríos is also invoking far older landscape interventions, such as the Nazca lines in southern Peru. Yet, as so often in Ríos's work, the social and political are never very far away: it doesn't take long to associate the white lines with the cocaine trade, a connection that is strengthened when you recall that people who are conscripted to smuggle drugs on or in their bodies are called "mules." Originating in the foothills of the Andes, an area known for coca cultivation, Ríos's lines are no doubt heading north. But they never reach any specific destination: the video ends when the bags strapped onto the mules break open and the screen is filled with smoky white dust, as the animals, spooked by the billowing clouds of powder, flee deeper into the mountains. It's a moment of pure poetry, and in Ríos's art poetry is always privileged over politics. Social

concerns are present and profound, but what really drives the artist is the quest for transcendent experiences.

The show included two other videos completed in 2014, *Piedras Blancas* (White Rocks) and *Landlocked*. Filmed in the Mexican state of Morelos, *Piedras Blancas* is named for its protagonists, heavy grapefruit-size white balls made from wire, concrete and white paint that we see rolling in great numbers across the landscape. Using only gravity and the natural topography of the land, Ríos and his unseen assistants unloosed thousands of white orbs and let them roll down hillsides, rush through shallow channels and hurtle off precipices. Sometimes the balls move in long lines, sometimes in great masses. The five-minute-long video is a cinematic tour de force made up of hundreds of shots, most lasting only two or three seconds. We see the cascading balls from every possible angle, from fixed shots to sequences captured by a rapidly moving camera. The white spheres coalesce into an accelerating mass that sweeps across the landscape like the out-of-control cattle in the famous stampede sequence in Howard Hawks's classic Western *Red River* (1948). Ríos, who in past work has taken inspiration from Fritz Lang and Sergei Eisenstein, lately seems to be drawing from old-time Hollywood. *Mulas* could almost be an actorless remake of John Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), while *Mecha*, which I will discuss in a moment, draws freely on the war movie genre.

Waiting to be discovered by patient viewers of the upstairs installation were letters and notes (some of them

View of Ríos's installation *Making Of*, showing drawings and photographs; in the exhibition "Landlocked," at the Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe. Photo Peter Bugg.



addressed to the artist's assistant or his cinematographer, some apparently his notes to himself) in which Ríos explains, in Spanish or English, his thematic intentions. In a text about *Piedras Blancas* he acknowledges "the inevitable metaphor: the demand and supply of drugs coming from South to North across the U.S.-Mexico border" and observes how "the gravity of the incline in a mountain [that] makes the stones roll" symbolizes "the economic power of the demand for the substance." But a few lines later, in a statement that highlights the multilayered nature of his work, Ríos invites us also to see the rivers of white globes coursing along gullies as a visualization of drugs flowing in the veins of a user: "The action of intoxication as the landscape becomes the inner body."

At just over 10 minutes, *Mecha* was the longest video in the show. A two-channel work (all the other videos were single-channel projects, except for *On The Edge*, 2005, which belongs to the artist's spinning-top trilogy), *Mecha* opens with stereoscopic cameras exploring a smoke-filled, rubble-strewn space where small fires burn and distant explosions can be heard; it's like a battlefield just after the fighting has stopped. We can hear the sound of the camera operator's feet crunching through the rubble and his/her increasingly labored breathing. (The soundtracks of Ríos's videos are as nuanced and crucial as the visuals, so much so that listening to the videos with closed eyes would probably be a totally compelling experience.) The smoky interior is divided into corridors and cages by chain-link fencing. Suddenly, groups of black-clothed men seen only from the waist down begin running through the space, harassed by small explosions underfoot and apparently pursued by an immense wooden wheel. There's a shot of metal disks stacked like ammunition. Men present similar disks with outstretched arms, the gesture recalling that of the soldiers in Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii*. At about three minutes into the video, with a visceral symphony of nerve-rattling noises, these disks begin to shoot across the frames and barely let up until the end. Some fall to the floor, but many more hit large wooden targets, collide with steel pipes, splash into expanses of yellowish mud or come hurtling toward the cameras, which retreat into protective shelters.

As with *Piedras Blancas* and *Mulas*, the cameras are in constant motion, not only following but also intensifying the kinetic energy of action. In *Mecha*, the addition of a second channel adds another degree of intensity and disorientation. At times the two channels show the same scene from almost the same angle (for many shots Ríos used a pair of synchronized cameras mounted side by side) but often one channel switches to footage shot by a third camera from a completely different angle. The alternation between synchronous and asynchronous shots, and the shifting between flurries of explosions and ominous silences, contributes to the sense of confusion and panic, of violence spiraling out of control as if on an actual battlefield.

Mecha, like many of Ríos's other videos, is inspired by popular Latin American street games. In this case, the game is *tejo*, a venerable Colombian sport in which contestants



toss heavy metal disks (*tejos*) at wooden targets coated with clay. The aim is to land a *tejo* in a metal tube standing in the center of the clay-covered target. Players also try to hit small triangular envelopes (*mechas*) filled with gunpowder that explode when struck by a *tejo*. In Ríos's hands, the game of *tejo* becomes an allegory for the violence that has long plagued Colombia (hinted at by a fleeting reference to the country's M-19 guerrilla group), while also evoking other conflicts around the world. At different moments of watching *Mecha*, I thought about the CIA's black site prisons, U.S. soldiers battling insurgents house-by-house in Iraq, and frontline journalists everywhere falling victim to snipers and shrapnel. The video ends with one of the cameras being brutally destroyed by a barrage of *tejos*.

A very different mood is created in the aforementioned two-video *Ghost of Modernity* project, from 2012. The premise of each work is that a large transparent plexiglass cube floats through a poor Mexican community. *The Ghost of Modernity (lixiviados)* begins dramatically as a dozen corrugated metal shanties of the sort that are found throughout the developing

Above, two stills from *Mulas* (Mules), 2014, video, approx. 6½ minutes.

Opposite, stills from *Mecha* (Fuse), 2010, two-channel video, approx. 10 minutes.





*The Ghost of
Modernity
(lixiviados)*, 2012,
video, approx.
5 minutes.



Two stills from *Endless*, 2015, video, approx. 6½ minutes.

Opposite, two stills from *Landlocked*, 2014, video, approx. 5 minutes.

world fall out of the sky in slow motion, creating an instant settlement that happens to be adjacent to an immense garbage dump. Suspended by invisible wires, a large, slowly revolving see-through cube floats among these squalid shelters like a king or a god. Never touching the earth, impervious to the thick flocks of vultures attracted by the decaying garbage, the pristine cube symbolizes every kind of blinkered idealism, every philosopher or politician or theologian who has tried to impose a supposedly perfect system on the starving masses, or simply blissfully ignored them. Ríos also wants viewers to be reminded of the Minimalist boxes of Donald Judd, Larry Bell and Dan Graham. While deeply influenced by Minimalism, Ríos has always engaged the kind of messy content that was excluded from so much reductivist art of the 1960s. In the two *Ghost of Modernity* videos, which could well be subtitled *Minimalism and its Discontents*, he has staged an almost surrealist confrontation of opposing realities. And, as so often happens in Ríos's videos, *The Ghost of Modernity*

(*lixiviados*) involves a sudden turn to sheer poetry. At the end of the video, in which no people have been seen, women in black dresses suddenly appear, sweeping the ground under the transparent cube with reed brooms in what looks like a hopeless fight against dust and trash. Suddenly, one last shanty falls from the sky, this time directly over the camera. The screen goes nearly dark, but then, for a second or two, shafts of sunlight blaze through tiny rents in the shanty's roof, like stars in the night sky.

The end of *Landlocked*, the video that gave the show its title, is equally startling. Throughout the 5-minute piece we watch as four dogs furiously dig separate tunnels into a cliff, on the track of we know not what. When, after some dramatic intercutting and claustrophobic shots that look more like endoscopy sequences than views of tunnels dug by canines, the dogs finally break through to the other side, Ríos withholds any image of their goal (the Pacific Ocean), letting us imagine it via the sound of waves and the barking of the exultant dogs. An allegorical meditation on the psychogeography of landlocked nations such as Bolivia, which lost its coastal region to Chile in a bitter 19th-century border dispute, the video follows an artistic logic that, like nearly all of Ríos's videos, begins in the everyday, in some aspect of vernacular culture, but leads into the visionary.

Another characteristic of Ríos is his ceaseless innovation; he is as restless artistically as he is geographically, always pushing himself to work with new materials, new subjects. This was clearly the case with the most recent video in the exhibition, *Endless* (2015); accompanied by a recording of Schubert's "Ave Maria," the camera lingers for six-and-a-half minutes over a group of immense wall-like structures made from densely woven-together thorny branches. To create these massive objects, which are made from the *huisache* or sweet acacia plant, a large indigenous Mexican shrub, Ríos and a crew of 10 worked for four months, cutting the plants with machetes and then pressing them into wooden boxes to create the thousands of modular units required to build the huge walls. Possibly the most abstract of Ríos's videos, *Endless* is certainly the most meditative. In contrast to the strenuous and often violent activity at the center of his previous videos, the pace is slow and stately. The thick, freestanding walls remain stationary until almost the very end, with nearly all movement coming from the gliding camera. While a few shots recall Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Endless* is chiefly in dialogue with abstract painting, especially that of Barnett Newman and, when a zoom fills the entire screen with the wall of entangled thorns, Jackson Pollock. There are also hints of religious mysticism, perhaps triggered by the thorn imagery and the widespread appropriation of Schubert's melody for the Catholic Ave Maria prayer. As the aching Romanticism of Schubert's lieder filled the room and the thorny barrier appeared to open up as the camera zoomed in, the exhibition concluded as it began, with the artist once again inviting his viewers to wander freely around new territory where the tactile and the metaphorical constantly enfold each other. ○

