

STILL

Dino Dinco



Rafa Esparza's performance, *STILL*, began just before the sun rose on Thanksgiving morning, 2012. To observe it, one had to first drive through the thick, pre-dawn fog blanketing downtown Los Angeles and into Elysian Park, the public park located between Chinatown, Lincoln Heights and Echo Park. In addition to being the home of Dodger Stadium, Elysian Park is the main training facility and firing range of the Los Angeles Police Department. From the LAPD's own website: "The Academy is nestled in a picturesque setting of fountains, waterfalls, pine trees, and flowers." Like many public parks that contain enough trees and overgrowth of brush for cover, it's also a site where men relentlessly cruise the winding roads, fire lanes and hidden trails

Dino Dinco is a performance art curator and maker, filmmaker, theater director and multi-disciplinary artist. His work has been exhibited in solo exhibitions in Paris, Los Angeles and San Francisco, as well as in group shows in London, Paris, Antwerp, Hasselt (Belgium), Mexicali, New York, Hamburg & Chihuahua. His experimental short play, *Real Women Have Periods*, was presented at REDCAT (2010). Dinco's award-winning short film, *El Abuelo*, premiered at the Tate Modern in London (2008) and continues to screen in festivals and online as part of Frameline Voices. In 2011, he completed his first feature length documentary film, *Homeboy*, which profiles gay Latino men who were in gangs. Dinco is currently writing a book on contemporary performance art practice, scholarship and thinking taking place in the major cities of the West Coast of North America. He is also co-organizing an exhibition concerning contemporary performance art practice of The Americas and Latin American diaspora.

on the hunt for sex with other men, a practice and culture chronicled by famed Los Angeles novelist John Rechy in novels such as *City of Night* and *Numbers*.

Rafa and I are a couple. Historically, he and I have both cruised the trails of Elysian Park and have had sexual encounters with men there. Rafa remembers vividly the day his father returned home from work when Rafa was 16 years old. His father had decided to drive into Elysian Park to take a rest, having worked on a construction job nearby. At home, Rafa remembers his Mexican father's explosion of "*pinches maricones!*" (Spanish for "fucking faggots!") and similar anti-gay epithets, presumably a reaction to his receiving unexpected advances from interested men. Rafa also feels that his father suspected that Rafa was gay and that his dad's histrionic performance was, in part, an attempt to scare the potential homo desire out of his son. The very next day, Rafa's curiosity inspired him to travel on a number of public busses to see for himself *los pinches maricones* who had allegedly rankled his father so.

Independently, Rafa and I have also made an array of artworks in and about the park, namely as a site of urban queerness and a location of homo-social surveillance and desire that increasingly falls outside mainstream gay visibility and discourse. As cruising and same-sex hook-ups have migrated to the convenience of the Internet and smartphone apps, many gays today believe that "old school" park cruising is a thing of the past. But beyond the roar of the Dodger game crowd and LAPD recruits firing pistols into targets, men cruise Elysian Park on a daily basis. Most appear to be Latino, some white, some black. The park offers a discrete location for men who may live with their families and may not be open about their sex practice with men, including men who are married and have children. (Years ago, I remember seeing a Lexus parked next to a path that led into a thicket of bushes – a hotspot for encounters. There was a baby carrier in the backseat.) A number of the men who cruise the park are undocumented immigrants, mostly from Mexico and Central America, who don't feel comfortable in gay bars or who lack ID to enter. The park is also free and somewhat democratic that way, a respite from the chaos of the city, open to all stripes of life who want to stretch their legs, breathe fresh air and get off with another man, no strings attached.

Rafa announced *STILL* as a Facebook event, describing it as a "meditation on manifest destiny." On the event page, he used a detail from Theodor de Bry's 1594 – 1596 etching, *Sodomites Savaged by Mastiffs* (aka *Balboa's Dogs Attacking a Group of Panamanian Sodomites*), in which mastiffs are depicted attacking a group of *joyas* (Spanish for "jewels" and here used in the same connotation as "berdaches" and two-spirit peoples common in many indigenous cultures) while Spaniards watch from a distance near enough to take pleasure in the carnage. Indian *joyas* were revered third-gendered men who dressed as women. They were a staple amongst Indian culture and society. But Spanish influence and mores against anything they deemed remotely queer turned once-loyal Indians against the *joyas* in an attempt to save their own necks. Rafa's performance was scheduled to begin at 6:30 a.m. He included a map showing an approximation of where he would be in the park and a short hint: *Watch out for dogs. When you see them, you'll know you're near.*

In addition to being a couple, Rafa and I live together in a loft in downtown Los Angeles. Wanting *STILL* to be a surprise to me, he revealed little about what was going to take place, including the props he'd be using. He asked to borrow my only tie, a vintage Emilio Pucci silk tie I purchased in a Washington, D.C., thrift store in 1990 for 75 cents. It's been the only tie that I ever deemed cool enough to keep and wear.

I woke at 5:30 and Rafa was already gone. He had texted me from a cab on the way to the park: *Can you bring a bucket of warm water?* I'm not a morning person, but I never regret having to wake up early. Noisy, funky, dirty downtown Los Angeles is like urban areas of many mega-cities – a different planet when the streets are empty in the first hours of daylight. I drove north on Broadway, making my way to the park, through patches of fog so dense I found myself smiling with childlike excitement. Scheduling a performance outside of a gallery, on a major holiday and at such an hour was guaranteed to weed out the average performance spectator. I was not only already intrigued about the work itself, I was curious to see who would actually follow through, especially those who had marked “Going” on Facebook.

I entered Elysian Park at 6:15, having to take a side route that's always open, as the park ranger hadn't yet opened the gate on the main Broadway entrance. According to the map, I parked in the general vicinity of the performance. I grabbed Rafa's bucket of warm water I'd brought with me and walked across the overpass above the 110 Freeway, one of the city's oldest freeways, that slices through the park on its way into downtown. Looking north towards Pasadena, the thick fog created a white, fluffy bridge over the freeway. It was a classic image of Los Angeles as autumn heads into winter, yet one that few people would ever associate with the city.

With bucket in hand, I walked along a dirt fire road, lined with brush and trees, that comprises my routine jogging circuit. The chirping of birds blended with a soft hum from the freeway down below. There was something refreshing about being in a place I'd been to thousands of times, but never so early. The day was just beginning, the leaves and grass were slick with dew. *Watch out for dogs. When you see them, you'll know you're near.* I came upon a 2' x 3' poster board at the base of a tree. A rough, black marker sketch of a detail of de Bry's engraving – a close-up of a mastiff's muzzle, its teeth tearing into the flesh of a *joya*. I paused for a moment and looked around, to see if anyone else had arrived, savoring this element of search and discovery. This wasn't only part of my jogging circuit, but an artery coursing through an area well trodden by men on the hunt. I walked down a short, narrow, dirt trail and already saw the familiar evidence of sexual encounters – wadded up tissues, used condoms and their wrappers.



Rafa was dressed in a suit and tie and was already in the process of digging a hole in the ground with a shovel. I tried to figure out what time he had slipped out of bed and jumped into a cab, let alone what the driver thought of his passenger, a tall guy in a suit before dawn, carrying a brightly colored duffle bag, a cardboard box covered in shiny gold tape and a 6 foot shovel. From a branch of the nearest tree, he had hung a thick rope fashioned into a noose. I took the bucket of water over to him and goofily said *Hi*, as I put it on the ground. I wasn't expecting a *Hi* back and he didn't offer one. I walked around the site, one that I was very familiar with, as I had made a series of photographs documenting what I called "sex graffiti," including the graffiti on some of the trees in this spot. One prolific graffitist has, for years, tagged tree trunks, rocks and buildings in the park. He's also tagged the backside of the crowns of the tunnels through which the 110 Freeway passes heading north. Every tag contains his phone number, his dick measurements, offers of massage and that he identifies as a top. Occasionally, he mentions "crystal" and / or "PNP" (Party and Play, common lexicon for fucking while smoking meth). Near where Rafa was digging, I found a tree with *verga* (a common Mexican Spanish word for dick) scrawled sideways in black letters.

I walked around as Rafa continued to clear away the earth, revisiting a private natural nook close by that had always been a generous site for sex graffiti. There were also hundreds upon hundreds of used condoms, their discarded wrappers and lube packets on the ground, one of many such sites buried deep in the park. Despite that it's littering, public health officials should feel proud knowing that yes, men ARE using condoms to negotiate safer sex practice – undocumented, monolingual, immigrant men among them, the type of men health officials identify as "high risk" and "hard to reach." Instead, the media will occasionally exploit coverage of these condom hot spots during nanny nation news alerts. While instigating public outrage over something people typically wouldn't even think about, these public disservice announcements work to convince TV watchers that LAPD stings against men having sex deep in the bushes are justified and necessary expenditures of police time and tax dollars. The implication is that private sex in public among consenting adults somehow disrupts the stability of community.

Rafa continued to dig. I sat on a nearby branch and watched him labor. Something felt extra special about this performance taking place on Thanksgiving, a holiday when people continue to trumpet on about things they realize maybe they're grateful for, things that they'd miss if they didn't have them, when in reality, it's often just an excuse to overeat before the Black Friday sales. *What Indians?*

Something rustled behind me. Our friend Samuel Vasquez, a performance artist, had arrived. We hugged and Samuel sat next to me on the branch. We spoke in hushed tones, watching Rafa dig. Samuel walked around as artist Gerardo Monterubio arrived, a friend of Rafa's from UCLA. Mariel Carranza, another performance artist and the instigator of a monthly performance encounter Rafa and I attend, texted me that she couldn't find the site. She and I texted back and forth a few times, but articulating accurate directions deemed challenging beyond, "We're near a tree off of a fire road," in a park composed largely of trees and winding fire roads. Despite being armed with iPhones and map apps, the Dropped Pin I texted her was only an approximation. Plus, my phone battery was dying. I really wanted Mariel to see this piece and started feeling tense when the "20% battery remaining" alert popped up on my phone. Samuel wandered around the site.

Two burly men arrived, Leonardo Iriarte and Esteban Jiménez, a Silver Lake couple Rafa and I know through mutual friends. Leo is from Mexico City, Esteban from Columbia and they've lived in Los Angeles for years. Leo and Esteban are a loving and outwardly sex-positive couple, active in the bear, leather and Burning Man scenes, and part of a Los Angeles queer fundraising group called *Payasos L.A.* ("*payasos*" is Spanish for "clowns"). As *Payasos*, they present themselves as (sexy, beefy, beary) clowns and conduct benefits for kids (with AIDS, cancer, etc.) and LGBT crisis needs.

With the hole about three feet deep, Rafa stripped out of his suit to his underwear. He slipped the noose around his neck and stepped into the hole, his waist at the same level as the ground. Rafa used the shovel, then his hands, to refill the hole with earth, packing it firmly around him. Now half-buried, he pulled the cardboard box close to him, removing a bag of off-white latex balloons. One by one, Rafa pulled a balloon from the bag, inflated it completely, tied it off and released it nearby. He repeated this action until the ground was covered with over a hundred inflated balloons. Whether or not it was intentional, I saw the balloons as paying reverence to the stockpile of discarded latex condoms just around the corner and littered throughout the site. I was guessing, if left alone, these balloons would eventually deflate and blend in with the existing latex detritus.

Rafa then undid the noose and used the rope to pull himself from the hole. Shaking off the dirt, he slipped on a pair of red Levi's, a red windbreaker and red Converse hi-tops. From the bag, he removed a hard plaster-cast mask and put it over his face, affixing it to his head through a lace in the back. The mask was eerily painted as the likeness of his own face. Rafa's been working with painted plaster masks of himself in performances over the last year.



Carrying the shovel and cardboard box, he motioned to the five of us to get up and follow, and to me to grab his bag. We followed Rafa through the brush, traveling on a network of heavily cruised trails, down and up hills, for about a mile through the park, until reaching a sheer cliff that overlooks the Los Angeles River, the split of the 110 and 5 Freeways, the neighborhoods of Cypress Park, Highland Park and Lincoln Park and the hills and mountains that span east and west. Rafa removed his mask and submerged it into the bucket of water. He opened up the cardboard box, revealing a number of black, letter-sized envelopes. He distributed an envelope to each of us and inside we found a text written by playwright Ricardo Bracho, author of queer-centric plays such as *Puto*, *Sissy* and *When the Chunt Comes*.

The text read as follows:

“watch out for dogs.
when you see them,
you'll know you're near.”

Have you seen my feet?
I can no longer feel them.
I do not blame the beast
that made them meal.

Dino Dinco

STILL

I am a runner, a messenger.
I run the spine of this coast,
return with nuts,
flowers,
a kiss for his soles.

I put my mouth to his sole
and kiss.

“watch out for dogs.
when you see them,
you’ll know you’re near.”

The men in silver shells
ran their knives and dogs
across his spine

From here I heard the bones break.

“watch out for dogs.
when you see them
you’ll know you’re near.”

I return from my runs,
And upon entry,
I kneel down
and kiss.

My warm mouth
his skin
laughter and heat.

I am home and his
soft soft soft
step
is where I sleep.

“watch out for dogs.
when you see them
you’ll know you’re near.”

I can build a fire
light it with two small stones
so that he can see his way back.

Dino Dinco

STILL

I can fatten a bird
with the nuts he brings.

I can axe and spark, kill and feed

But I could not run fast enough.

My soles are
soft soft soft

Have you seen my feet?
I can no longer feel them.
I do not blame the beast
that made them meal.

“watch out for dogs.
when you see them
you'll know you're near.”

I put my mouth to his sole
and kiss.

*For Rafa
From Ricardo
Para nuestra putas vidas del puto
Anciano y presente*



As we read Bracho's poem, I thought about how this performance was only witnessed by men, most of them queer identifying. Given the environment, the specificity of the audience appealed to me, particularly as it happened organically despite this performance being open and publically advertised to all.

Rafa opened bottles of red wine and poured us all a glass. Drinking alcohol at this early hour of the day typically reminds me of alcoholism and other abuses of the body, of an all-night party that's going to be memorable and of the after-work drink of the working class, just after finishing a graveyard shift. On the other hand, this morning drink felt celebratory and communal; a drink amongst men upon completion of a shared experience that delicately layered hunting and discovery, labor and witnessing, and a complicated matrix of histories: queered, brutal, clandestine, transformative. As spectators (and arguably, collaborators), we had confronted the warning, *Watch out for dogs*, yet here we were together, standing at a precipice overlooking the Los Angeles River, a fortified flood channel that charges 50+ miles through the city and empties into the Port of Long Beach at the Pacific Ocean. *Pacific*: peaceful, calm, tranquil, still.

Note: all images taken by the author.



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