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## Interview with Gonzalo Fuenmayor

Josune Urbistondo

*University of Miami*, [josie.urbist@gmail.com](mailto:josie.urbist@gmail.com)

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## **Opulent Oppressions: A Conversation with Gonzalo Fuenmayor**

Colombian-born artist Gonzalo Fuenmayor's "Genesis III" graces the cover of *Anthurium's* Volume 11, Issue 1 (2014). It is a haunting black and white photograph where a banana tree holds up a Victorian chandelier. The darkness of the scene nearly envelopes the banana plantation surroundings, but the brightness of the chandelier crystals reflecting the candlelight defies such oblivion. The juxtaposition between implied labor and opulent luxury is the precise chord Fuenmayor seeks to strike with his *Papare Series*, of which "Genesis III" is a part. The term genesis, which echoes a biblical beginning, seems ironic as the title of the piece, especially since his work propels the audience's gaze toward historical traces and past colonial erasures. However, how we come to see this space – the plantation – anew may be a beginning of sorts, given the banana's arrival as the "yellow gold" that would replace sugar as a primary cash crop in the Caribbean region.

I had the privilege of interviewing Fuenmayor at his Wynwood studio in May 2014. Since then, public interest in his work has grown tremendously. He opened a solo show entitled "Tropical Mythologies" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts and showcased his work at Art Basel, Miami 2015. Most recently, Faena Hotel, Miami Beach, purchased five limited edition prints from the *Papare Series* along with several large scale prints that will adorn the guest rooms at the hotel. They also commissioned a mural for the concierge area which bears Fuenmayor's signature lush landscape terrains. Our conversation shows the thoughtfulness of an artist whose cultural background informs the particularities of his work without dominating his politically charged representations of these tropical landscapes.

### **Boston or Bananas: Fabricating Latino Identity**

**JU:** Do you remember your first encounter with art and photography? At what point did you begin to think of yourself as an artist?

**GF:** I have always thought of myself as an artist. I have always drawn, and growing up I wanted to become either a chef (when it wasn't cool) or a biological engineer to experiment with genetic modifications. Both are making hybrids basically. Although I came from a very progressive background, I always considered art just a hobby growing up. Rather than those three careers, I initially studied business; I subconsciously was bartering with myself thinking I would go

into advertising that could have included drawing. I realized early on that it was not for me. Thinking back to all of these careers, while drastically different and disconnected, they are all about producing something new. I hope to be doing that in my art.

**JU:** How did the banana metaphor become a point of departure for you? What has been its evolution in meaning and how has it helped construct an identity?

**GF:** At first I was doing very narrative abstract paintings, wanting to depict the moment before or after violence. So it would be desolated places where you didn't know exactly what was happening. And then I had a crisis of honesty. I questioned how one is honest and what the burden was for contemporary Colombian artists in addressing violence connected to drug trafficking and so forth, but I was living in Boston and in New York having a privileged education, so it didn't quite feel honest to make these kinds of drawings and address these issues. As a contemporary artist, I constantly question: who has the authority or the responsibility of speaking for others? So I had a moment in which I dropped everything; I dropped the very narrative, magical realist type renditions and made formalist paintings. And the formalist paintings were done with TV color bars, and I did a whole series of color bar paintings. Peter Halley was my hero at the moment, and I was thinking *just paint*. Looking back it was a way to silence myself and not force myself to be political. I just wanted to force myself to deal with issues on the surface of paint. I did 20 of those paintings, trying to regroup and confront how to be real and honest. And then I decided to do a banana painting. It was something funny, very tongue-in-cheek, and different for me; Warhol's "The Velvet Underground" image was very present at the time, but I wanted to address a completely different manner and try to address violence with where I come from.

I did my first banana painting, and I thought it was just going to be one and then I started making an entire series. At first they were just still lifes, very sort of what was expected of myself at that time. I was trying to exoticize myself for the Bostonian/American crowd. I was the only Latino in the program. At first it looks like a very warm depiction, but the bananas were rotting; they were human sized so I'd hoped that the scale would add some more narrative to the still life tradition. They were like big corpses, ironically breathing. Then I moved to New York and I started drawing. I started making drawings that were more sexualized. I was peeling the banana. I was doing the banana series for such a long time that I became the heterosexual Latino 'doing bananas' and then I tried to really push the image of the banana to mean something completely different. So I took color off the palate, and I started peeling the bananas so they looked like vaginas, very non-phallic, almost flying creatures. These bananas became octopus-looking animals

that were interacting with multiple imageries. Through this experimentation process I fell in love with charcoal and the way I could create atmosphere with it. Slowly I started distancing myself from the fruit to have sort of a bigger vision of the plantation and then the idea of the Victorian aesthetic invaded the canvas.

I became enthralled with the complicit nature of decorative art, how some images camouflaged the history behind it. In some way I related it to my own process – of what I should do? What was expected? And, what I was doing at the time. Ultimately, I was drawn to decorative art because it told a story through absences – of the plantation, of colonialism, and of exploitation, but all you saw was beautiful patterns. I wanted to make these two images clash – the opulence and the decadence with the oppressions it concealed.

I also wanted to draw myself away from the banana because it became too easy, too formulaic. It is funny because I have been pushing this image. The banana has been a vehicle for me to explore different themes that I am interested in but it has never just been about the banana itself.



Inert trap, 37 x 50in, charcoal on paper, 2004

**JU:** You said that when you were in Boston that you began to exoticize yourself for the Bostonian crowd. How was that received? Did they see through the kind of performance, or were your peers and the art community participating in the performance in a way?

**GF:** I wanted to be the stereotypical Latino painter so I would have salsa playing, have a very untidy studio, paint everywhere, like a Francis Bacon studio. My MFA program was very white and so sometimes it was not easy, but the fact that I would say I come from Colombia, I would immediately get the ‘oh, magical realism.’ So anything I did seemed to be placed into these preconceived categories. Julio Cortazár, Gabriel Garcia Márquez would be summoned; I felt there were very specific expectations of what a Latino artist should be making, instead of a focus on personal exploration in order to expand or break those expectations.

I played the role I thought my program and my peers wanted me to perform, but after a while, I realized that they were my own expectations and that their feedback or lens through which they read me was never antagonistic. Now that I look back, I learned from that experience, particularly how I helped others exoticize me and my work, but in the midst of it and making art I felt as if no one understood me. In order to have a meaningful conversation I had to become this other person, make this hyper-Latino performance happen.

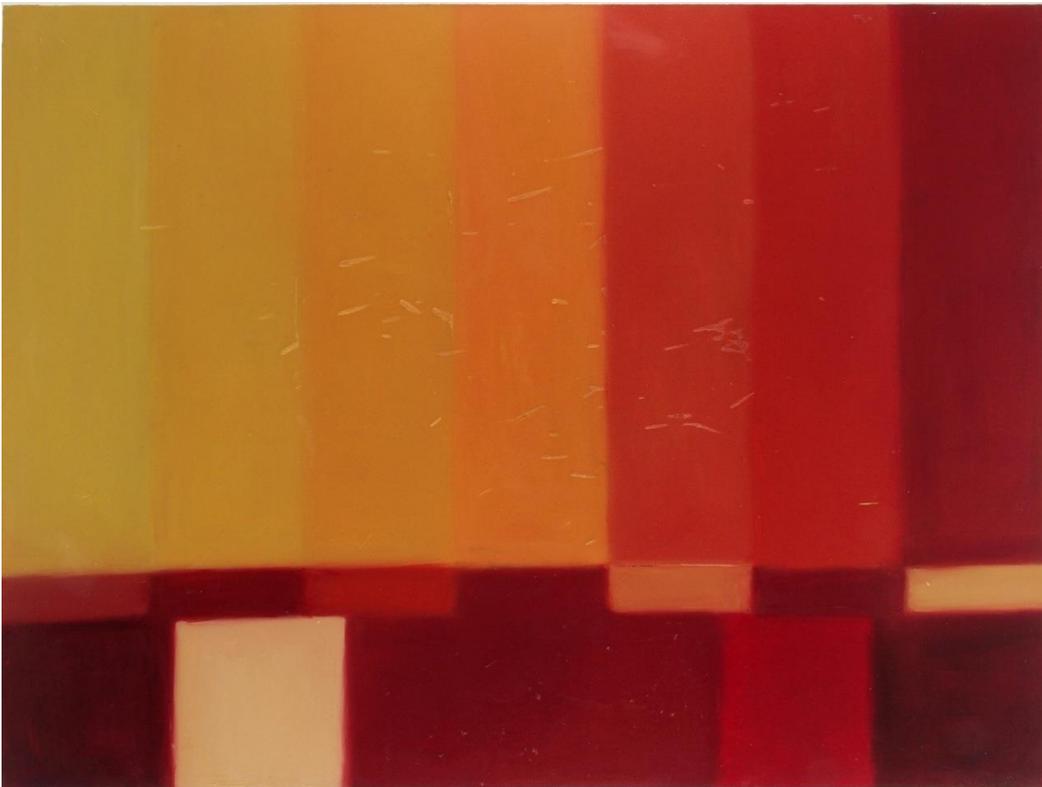
**JU:** So, this performance, however misguided, became understandable or readable for your Boston audience and peers so that you could engage more productively despite your personal concessions.

**GF:** Exactly. I was sort of controlling their expectations in order to have any type of conversation.

This was a struggle and my reaction was to shift into the formalist paintings we discussed. I would be doing same scale format paintings of the color bars and then everyone would be like ‘wow, this is so contemporary, this is so formalist,’ but at the time it seems like they weren’t interested in anything but the Latino stereotype. So, I decided; let’s have a conversation about painting not about who you think I should be. I did that out of frustration, but then I started combining images. The project where I made national flags, which readdressed ideas of nationality and being sort of a standard, came to be. Having the image of the TV as a flag that addresses notions of nationality and what one should be became a sort of compromise with the performance I perpetuated myself and my distance from that moment.

**JU:** You mentioned that looking back you learned a lot, and I find this very interesting. Did trying to fit in those boxes force you to question those boxes even more?

**GF:** Or embrace the box while re-defining the box. I have to say I had a hard time in Boston, but I think it was a lot to do with the frustration of me trying to speak out and making it more difficult for myself because I thought I was there to struggle and ask questions like, ‘why are you saying that? Or, why are you suggesting this artist or that one?’ It was a very confusing time for me. I was doing one thing one semester and then something completely different and then returned to the clichéd Latino production. However, I don’t think I would be making banana paintings if I had not gone to Boston.



Orgasmo de San Juan 1.60 x 1.20, oil on canvas, 2003

### **Miami: La ciudad del marmol, puro mar, puro mol**

**JU:** Sometimes I am not sure if it is easier here (in Miami) to have that honest, messy conversation or if it is a watered down Latinidad that everyone participates in. With so many levels of Latinidad – groups that return often to their homeland, others who imaginatively recreate that home space – it sometimes feels rushed or superficial on a casual, social level. What are your impressions?

**GF:** I completely understand. My two sons were born in the US, have American passports, and I always think about how they will be brought up. Who will they cheer for in the World Cup? I hear my accent and sense my accent when I speak with other Latinos who don't have an accent and then you hear the comments – oh so and so, she speaks just like any other American. This makes a huge difference in the perception of the other. Although I feel closer to home, I may say, so it is easier in some ways, but it is challenging in others. In Boston or New York, I invented myself; I invented Latinidad for a public. Here it is available and there are so many bridges or shades of Latinness and that means different things that it can mean to you for example as a second generation.

**JU:** Even in your impromptu reflection, you engage with a dynamic sense of identity that is spot on. You touch on Latinidad but also family and carrying culture forward. How old are your sons? What do you want to impart to your children?

**GF:** They are three and one. They live in Miami; they were born in Miami. My wife is from Barranquilla, Colombia, so we speak to them only in Spanish since they will pick up English through osmosis in school. I see myself being corrected by my sons one day, 'Oh dad that's not the way you pronounce xyz' or have them make a call on our behalf. I still have no idea what I would like for them to do professionally, but I want them to navigate the two cultures in a seamless way. We named our oldest Martin, so that it was easily pronounced in both languages. I don't know what happened with our youngest Manolo, which is very Spanish. And my last name doesn't help – Fuenmayor. I struggle with translation all the time, and I think that feeds into my work.

**JU:** If there were two things you wanted to share with your children to know or take away from art and the artistic process, what would they be?

**GF:** One thing is that they remain visually curious. Most people don't know how to look or to relate to the visual culture that surrounds us. I would like for them to be visually literate in everything from popular culture, the everyday symbols, to how they encounter a painting and sees what is in front of them instead of what society is telling them. The second, I believe art provides the launching pad to

learn other disciplines, so the curiosity in art or anything creatively produced is paramount. I don't know if I would want to encourage them to become artists, but I want them to critically take in the world like so many artists do.

**JU:** It is interesting that there seems to be a sense of tolerance in both learning to see and becoming visually curious.

**GF:** That's what I want them to do. One of the things I learned when completing the Master's program was that there were 30 students in the classroom and 30 correct answers. In art you are challenged on so many issues, but it is really about where the person is coming from, what they are portraying. I think art enables the dialogue. You sort of put ideas in question but there needs to be a level of tolerance and sophistication in engagement. Starting from the art in some ways is safer; it is its own space that enables tolerance that is very healthy for anyone growing up and learning about the world.

**JU:** That is so counter to where education seems to be going now. With so many questions on standardized tests and the need to defend the humanities, where is art education?

**GF:** Anything that I see with the term standardized, I am suspicious right away. So you learn how to perform on tests and not as a critical thinker in the world. I think an artistic education is important. I believe that art and writing, the ability to convey thought, concepts, to communicate, is in peril; the very next thing in danger is thinking, if it isn't already.

**JU:** In a culture that is progressively more and more visual, I am not convinced that we are productively learning how to navigate and read the symbols that are being thrown at us every day from all angles. What are your thoughts on social media and technology? How do you perform this otherness via technology?

**GF:** It is how you learn to use the technology that helps you perform who you are and not blindly embrace a mix of blanket ideas and expectations that are out there about who you should or should not be. Take writing online, for example. I think people are writing more now but are being less thoughtful. Part of my education was writing an artist statement. It became sort of a space where you actually had to think and internalize many things and muse over the ideas and somehow by the act of writing they made sense or not. Writing in a way is a drawing but of words; through this act there is something that happens in the brain that makes life clear or the process makes obvious that something is not yet clear to you. Now there is no introspection in the act in writing. Where is the idea of a diary? It is gone. Now it is one's status on Facebook. There should be a collective mourning for the loss

of the personal space. It is more difficult to reconcile a self, even an artistic self, online.

**JU:** Do you feel it is easier or harder to carve out a niche identity in Miami?

**GF:** I don't know if I want to have a niche identity although I have built up this whole support system of images, claiming this space for myself. But I don't know if it is about making a niche space for what I want to do. Miami is easier to navigate, but you also have those stereotypes here; they are just easier to address than if I were in Boston. I think it is easier to have the dialogue because we, ourselves, have stereotypes of other Latinos, so it is easier to have an exchange engaging various points of view. While in Boston early on in the conversation the critical thread would fall short.

**JU:** What is your process of your engagement with the Miami art scene?

**GF:** I have two kids, so it is very limited. I have a gallery, Dot 51, which is in Wynwood. I have been working with them for the last six years, and it has been wonderful. Unfortunately, I don't have the time at the moment to consistently go to shows and engage with the community.

**JU:** What do you think about the Miami art scene?

**GF:** It is very vibrant. I think the challenge is to create or consolidate the Art Basel scene year round, to sustain that same level of notoriety throughout the year. I know many talented artists who don't get seen that much, so in that sense it is very difficult to navigate. I wish there were more spaces to showcase and support local Miami production.

**JU:** Do you think places like the Perez Art Museum (PAMM) help or hurt that effort?

**GF:** Definitely help. For me the role of the museum is very important. Just to have the opportunity to see incredible artists and exhibitions. I don't know that the mission of the museum is to highlight local production. I would hope that it is one of its goals but not the sole focus. For local artists, I think it is a privilege to have a museum that wants to engage local artists with nationally recognized domestic and international artists. It benefits the whole community.

**JU:** It is interesting how in many ways Wynwood and certain pockets of the beach are very evolved in what type of art they showcase, and then still in many ways Miami is a very mall culture, non-artistic, anti-public intellectual community. I was drawn to your work through your visit to Professor Saunders'

graduate seminar at UM. Do you believe you are participating in a type of outreach that is lacking in the community?

**GF:** Yes, what is the joke, ‘La ciudad del marmol, puro mar pur mol.’<sup>1</sup> I initially never foresaw coming to Miami to live, and defending my position then, I thought, *what do people do in Miami* – beach, party, nightlife. It is a spread out car culture. It is a city difficult to navigate, and other cities I have lived in there exists so many points of intersections where people could meet and cultivate or learn or at least have the conversation. I think Miami has this but drastically disparate. The reason New York was so appealing to me was the adventure of walking down a different street every day and finding a new restaurant, bookstores or a new coffee shop. Coming to Miami there is this culture, but you have to be more proactive about it. It is not readily available at times.

You must become exposed through your proactivity. You have to make the effort for connection. Let’s take ownership of our community and what it produces.

### **Sweetness and Light<sup>2</sup>: The Papare Series**

**JU:** For the *Papare Series*, did you work from the photography that you did of the chandeliers or did the charcoal renderings come first?

**GF:** The drawings came first. I had been working with the banana image for 10 years, and then last year I stepped onto a banana plantation for the first time. Immediately, the goal became to work in a different way, this time photographically, assembling the banana and the chandelier to appear as one and then capturing that in a photograph. I first found the imagery; for instance, I found the chandeliers in a catalogue and then I brought them together in a collage. The photograph was challenging because the medium demanded a different way of

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<sup>1</sup> When translating the phrase, it is important to note that the word “marmol” directly translates to marble. However, the joke breaks down the syllables to create a different meaning where “mar” alone means sea and “mol” alone means mall. My direct translation is as follows: *The city made of marble...pure sea [beach], pure mall.*

<sup>2</sup> This phrase was coined by Jonathan Swift in *The Battle of Books* (1704) and later introduced by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (1883). I refer to Arnold’s specific deployment of the phrase here to focus on his layered criticism regarding culture as something that should be sought out with “liberal and intelligent eagerness about things” (7). “Sweetness and light” refers to aesthetic beauty and intellectual curiosity; however, he critiques the baseness of approaching culture as simply materiality that separates social classes. Fuenmayor’s body of work embodies the concepts of Arnold’s phrase, sweetness and light.

capturing the image. I wouldn't go back and make drawings of the photographs. That's their own thing. I believe these renderings bring the banana series full circle.

Apocalypse II,  
80x45in,  
charcoal on  
paper, 2013

**JU:** Let's return to the banana, so to speak. How did the idea of working on the *Papare Series* on a plantation come to be?

**GF:** The idea of the project came from a fellowship. Basically, there is a travelling fellowship that is offered by the Museum School in Boston for alumni. They provide a grant to travel and work wherever you want.



I have been applying for this award for about 10 years. I have all the rejection letters of every other year; I would usually propose to go to places like Granada, Spain, Versailles with all of the Rococo references, and also places that I wanted

to go with my wife as an interesting travel destination. Then my final year of eligibility (the 10<sup>th</sup> year) I reflected on what would make most sense for my immediate work. I applied for Leticia, Colombia. Leticia is on the southern tip of the country in the Amazon. I chose Leticia because it was the most exotic place I could think of that had a relationship to my work. At first it was weird to admit to myself that I was entering an exotic place for me that was located in Colombia; I then relished in the idea of working in a space where I was feeling from the place and simultaneously alien or other. So I went to the Amazon for two weeks; I stayed with locals in a forsaken place off the radar. I think my idea was to do something real. I have a terrible concern with turning the iPad off and engaging in a conversation, really focusing in on living life and stripping any excess comfort.

Despite being from Colombia, I heard outrageous accounts of ‘don’t go to Leticia...there are snakes, you will get killed.’ Even as a Colombian, I was ‘warned.’ So I wanted to enter a space that I didn’t have control and that nature would supply this order. Putting myself in this space, prompted me to push my work further beyond the privileged space of distance. I think I am a better person just by putting myself into that situation.

After the Leticia experience, the idea of visiting and critically engaging with the plantation was born. So when you ask me does the idea of fieldwork make more sense, it does in the sense that it draws me closer to the source; I felt an unmediated connection to the experience by being with the workers, not just reading second hand accounts.

I think that my own background, my grandfather was very close with Garcia Márquez and a community of writers, poets, and painters in Colombia, and the idea of writing and living and now painting or drawing for me the connection has to be very intimate. You could not produce something you haven’t lived. Basically I think that authorship is something I continue to dwell over. Who has the right to speak on a subject?



GenesisXIV, 66x44in, archival inkjet print on 100% cotton paper, 2013

**JU:** The workers who you engaged with on the plantation, did they ever get to see your work?<sup>3</sup>

[http://gonzalofuenmayor.com/artwork/3387389\\_Papare\\_Project.html](http://gonzalofuenmayor.com/artwork/3387389_Papare_Project.html)

**GF:** Yes, I actually went back and I gave one of the plantation managers a photograph; it is of him wearing the banana head. All the workers were there and thought he was minted a new celebrity. They have seen some of the work, and the owners of the plantation keep them in the loop. I like that they know that the photographs are living on in a different world.

**JU:** Would you feel comfortable doing a similar project but in another banana producing country?

**GF:** No. Where I did it had so much sense to me. Although similar situations may transpire in Central America with the United Fruit Company with the same idea, I wouldn't consider it because I would not feel a connection to it.

**JU:** Who do you consider as part of your artist community?

**GF:** People I went to school with, some critics, collectors, gallerists, but more so friends I've made along the way.

**JU:** I imagine it is eerie and at times fun to have someone reflect back your work to you. Do you ever have that feeling of 'I have no idea what they were looking at'?

**GF:** One of my most cherished teachers, Lucio Pozzi, says that people 'creatively misunderstand' what they see. There is no right or wrong, but I think once an image is put out into the world it is no longer mine. People can see it, put it into their own stories and I cherish those opportunities where people can bring in their own histories and experiences into the work. The more the work enables people to have that conversation, the better.

**JU:** And finally, where do you see your art going? Not necessarily what symbols, but what forms do you want to tackle or refine?

**GF:** I think that I am more interested in photography. I really enjoyed the experience. The creative process when working in a team generates a different engagement with the work, rather than a more intimate one to one moment. I am

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<sup>3</sup> The video link captures Fuenmayor and his crew at the "Papare" Plantation in Ciénaga, Colombia where the *Papare Series* images were all shot.

innately a painter/drawer, so I am also very invested in the draft, in the touch, my touch.

**JU:** It has been a real pleasure discussing your work and artistic vision with you. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts on art, life, technology, and most of all, the idea of visual curiosity. It has been a privilege and I look forward to your next projects.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Permission was given by the artist to reprint the images.