

# Felipe Mujica

IN CONVERSATION WITH MARCOS AGUDELO

**Marcos Agudelo:** Culture can also be a space under construction. Being aware of the modesty of our efforts and the material limitations we constantly deal with, the notion of *building* motivates us to experiment, inviting a group of artists to the Solentiname Art Residency. We are very interested in what can be proposed, taking into account a series of factors such as the natural environment and its particular connection with the spiritual, the historical memory, popular artistic production, and its relationship with contemporary art - without a specific eagerness for the latter. Experiences make sense as they are remembered in the future, not only do they have the importance of the present time, sometimes we work to build memories. Felipe, two years have passed, what recollections, emotions, and reflections do you have of your experience with us?

**Felipe Mujica:** I have the most beautiful and intense memories of the Solentiname residency. When I recount and explain my experience to others, I always start by telling them that it's the most exuberant place I have visited. In terms of nature, I have never experienced so much of everything, the expansion, and the dimension of the lake, the humidity, the rain, the vegetation, insects, and animals. Everything is connected to each other, and I felt that we, humans, are just a small element in this larger natural environment. Of course, nothing is perfect, and one becomes part of this eco-system, insects eat you alive, and it's a constant battle and hassle... but survivable. I believe that the people who live there of course are affected by this, by the force of nature. Their openness, humbleness, and warmth are impressive. There is a balanced way of living, at least that is what I perceived in my short 10-

day stay. One fond anecdote happened in the cabaña room I was staying with my partner Fabiola. In the middle of the dark night, we felt something flapping and moving around the room. We turn on our cell phone lights, and we see a huge black butterfly, technically it was a moth, about 6 or 7 inches wide. I spend at least 30 minutes trying to get it out of the room with the help of a broom. Of course, I did not want to kill it, just get it out. After some moments of excitement, I manage to do it. The next morning, we recount this moment to someone, and we are told about an ancient Mayan legend in which the visitation of a black moth is a sign of death or simply bad news. We kind of nervously giggled and wondered what could happen. That same day we receive the news of the death of a local painter, one of the oldest members of the Solentiname style of painting. It all made sense, those paintings are the reason we were all there, you, Jorge, Albertine, Fabiola, me. I think this might be what Ernesto Cardenal found in Solentiname. A natural field open to social and artistic experimentation, full of wonder and ancient spirituality.

**MA:** This is also expressed in the work you produced, in its interaction with the different areas in the archipelago where the curtains were installed. In them, in an encrypted code, one can feel the power of the landscape you mention, and its symbolism, such as the immense emptiness and fullness of the lake, the local painting styles, the infinite forms of animal life from herons to the most fantastic insects; can you tell us more?

**FM:** I am glad you see it that way because every curtain project I realize aims to work from the conditions of each context. Each place has a specific history



*Primeros amaneceres en la tierra – Solentiname (Curtain 6), 2019*





Dye process, Isla Mancarrón, Solentiname, 2019



Dye process, Isla Mancarrón, Solentiname, 2019



Geometric Abstract Workshop, Isla Mancarrón, Solentiname, 2019



Detail of collaborator Jeamileth Peña, Isla Mancarrón, Solentiname, 2019



Geometric Abstract Workshop, Isla Mancarrón, Solentiname, 2019



Wood carved fish handcraft, Isla Mancarrón, Solentiname, 2019

and relationship towards textile production and as I collaborate and learn from local artists and artisans, I must be open to understanding these differences and be open to incorporate them. As mentioned before the landscape and nature of the place is so powerful it affects everything so in a way yes, in the end, the project integrated itself into the islands, the vegetation, the water, the architecture, its people, and vice versa, all this was absorbed by the work. To have a community of painters and artisans in such a remote place is kind of a poetic luxury, and I got to know about it in two stages. First when we met here in New York, during the exhibition *Dream of Solentiname*, which Pablo León de la Barra curated at 80WSE at NYU, and later being there and meeting the people, perceiving their surroundings, and looking at their paintings and artisanal work. At the exhibition what blew me away was both the historical political aspect of it (the 70s and 80s' in Nicaragua and Central America) and the strong artistic legacy that emerged from it. Possibly, the remoteness of the place allowed these two styles to develop in the unique way they did, painting on the one hand, sometimes exuberant, sometimes naïve, and sometimes even a space for the depiction of political violence, and the sculptural animal depictions on the other. Compared to Mexico or Guatemala, where there is a very important textile tradition and history, other countries nearby are not so rich in this sense. Therefore, we decided to dye the fabric, in a conversation preparing for the residency, and once I got there, I paid more attention to the animal sculptures... I noticed all of them had a gradient painted background and based on that I decided to dye all the curtains in color gradation. It's a simple gesture, but it made the work particular to the place, made in response to it. Possibly I was also affected by the moisture, the sunsets, the reflection of light on the water. And as you pointed out here geometric abstraction becomes a code, a futuristic and a mysterious early language, a tool for unifying the curtains, tying them together, and also tying them with other curtain projects. And finally, anybody can paint a relatively straight white line, and I respect that basic openness of the

production system, it's approachable, doable, with very simple means within a simple studio setup.

**MA:** Felipe, you say: "geometric abstraction becomes a code". Do you think we could say that latitude influences the creation of these codes? What makes the experience of an abstract artist in Solentiname special?

**FM:** The curtains produced there have a strong organic presence and feel. They are extremely pictorial, the backgrounds with color gradations, and the white lines which are not too straight nor perfect. Both elements are also defined by the dyeing process as the surface is full of wrinkles, giving them life form, as the skin of an animal or the bark of a tree. They contain nature, without describing or narrating it. So, in this case, the location influenced the final object, its appearance, and tactility, yet at the same time the "code" is abstract, and it remains sort of the same – or better said continuous – no matter where the work was produced. There is a contradiction here, but I don't see it as a problem, on the contrary, I think it all goes back to what I've been trying to do from the very beginning of my work, to expand the formal into the social. As for your second part of the question, all I can say is that Solentiname should be a special experience for any artist. In my case, it helped me produce this very special and unique body of work. To round up I would like to bring up the way some houses and very basic structures are painted, using a very limited color pallet there is a real play with geometric abstraction, which even expands to adjacent trees, a blue-red band on one, a blue-purple on another. Just color bands painted on trees, which I find a beautiful formal and playful gesture. It's a popular conception of color in space, color, and form in dialogue with its surroundings. I had a similar experience, and discovery, in the Dominican Republic. This is something I want to keep working with. Until now I have made one publication, with the Dominican Republic project, and one set of printed photos, with the Solentiname project. Here the documentation in the book, and the documentation as framed photos, are as important and vital as the curtains. It's a new way of

pushing them, now in a conversation that goes beyond the walls and context of any exhibition space, which is in line with my idea of opening the project as much as possible.

**MA:** Would you say that art is a vehicle to imagine better realities?'

**FM:** Of course, one can see this in Solentiname all the time. Not just because of the history of Ernesto Cardenal, it's something you see constantly, daily. The carved animals, the painted landscapes, the way most people interacted with us, with such openness and generosity. Art takes people out of their daily routines and worries, sometimes in a big way and sometimes just for a moment. Either way is helpful as each experience reminds us there are other ways of communicating and exchanging. I remember the workshop you asked me to do. We sat down with a group of about 15 people, and I gave the instruction to everyone to redraw a specific grid that I showed them and to work on this grid creating an abstract geometric design. My goal was for them to see how each of them would eventually come up with a different solution to the same grid, from the same starting point. In the beginning, they were somehow timid and kind of afraid of my abstract imposition, yet slowly they loosened up and at the end, the exercise was surprisingly fun and varied. The grid we used is also a grid that I have used many times for different projects, and I told them this. I truly believe in horizontality, as much as possible. Funnily enough, in the end, two participants broke the rules and started integrating figurative elements into the designs. Here Solentiname took over, won, defeated my "code", with a wired-looking owl, and humble house with a window.

**MA:** I'm glad you mention the workshop experience, because we are convinced of the importance of art as a pedagogical instrument. It's not only the playful and aesthetic importance of the artistic experience but also the need to create and share sensitive knowledge. Tell us a little more.

**FM:** Exactly, and that's what I try to achieve when I do this exercise. This sensitive knowledge that you talk about



Isla Mancarrón, Solentiname, 2019

is shared and understood through the act of playing within the grid, which becomes a field, a structure with rules. Each participant decides how to behave within this structure, what colors, what shapes, what intensities or contrasts they use. And this cannot be explained or rationalized, it happens in the moment, there is a kind of gradual and intuitive process of discovery. In the end, everybody enjoyed the experience, and looking back to it now the whole thing kind of reminds me of how Malevich used to teach painting, or at least what I remember reading somewhere about his teaching experience. He would make students paint in the impressionist style, to teach impressionism, cubist style to teach cubism, futurist style for futurism, and so on. That was the only way students would understand the concepts behind each movement. Humbly the grid exercise aims for something similar in relation to geometric abstraction. And doing this with seniors or children from a community center in Bed-Stuy Brooklyn, or with the people from Solentiname, just makes the experience even richer. Having said this, all artists invited to the residency must do a workshop, as it's one more way of creating a bridge between both parts. I hope we can go back one day, for a longer period, and do much more. Remember Fabiola and I found that lot with

empty houses and a larger structure? It seemed to be a former school with living cabañas or something like that. Let's occupy that place!

**MA:** What do you think distinguishes current art from your experience in Latin America? Do you think there is an art from and for the American continent?

**FM:** Current art might a bit wide of a term, yet one can always compare what happens in Latin America with other parts of the world. From my experience what makes my work so particular, has been the possibility to collaborate with different communities integrating different knowledge and micro-histories into the work. And although I have worked in the US and Europe most of my collaborative experiences have indeed happened down south. Probably two specific aspects make this region fertile for my work. On the one hand in most of the continent, there is a strong history and tradition of textile production which in many places is still present today. In Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Chile, indigenous people wear their hand-woven or embroidered clothes, it's a matter of cultural identity. Even coming from mostly poor and displaced communities they have such a strong and proud presence. On the other hand, there is also a textile tradition that relates to the

day-to-day, even in big cities such as São Paulo, you can find several textile neighborhoods, full of small family-run businesses that produce costume made party dresses or stores where armies of mostly women buy materials and tools to repair or make any project they have at home. In the US and Europe most people just get rid of their old clothes and buy new ones, in Latin America, out of necessity, there still seems to be a tradition of fixing and self-producing. This relationship to textiles – both traditional and contemporary - is something I haven't seen anywhere else, and this of course has influenced my work.

Your second question reminds me of an interview with Carmen Herrera I recently saw; at one point she talks about belonging... if she feels like a Cuban artist or an American artist, and she says, "I am just a painter". I find it a brilliant response, as hard-edged as her paintings, yet her experience also has to do with the fact that she could not return to Cuba and lived and worked mostly in New York. I do have a relationship to Latin America, in many aspects, family, friends, professional ties, and as I mentioned before my work has hugely grown from my collaborative experiences there. The fragility and inequality of our countries probably make us more aware of social issues, on top of that in most capitals the art market and industry are not even as closely developed as they are here. Precariousness is everywhere, in our health and education systems, pensions, transportation, and in the daily life of the working class and the extremely poor. By extension, it is also in the art system. So, whatever we do, there or here in New York or anywhere else, most of the time is influenced by this lack of everything. To deal with this in your life and your work makes you resourceful, and resilient. I don't like generalizations, but this might be our contribution, our "je ne sais quoi"!

**MA:** Can we talk about your abstract language? What is color and texture for you? What are geometric symbols? Within the pieces that you produced in Solentiname there was a kind of heron in a painting, tell us a little more about that.

**FM:** Geometric abstraction has always been a playful and structural language

for me, a way to develop questions and problems, which start, as mentioned before, in a purely formal manner but later expanded more and more into the social; and this is a core issue, how to maintain – or not – a balance between its formal possibilities and the social and political implications of its use. In my case, it's a starting point, the beginning of a system, a program, which reaches out to people, to communities, to areas of knowledge that go beyond what we normally understand as pure abstraction. In the end, something new comes out, something that is a mix of my interests and theirs, something that neither of us could have made on our own. Basically, I work from the universality of geometric abstraction towards the localities of different ways of production.

Color is such a generous and direct element. It's shared knowledge, coded by conventions or infinite in its interactive possibilities. I also have a special relationship to it as I studied Joseph Albers Interaction of Color method in Art School

in Chile, under the professor Eduardo Vilches. So, I have a very Bauhaus color formation. With time I understood that it can also function as a horizontal tool, a way to reach people, as I open up combination decisions to the fabricators and actively involve them in the production of the work, not only technically but also aesthetically. Texture on the other hand is a subtle element, it requires the viewer to get closer and really look at the work. It also defines any surface, making it warmer or colder, flashy or sober, but by the feel of it, the "visual touch". It also allows us to understand the fabrication process of the material, by hand or by machine, and so on. In a curtain, textures can also behave as pictorial elements. I like to think of different fabric and their textures (or appliques, sewed or hand embroidered lines, and so on) as different painting techniques and styles.

The heron in the Solentiname curtain is one interpretation of many. When I make the drawings I work on notebooks, and before I start, I set up a set of rules,

for the whole or sections of it. The heron-looking drawing that I chose and produced is that kind of drawing that is in the limit, or gray zone, of abstraction/representation. At first, I didn't see the heron, or any other bird, I just saw two intersecting angles. Yet once we placed the curtain in dialogue with the landscape of Solentiname we all saw a bird, you saw a heron, and that is what context does. Of course, I avoid representation as much as I can, but sometimes it quietly slips in. This situation reminds me of indigenous notions of abstraction, where animals and elements of their environment are abstracted to become decorative elements with more or fewer degrees of symbolism or spiritual connotations. The abstraction of a bird could perfectly be used for a ceramic bowl or on the edges of a textile piece. In this sense, the heron to appear as it did in Solentiname makes perfect sense. I prefer to stay open to these unexpected situations, crossovers, encounters, if they happen it's for a reason.



Isla Mancarrón, Solentiname, 2019



*Primeros amaneceres en la tierra – Solentiname (Curtain 5), 2019*

