

Interview: Al Torres (with Sarra Qadri)

February 16th, 2015

I'm going to start the interview by asking for your full name.

Yeah, my actual legal name is Alvaro Torres, but I just like to go with Al.

Okay, and you were born in New York?

Yes, New York City in Manhattan.

What is the origin of your parents?

Yeah, they are from Gutanaga, Spain. A little town, a village, Adefe.

Okay. And when did they move to the United States?

They moved here around 1958. Well, my mother moved here first, like 1958, and then she went back to Spain to my father and then they moved back here and I was born in 1960.

Okay. And do you have any siblings?

Yes, I have one brother.

You have one brother. And have you guys gone back to Gutanaga, Spain at all?

Yeah, like before the age of 10 I had gone there a bunch of times, but probably a half a dozen times before the age of 10.

Okay. And do you have extended family...

Yeah

...that still lives over there?

Yes, I do.

Do you still communicate with them and talk to them a lot?

My father does more ... more communicating with this side of the family, this side of the ocean.

Okay. Do you have any extended family on this side of the ocean?

Yes.

And they are all over?

Yes, they are all over, along the East Coast.

Okay. Very nice.

Florida.

So when your parents came over did they bring any like traditions with them that they tried to instill in the house while you guys were growing up?

I mean it's funny, you know. They would speak to me in Spanish and I would speak to them back in English. Hah. It's like, I don't know, when I was growing up I had a little problem under...being able to assimilate both languages simultaneously. So, I've got that mosh, mish-mosh. I can still speak Spanish. Yes, I can still hold my own so to speak.

So would you say that you can understand easily?

Oh, I can understand Spanish.

Like perfectly?

Oh, I can absolutely understand just about everything a foreigner would say.

Okay.

But, speaking ... it takes a little longer to articulate. So I might have to substitute an English word here and there.

So you obviously attended school here...

Yes

And you...did your parents ever talk about the differences between schooling here or life here from Spain? Did they ever bring that up with you?

Yeah, they kind of said that, you know, my mother got up to like 6th grade education. My father finished high school there. And they said that it was rough, like sometimes they would lock up the kid in a closet for like an hour or something like that. Or throw a kid down a flight of stairs. Hah.

Oh, my gosh.

It was like brutal. It was like “you don’t want to learn, okay, here, stay in this dark room for an hour.”

Oh, wow.

Yeah, so I think it was Spain. Imagine 75 years ago. So.

Yeah, very different.

Yes.

Very different. And what did your parents do when they got here?

My mother was trained as a beautician so she worked at the Plaza Hotel in New York City, Manhattan. And my father, he was actually a professional soccer ball player. And then he came here to play and what not, but then I was born so, yeah, that went out the door and he kept playing, and then he worked for the University Club as a waiter. But things took precedence and then he basically had to just do the waitering and then he actually worked his way up to job captain and manager of the banquet department eventually.

Very nice. So now I am going to switch gears a little bit into your artwork. So when did you become interested in art?

Basically since I was 4. I started drawing. And I was actually not good academically at like just about everything. Hah and it’s kind of funny, also, because I did go to Catholic school and they had minimal art. It was more the, you know, the major subjects. So, it was sort of like my way to, maybe, escape from the world.

Like a release?

Yeah, and so I was constantly, constantly drawing. Almost all the time. I think it also was kind of like, not like a paradox, it was just a release mechanism for myself because I was doing so poorly in school. I’d end up with Cs and Ds most the time. And so, as I got older. I hated school until I got to college. That’s when I really started doing a lot better.

Okay. And where did you attend college?

So I went to architecture school actually. At City College of New York. And so I did that. I got my Bachelor of Architecture. Then I did architecture for a couple of years and I was a little disillusioned by that. So I got a job teaching art in the public schools in New York City. And then, I ended up going back and getting an MFA in painting.

Okay. And where did you get your MFA from?

The New York Academy of Art.

And how long is the process for getting your MFA? How many years does it take?

Well, if you go full time, it is 2 years and it's not like you go there two years and relax and do work..., it's like constant, constant too. And it's a top school. So, either you did the work or you wouldn't do well. So I actually ended up taking four years because I was teaching at the same time.

Oh okay, very nice. And where would you say a lot of your inspiration comes from for your artwork?

You know, when I was younger it was like, I don't know. I was into surrealism when I was young. Salvador Dali. Then I got a little more into realism. So right now, it is such a mish-mosh. Right now, I am into realism like Velázquez, Vermeer, Caravaggio, Da Vinci. It's like a list of 25 painters. But right now, since I can't paint models, I mean I could paint models, I've done it for 20 years. But, I just can't afford to hire models anymore. So I'm really right now into still lifes. And I really do like that genre. And it's like a different kind of experience. It's sort of like a meditative experience. You are alone in the studio and you are working with these objects that you want to... that I want to depict so well that they look like they're coming out. Like, I don't know if you saw my exhibit?

I did. I did. It was incredible.

Thank you.

It was really beautiful.

I mean, I actually want them to look like they're coming out of the board or the canvas.

I feel like you did a pretty good job. My favorite was the pineapple.

Oh, okay. Oh, okay. I really did like doing that little pineapple, hah!

No, but yeah.

So it's just, it's a different experience. Working from a model, obviously, they move around, and they don't get exactly in the same position because they're human, obviously. But, they're also models that basically, I've worked with a couple of them that they're like perfect. You don't have to tell them anything. But, it's a different type of thing and also compared to landscape painting. But I think like once you are able to master real life painting and drawing from the model, you can transfer that to anything, whether still life or landscape, what have you. At this point in my life, it is ironic that after so much figurative work that I am drawn to still life and maybe it's because it's got the objects that seem to have their own life. They're imbued with something, some essence that's not apparent, but through the painting of them and the rendering of them, I feel like there is, I feel an essence in these inanimate objects, if that makes any sense.

It does. That's really cool. So what...how long would you say a still life would take you? How much time do you put into that?

A long time.

A long time?

Yeah. I would say, like the flowers that I have there. Those took about sixty, seventy-five hours or so. Yeah.

And as far as with models, how long does that take? Do you have to do it all in one sitting?

You could.

Or could you like bring them back?

Well, it depends. It depends on what you want to do. I mean, I have done paintings of models in one sitting, 3 hours, those are called more "a la prima" where you are working wet, into wet paint. Or you could spend 10 sessions with a model. 3 hour sessions. And there, you'll get something more highly resolved. Like the, like the painting that's there, Sarah, in the exhibit. That was about, I think it was about a thirty hour painting. So yeah, it just takes a long time. It's very difficult and it takes a long time. For realism. I mean if you

are going to do something abstract, you could do it in a day or whatever. It just depends what you want to do.

Yeah. And how long have you been at CPCC?

I've been teaching here since, what, 2013. January 2013.

And what brought you to Charlotte?

Well, I had finished up twenty years as an art teacher in New York City and my wife had moved down so, I was in New York and she was here for about four years. So I just really wanted to get my twenty years in, in New York City, and then move over. And you know, I had been offered a job here, but I knew someone that worked here so I was kind of confident that I could adjunct.

And it worked out in the end?

Yeah, and it's like too many offers, you know.

Yeah, that's great.

But I just need to say okay I am going to teach this many hours a week and do my own work because it is very easy, I think, to just get caught up and just teach and...

Losing the...

That's not what an artist does. I mean an artist, most artists do teach, but they also produce.

So how was your experience of teaching art in New York City?

It's a mixed bag. Yeah, this is middle school.

It's a mixed bag? Where did you teach?

IS145. Yeah. You know, you have to realize it's 600 kids and, you know, they all come with emotional baggage, very tough home lives. Broken families. So basically, you are wearing five different hats. Hat of a teacher, hat of a therapist, a nurse, so on and so forth.

Very true.

It is what it is. You do what you can. It's kind of sad where some kids do fall through the holes. And I think it's just too large a system. Even thirty kids is too much. I would say class size would have to be, really, twenty if you wanted to try to...no more than twenty if you wanted to really reach the kids. Right. You just needed an infinite amount of patience. You know, I've seen teachers come in and go out like a year later. And they say it's pretty much a revolving door. I think they say after five years forty teachers, forty percent of teachers quit in New York City.

Wow. That's a high percentage.

It is a high percentage. If you think of it, if you just applied it to another profession like doctors, there would be people dying in the street if half the docs... almost half the doctors quit after five years.

Yeah, and teachers are necessary so that's unsettling...

It's the foundation of society, you know. If you have an uneducated populace, that just brings on a lot of problems.

Yeah, that is very true. So what would you say is the biggest difference between teaching a middle school population and now a college student population? Is one preferable?

Yeah, I mean I really do, I feel like I am actually teaching here. That I am reaching my students. Obviously they're more adults. I hate to say it, but middle school teaching was, it was teaching, but it was also babysitting, I hate to say. But, sometimes I just don't feel like mincing words. Here is actual teaching. It's more of a pleasure.

That's good. So what kind of classes are you teaching?

Well, right now I am teaching Art Appreciation and Design 1.

Okay. Very interesting. And overall you are happy with your move from New York City to Charlotte?

Yes. New York City is just, it's just too big. There's just too much going on. It's like the capital of the world for just about everything. I mean, the mayor sneezes in New York and they put it...they write him up in the paper. I just like the slower pace of life and doing art. You know, you could be in Alaska. It doesn't matter with the internet anymore. With the

internet, you could be anywhere in the world and do art. And I just like the slower pace of life. The weather, obviously, is a lot better here. And I think I like being in a medium sized city. I don't feel like I'm out in the middle of nowhere. I like being here. Charlotte is a very quaint city to be living in.

I feel like it is the perfect size, not too big not too small. Get a city feel, but not like swamped or overwhelmed. Hm. Let's see. What other questions do I have? Do you try to bring any aspects of like, your Spanish culture into your artwork at all? Or is it just with your stills because with your stills it's not necessarily bringing in culture?

I don't know, I mean, I probably, like on an unconscious level, I probably do. Like I know like the pineapple, one reason why I did paint that was because my wife is Dominican and that's like a delicacy there. Well, they love pineapples and other things. I think, I mean through the artists that I love. I love Velázquez. And I love Rivera and Zurbarán. I'm starting to rediscover...well really focus more on Zurbarán now because he was a great still life artist. So and Dali and Morrow. So I'm sure it does play in there, but not consciously. Saying I'm going to do a painting that a Spaniard would do. Probably not that. Yeah.

Yeah probably not. Let's see. Do you have any...well your wife is Dominican and your Spanish background.... are you involved in the Spanish community in Charlotte at all or like the Latino community? I know they are trying to build it.

Well, my wife is very religious. We are both Catholic and she, she gets involved in the Spanish ministry there. So, once in a while, we'll go to church or have these other functions that involve Catholicism and like the little Divino Niño. It's a little baby Jesus. So they'll have masses for that and things of those sorts. Yeah.

Very nice. And does your wife speak Spanish?

Yes.

She does?

Yeah, but I actually speak to her in English.

Okay so she'll like speak to you in Spanish?

Yeah, but she'll speak to me in English and I mean, her English is very good. There is a little bit of an accent, but you know, she's basically native born from the Dominican Republic.

Very nice. Do you have anything else you want to add to this interview?

No, I mean, I am very happy that Michele selected me for that exhibit. I think it was very successful.

She did a great job.

Yes, yes. Very well organized. I'm sure it was an extreme amount of work in terms of logistics. It was nice, I have always heard of Queens University so finally I get to find out that it's not too far from here.