

JAVIER ALVAREZ SAGREDO

- NO SMOKE WITHOUT A FIRE

By Rikke Luna & Matias

Hi! Dear Rikke & Matias. I hope you're feeling fine. My name is Javier. I hope you remember me from Afgang 21. I remember that the moment/dialogue we created and the information I was allowed to share with you was so much fun to do and very inspirational. I'm contacting you in regards to a lil potential collaboration. I'm atm making a semi monumentalish solo exhibition that I'm really happy about, titled "Live Fast Die Young" @ inter.pblc, with an opening on the 16th of June - that runs until the 1st of July. Would you be interested in starting up a new dialogue and do an interview with me for your platform? I feel like I've got a lot in my heart, new information and personal experiences to share with the public. That hopefully a lot can relate to or try to understand (we all together). Please let me know what you think.

This email came in our inbox on a Monday afternoon and was in many ways exactly what we needed. Of course we remember our first meeting with [Javier Alvarez Sagredo](#) (b. 1994)! We were at Kunsthall Charlottenborg to write about the [graduation exhibition from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts](#), and despite our awkward disguises (aka face masks - thanks corona time) we very naturally fell into conversation about Javier's works.

Since then, they have been in our thoughts, which made it very easy to answer: *Dearest Javier, Of course we remember you! <3 And we as well remember our meeting with you as very special and amazing. We would love to do an interview in context with your upcoming exhibition!*

Dealing with generational trauma

"When we first met, I had one child and I dedicated two artworks to them. Since then I got a second one and I've been trying to navigate being a parent, while managing my practice and the art world in general. Laying foundations in the Danish art scene after living here for five years now," says Javier when we meet them again, this time on a warm and maskless June day, in inter.pblc's raw exhibition space at Ydre Nørrebro in Copenhagen.

The graduation piece *Trauma* consisted of five intertwined elements: a painting, a film, a sculpture, a performance and a publication. "The video work is called *Baby* and was made in collaboration with Adam Aftanas Studio. Through manipulated stock footage I tell the story of a Swedish elk that is expecting and in the end it's giving birth in the wild. The video starts gloomy, dark, maybe referencing bad experiences, but at the same time it's about turning lives around and seeing a light in the new generations." With short lines and an insistent all-caps vulnerability, the book also reflects on generational trauma and the fear of what heritage one unconsciously passes on.

"I was very clueless when we were expecting the first one. There was also a lot of fear - will I be able to live up to this? Luckily it felt natural and through that process, I was really confronted with my own reflection. In my relationship and with the new child I could suddenly take care of mental issues that had been holding me back. For example, I couldn't have expressed my feelings like this just before my first born. I couldn't speak. We don't have this in my family, we don't do therapy. We don't have transparency. And that's all what I'm for now, you know? I love transparency now."

What do you mean when you talk about freedom?

Javier describes the exhibition at inter.pblc as a home or a living room. On the back wall we find a painting; an eight meter long landscape of screenprint, bleached chlorine traces, neon-coloured pieces of text and black-and-white photographs. A TV screen shows footage of busy worker bees. On the kitchen table sits a figure wearing fragments of streetwear, ripped leggings, Nike shoes and an *ICON* cap, and by the large windows stands another in a grey cloud of found textiles, perhaps absorbed in their own thoughts. "The whole installation was supposed to represent something dreamy but also a home. Maybe it's a trap house, maybe it's our dream house. Maybe it's a dysfunctional home. Maybe it's something else."

For Javier, the domestic and political are inextricably connected. "I was born into a highly political position, so for me it's very natural to use this in my art," as they put it. Javier was born stateless 15 years after their parents came to Sweden from Chile as political refugees. "They were under a lot of pressure when they fled in 1979. My dad was kidnapped, incarcerated and tortured under Pinochet after the military raided my parents' neighborhood. For so long my mother didn't hear from him and this was while they were expecting their first baby. After maybe a year they released him in a labor camp, where he could finally call my mother. He wasn't even radical before, but after that he became very critical of the military dictatorship."

Javier gets up and walks towards the big canvas, where a multitude of pink and neon green statements break through an ashen cloud of ink and paint. A mixture of text pieces from historical and global freedom struggles, rap lyrics and Javier's own poetry weaves personal narratives together with system critique and geopolitics. The work talks about displacement and migration, about subcultures and resistance, but perhaps most of all it is about freedom. "Nobody's free until everybody's free," it states, in the famous words of American civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer. "A lot of people and artists talk about freedom, but I'm like yo, what are you talking about? Are you talking about your own personal freedom or are you talking about a collective freedom from oppressive systems?"

Celebrating sobriety

Just below the Fannie Lou Hamer quote, Javier has written "Celebrate Sobriety" next to a photo of a [coca plant](#) hiding behind loosely hanging sewing thread. In all its simplicity, the quote contains both a critique of the incomprehensible and borderless web of exploitation that connects to drug use, and at the same time it is written as a personal celebration. "With this exhibition, I'm turning three years sober from substances. No smoking, no alcohol, no drugs. I'm really happy about that. I feel like within a lot of communities, unfortunately drugs really do a lot of damage – still today. They control people's minds," Javier says with both pride and concern in his voice.

"Poor farmers cultivate it under a lot of repression from the state and then the criminal gangs take advantage of these people. It travels here and along the way it becomes blood. It becomes war. It becomes corruption. It becomes down spiraling for communities. People use these drugs without thinking about where it came from. You are supporting this very problematic business and you're enjoying it, talking about freedom. I wanna let people know that you don't have to do drugs. Please cleanse your mind and soul from toxins that you think you need to numb pain or because of culture. I'm interested in letting the younger generation know that it's okay not to do these things. You don't have to follow a toxic culture."

Ghetto like a bird

Starting from a single line of poetry, Javier takes us back to his upbringing in the outskirts of Stockholm in the 90s and 00s, in what they themselves call a "socially underprivileged area" – an area that today is strongly influenced by the increasing gang activity in Sweden. "Ghetto som en fågel, Ja vill ha dig i mig" (Ghetto like a bird, I want you in me) refers to *Ghetto Birds* which is slang for police helicopters that monitor and control specific residential areas and is for instance used in [Ice Cube's rap track of the same name](#). "It could also be a bird that is just out in the streets – I think a bird is so ghetto. It's just out here trying to maintain, hustling for food, building their little nests, just hoarding up. 'I want you in me' because I'm really interested in relationship dynamics – giving or taking,

submission or domination. I'm very much against patriarchy, how it determines so many lives if you are not aware of the history of it. It's also about queerness in that way."

Since Javier was growing up in the Stockholm suburbs, gang activity has increased significantly. In fact, in the last 20 years, Sweden has gone from having one of the lowest rates of gun violence in Europe, to the second highest. Last year, Sweden broke the sad record with 63 fatal shooting incidents, and the photographs in Javier's work bear witness to the brutality of the incidents. "This image is from Stockholm where somebody detonated a bomb in the home of a gang member's family. They go after innocent family members now. I know some people in these networks that died because of... you know. Some criminal organizations are using foot soldiers as young as 15 years old. And I'm like, damn. I think criminality can be amazing, but when it becomes social cannibalism, it horrifies me. When people from the same group eat each other for nothing, for drugs, for money."

We ask Javier why they think some people are drawn to these forms of violent crime, and as with most of our questions, they offer a nuanced answer: "People blame alienation. People blame mental health. People talk about belonging. People talk about liking it. People talk about fast money. People talk about status. People talk about being used, about not thinking about the consequences. Some people grew up with really good families. Some people had abusive or no parents. And yeah, Patriarchy again. I think that it has a lot to do with machismo."

A chance to step away from the familiar

According to Javier, they could very easily have ended up in gang-related crime themselves, but for several reasons their lives took a different turn. "Maybe it's about intuition or just luck to be honest," is how they explain it, but perhaps it's also because their mother's words stuck in their mind: "If you see something that feels wrong or that you don't agree with, step away as fast as possible." That was the mantra that led Javier to instead follow their passion to create.

"Some really good childhood friends of mine started at an aesthetical gymnasium and I saw that they had facilities for artmaking, and I thought that was so cool. That's also the thing; I know so many people from these environments that never indulge in anything bad and are just inspirational, but we never put shine on them. When we talk about certain neighborhoods where certain people live, it's always about the bad stuff. The problematic stuff, not the interesting stuff, the beautiful stuff that people can actually learn from."

At the gymnasium, an art teacher encouraged Javier to apply to Konstskolan Idun Lovén, which offers courses that prepare young artists to apply to art academies. "Luckily the art academy in Umeå accepted me and I got a chance to get away from Stockholm, from everything that I knew," says Javier, who after one semester went on exchange - first at the University of Los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia and later at the Weißensee Academy of Art in Berlin, Germany. It was in Berlin that Javier met his partner, and after they had both completed their bachelor's courses, they moved to Copenhagen, where Javier took his master's degree at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts.

There is no smoke without a fire

We have now moved all the way along the eight meter wide painting, and in the upper right corner it says "Fuego, no flores" (Fire, not flowers). "I follow a lot of anarchist groups in Latin America where anarchism is very strong because of so much repression. It's not huge, but they are very radical, very militant. The sentence basically means, don't ever bring me flowers. What am I supposed to do with flowers? Instead, buckle up and organize. Bring workwear, fire and fight the system that oppresses us. It's in that sense I see this whole landscape as a fire or something smokey, because there's no smoke without a fire."

In their work, Javier examines the nature of criminality because resistance to oppressive systems by its very nature must break rules, norms and sometimes legislation. They are interested in gray areas, where the problematic and the poetic meet, where breakdown and change intersect, and where we as humans are forced to be critical of what we think we know. In the painting we also find a portrait of

Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793), who through theater fought for women's rights and against slavery in the French colonies. She is mentioned as an important character in the French Revolution because of her radical ideas of freedom, but paradoxically she ended her days in the guillotine because she also criticized the men who led the revolution. "There's also Angela Davis. A lot of people within my generation are inspired by them - I mean they're an icon, world famous Black Panther, feminist, political activist - an intellectual. At the same time Angela Davis has engaged in criminal activity and is not unproblematic. I think this link between criminality and radical politics is very interesting."

Javier points to a photo of a burning police car from the riots that followed Rasmus Paludan's Koran burnings in Sweden last year. "I'm very interested in Scandinavia as a material because there's so many interesting things going on. I really understand the anger and frustration, while it's also extremely problematic. I understand the seriousness of police violence, but also how police officers get PTSD from the riots. I think that we should dissect what's going on, as students, as artists, as institutions, as media, so it doesn't become black and white. So it doesn't always end up in polarization."

For the same reason, Javier is strongly inspired by trap and gangster rap. "Because it's real stories. That's what I could relate to the most when I grew up, and that's what I listen to a lot now. It's a vibe, you know? It can be extremely problematic. It can be a song where an artist mentions killing somebody and they have maybe been convicted for it. And in the same song, they can come with a deeper, poetic perspective that is super beautiful, philosophical, maybe existential. So you know, whoa, now I really have to pick and choose what I take from it."

The revolution is non-binary, the revolution is beautiful

Instead of succumbing to false dichotomies and unambiguous answers, Javier encourages us to think critically about the "truths" we are presented with. In the video work *Untitled (Hive)*, which was created in collaboration with JUNOxoxo (dj bl00d5port), Javier has remixed video recordings of worker bees following the structures of the swarm - dominated by a superior power that may be the queen bee, perhaps the beekeepers. Humans exploit the work of bees for honey, and in this way their lives become a metaphor of the extractive, capitalist system. "I also wanted to give a shout out to bees, because we need to look at nature. They're so beautiful and we just exploit them. I'm just interested in how we can start noticing small things, like natural systems. Just start tripping to that side of the universe."

Javier directs our attention in the direction of the two mannequin sculptures (one created in collaboration with Puer Parasitus) that also inhabit the exhibition space. They are dressed in well-known brands, but at the same time the textiles are cut up and put together in new ways to emphasize and mask identity markers. "I'm trying to work within the alien, the unknown and the experimental. These mannequin sculptures are non-binary figures. I want to challenge what we may refer to as normativity, trying to break from structures, heritages, things we maybe think we know."

"Taking inspiration from Scandinavian fashion, streetwear and radical political movements. We wear homemade dresses, we wear work gloves, ripped fabrics, camouflage and face masks to cover our identity. We wear Nike shoes because 'Just do it', we wear Dsquared2 *ICON* caps, because how cute is it, that people like us can be icons?"

Javier is interested in how fashion companies absorb aesthetics and trends from subcultures and how the same cultural codes can be reclaimed. How "Just do it" can be turned from being a capitalism-affirming, *slightly* ableist slogan - ala "Get your fucking ass up and work" - to a call for revolution. "When the revolution comes, I could imagine it looking like this. I would definitely wanna look like this during the revolution, to be honest. The revolution is non-binary, the revolution is beautiful, full of love and hope, I imagine."

A path for those who come after me

After a few hours in the exhibition, Javier has to pick up their colleague Xenia Xamanek, and a few moments later they return with the cargo bike filled with sound equipment, a guitar case and effects pedals. The two start unrolling cables and setting up for their joint performance *Untitled (Thorn)* (you

can see a [video documentation here](#)), which will be performed for the opening the following day - an improvised mix of distorted noise and poetry read in Swedish, English and Spanish.

We ask Javier what they hope people get out of the exhibition: "I want us all to lean more into critical thinking, into thought provocation, for real. I want to share information and I want others to do the same. Information as in experiences, as in feelings, as in knowledge. So that we can have a transparent way of dialogue and learn from each other." Javier also hopes to create the space and a voice that they themselves have lacked during their education at the European art academies. "I didn't really feel seen or heard by the professors. No one could relate to my position, so they weren't really able to help me evolve my practice. I hope that I can carve a path for the ones that come after me."

Just before we are ready to say goodbye, we hear a cautious voice from one of inter.pblc's automatic sliding doors. "Hey, did you make those pants yourself?" asks a young person who randomly passes by on Hamletsgade with a friend of the same age. Javier welcomes them and tells them that the clothes are recycled and that modifications are made with chlorine and scissors. "Can I buy a pair?" - "No, but if you message me on Instagram, I'll definitely tell you how to make your own." The short conversation ends with a high five, but may continue to the opening of the exhibition or maybe later in the digital sphere. "This is exactly my audience! This person could have been me, just maybe 15 years ago, when I needed access to these kinds of spaces. I'm so happy that they asked me something, because that led to a conversation, and that might lead to something new."