

Arturo Rodríguez: Biographical Note

Arturo Rodríguez was born in Las Villas, on February 6, 1956. He emigrated in 1973, going first to Spain and then settling in Miami in 1976. Began exhibiting in Miami in 1978, at Florida International University, after having exhibited in Spain in the mid-1970s. He has received a Florida Arts Council Fellowship (1980), a Cintas Foundation Fellowship, International Institute of Education in New York City (1982) and another Cintas (1988), as well as a Visual Arts Fellowship, South Florida cultural Consortium (1988) and a Florida Arts Council Fellowship (1990). Later, he received a Florida Arts Council Fellowship (1991) and two Florida Individual Artist Fellowship Awards (1990-91 and 1998-99). Selected Collections: Miami Main Public Library, Florida; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Jerusalem Museum, Israel; Polk Museum of Art, Florida; The Norton Museum, West Palm Beach, Florida.

Arturo Rodríguez: Interview

Interview Date: 01/04/06
Interviewed by Jorge J. E. Gracia
Filmed by Norma Gracia
Transcribed by Paul Symington
Edited by Jorge Gracia

The interview took place in Arturo's home and studio.

[Gracia]: "We are here with Arturo, and we're going to ask him all sorts of questions about his life, how he became an artist, his identity, how he feels about himself, about Cuban-Americans, and Cuban-American artists in the US, his relationship to art in general. So, let's begin with your art, and then at some point we're going to jump back into your life and how you became an artist. Arturo, you have a very distinctive style which develops in various ways. So, how do you conceive your art, how do you see it?"

[Rodríguez]: "The first thing is the human being, the presence of humanity, the human figure, various human figures in different contexts and landscapes, but always, almost everything I do has to do with the human being."

[Gracia]: "You have no paintings of landscapes alone or paintings of artifacts, or..."

[Rodríguez]: "No, nothing."

[Gracia]: "So, your subject is always the human being."

[Rodríguez]: “My art is concerned directly with the physical, philosophical, and psychological states of the human. How can you put that into painting, because painting is the opposite of philosophy, or – it’s something that is a language in itself – and you have to use language very cautiously. You don’t want to tell a story, you don’t want to state a philosophy, you don’t want to teach or say anything to people with your work. It comes out of the painting. The paint dictates your thoughts. Paintings become objects, but you have to put so much work in them, it’s such a long process of working on them. Just mixing colors, waiting for them to dry, regulating drawings, how can you do this better, erasing this drawing, going back and all that process is what ends up in the painting, but there is also an image and the image that comes from that process is a human figure and you can always see it in my work, the body in various stages and in situations. That’s about it, also it’s a very conscious process.”

[Gracia]: “And the human figure takes center stage in the painting. That is, it is always – I’m just looking at one of your paintings from here, a very large one, and I see that the human figure there is centered. Well, in fact, there are several human figures in the painting. I count five. But there is a huge one in the middle in a very difficult physical position as it were, maybe an impossible one. And then two figures on each side. But there’s practically no landscape, no context, no buildings, nothing but that person.”

[Rodríguez]: “Right, that’s the idea, how you can convey all these things and make it essentially human, the distortions. Because one figure has the head coming down his back, which is impossible. But mentally, this makes a statement about this discomfort, about violence, about pain, and sadness, but also about life, happiness sometimes.

[Gracia]: “In many ways you are unlike many other Cuban-American painters. They are concerned with buildings or situations or things that do not necessarily involve humans. Lots of vegetation, for example, or memories of Cuba. But you are centered on this, on some idea of a human being. So, how do you begin to paint? What is it that comes first? Is your idea a conceptual notion that you then explore?”

[Rodríguez]: “You have a concept and the concept is that you want to paint, and it is a human figure in certain ways, certain contexts. Then you have to work to paint it, which is the most important part for me. In conceptual art you have a concept and you don’t do that much work – you have the finished piece – because you say that this is the concept. It’s like Duchamp’s Urinal. He’ll say that’s art. He didn’t make the urinal. He just said that’s it. In my case, I think about it but what I think needs the work, and you get absolutely lost in the work and lose contact with the concept at the beginning. That’s what painting is; it has such a strong interest that you get lost in it. You start with the work and then the work dictates itself. You don’t know why you do it. You are in a fog. And it’s a great feeling but it’s also very disturbing, and you don’t feel comfortable at all. I don’t enjoy painting. I do it because it’s a necessity, but not because I like to paint.”

[Gracia]: “It’s one of those things that you have to do, but you would rather not do if you could, but you can’t get away from it.”

[Rodríguez]: “Yes, like Samuel Beckett, ‘I can’t go on, but I will go on.’ You have that fight, and it’s a fight. It’s something that you take to the canvas with the colors, but the painting never comes out the way you want it. In the end you like it, but only for ten minutes, and then you want to do another one. In my case, sometimes I go over paintings for years, I retouch them. And when I haven’t seen one of my pieces for a while that I thought it was great, but I see it as something terrible and I don’t want even to look at it. I want to retouch it, but they don’t let me, of course. And I feel that’s a shame...”

[Gracia]: “Ah, fortunately people buy them and they don’t give you a free hand. Otherwise, there would never be an end to your painting. You see, I’m siding with the enemy here.”

[Rodríguez]: “There was an anecdote about Bonard. There was this guard at the museum who saw this old man and he had this little box with paints and he started retouching a Bonard. And the guard immediately seized the old man and took him away. And you know who he was? Bonard! That tells you the level of obsession you can get into with painting. Paintings become infinite. In a way you could always be working on the painting and never finish it.”

[Gracia]: “Do you think that is a result of the fact that you yourself are changing and therefore when you look at a painting ten years after you have done it, you see something different than you saw before? Then you want to bring the painting to where you are now and move forward from there. But then it’s not the same painting, is it?”

[Rodríguez]: “Yes, exactly, no, no it’s not! That’s why I don’t do it.”

[Gracia]: “Ah, we won’t allow you to do this, and certainly not with the painting of yours I own! You have to do a new painting, so I can buy another.”

[Rodríguez]: “ You keep painting because you get tired of the ones you have done, you need a new idea. I always work on new things. But there are certain parts in a painting that you can never change. They come not because you want them, they are just there. And you don’t want to touch them – that’s inconceivable – because they wouldn’t return. Another aspect of my work in watercolors is that I don’t make any drawings at all. Everything is absolutely improvised so, unlike the paintings, I can’t erase, I can’t do anything because what I do is determined by whatever comes out of the water with the brush, that’s it. But then I do ten watercolors and choose two and the rest is trash. I like improvising. That’s what I like so much in music also, the artist’s expression and improvisation – but they have a structure, over which they improvise. Also in my work I get lost because I try to improvise. The work itself tells you where to go. You start seeing it, because painting is all about seeing what is right in front of your eyes. And what you see in the morning is different at night, because. . .”

[Gracia]: “. . . the light changes.”

[Rodríguez]: “The light, the time that you have to work on it. This face that is now red,

may be black at the end of the day. Painting has a lot to do with time, with space, with so many things. Painting is very complex.”

[Gracia]: “So, when do you think that you are sufficiently done to sell the painting or to put it in an exhibition, or declare it finished? Of course, if you had your way, it would never be finished. But let’s suppose you do not have your way, because after all you do finish paintings all the time and say something like ‘okay this is pretty good.’”

[Rodríguez]: “Somebody said ‘you never finish a painting, you abandon it.’”

[Gracia]: “Ah, alright, a very clever thought.”

[Rodríguez]: “That’s why you have a clear conscience afterwards. But sometimes it’s good to abandon them because maybe there is such thing as over-painting, and getting the painting too heavy and then it doesn’t work. You have to have this balance between so many conflicting things and that’s what makes the tension of the painting, at least in my work. I have so many different things from the same images, that sometimes I want to make it little, sometimes I want to make it more strong. Just to get to that is a struggle.”

[Gracia]: “And how much of the painting is you? Clearly the painting is doing a function for you, for your feelings, for your ideas – you are working something out, although you may not be clear about it.”

[Rodríguez]: “Because you work a lot with your subconscious. Once you start getting into the work, the actual work of painting, you get lost. That’s where the subconscious takes in a lot of stuff that maybe happened to you twenty years ago or just five minutes ago. These things start coming out like the brush strokes. You know, by the way, that my painting has a certain direction, all my pieces go from the right to left. That’s the way I paint almost everything. I cannot go left to right, because then they start twisting. Still, my paintings have many directions, the compositions are very complex and the brush strokes come from everywhere. So I have to turn the paintings around to get the different directions. I rotate the pieces as I go. To me, this is very important because a lot of my work is painted upside down, not the way you see it. That makes it more abstract, but it makes also easier for me to see that abstraction; I see the actual painting, the language of the painting itself, but I don’t have the image of anything, although it’s there.”

[Gracia]: “Does that mean that the paintings themselves could be hung upside down?”

[Rodríguez]: “If you want to, they work either way.”

[Gracia]: “Now let’s go back to your subject matter: the human being. That’s the center of everything for you. But is the human being in general that you are concerned with, or are you also in a way, painting yourself? Many painters seem always to be painting themselves in one way or another. How much of you is in your paintings?”

[Rodríguez]: “Everything. It’s always me, the way I see the world, but it’s not

narcissistic. I don't paint myself all the time."

[Gracia]: "But you have done self portraits?"

[Rodríguez]: "Oh yeah, because it comes with the want to see how you see yourself through all this fog that is painting. And you see who are you? And you can be one thing in one painting, and one thing very different in another. If you take Rembrandt's self portraits—and he did a lot of them—it's almost like a different person in each one of them, but all of them are Rembrandt. In some of them he is a subtle painter, in some he is an actor, in some he is a very young, cocky painter. So many things. That's what the self portrait does for you. But also it's something that you have on your hand that is very easy to get to because you are there. Sometimes I paint my own hands, or my feet. I have certain things that I want to resolve in a face. I go to the mirror it's there, so I put it in. A lot of my work is about my inner feelings. But also there is a distance, a big distance. You don't want to get emotionally involved with your own work. You have to keep a distance because it can become over-sentimental or emotionally overworked. You always want to keep a distance from the world, from reality."

[Gracia]: "You have now a very substantial body of work and you have been at it for a long time – how do you see yourself in the art world? What do you think is your main contribution to painting?"

[Rodríguez]: "At this point in time, anything can be art. We are in the 21st century, you can take anything, make art out of anything and then put it in a museum. If you believe that there is an avant-garde or a progress in art, that everything is getting better and more sophisticated, it's not! No, a lot of contemporary art work is manipulated by collectors, galleries, museums. Art is going to be art, especially painting. It's based in the Paleolithic. So that's an essential impulse in the human being. That's the way I see it: I need to paint, it's a necessity. I don't paint to make money or be famous or anything. I have to be there everyday, almost everyday – work. And if I don't do that, I don't feel complete. At this stage of the game, there's not a real center. I don't care that much about that at all. I just want to do what I want to do everyday, and I've been able to survive, without making concessions to what is. . ."

[Gracia]: "Fashionable?"

[Rodríguez]: "Yeah, that's the word. I didn't want to use it but you said it."

[Gracia]: "You are your own man. This brings up an important question because you said that, you have been able to survive without having to change what you want to do, to cater to a particular audience – maybe a museum audience, or expert audience, or collectors, or whatever. Many artists are able to support themselves by having other jobs in addition to the art, but you have been able to survive as an artist."

[Rodríguez]: "There is an element of luck in all this that nobody knows. Since I was 22 years old, I've been living off my painting. I've never done anything else."

[Gracia]: “How many Cuban-American painters have succeeded in doing that? I bet not many.”

[Rodríguez]: “Yeah, but I think if you work hard and are serious about what you do, and consistent in what you want to say, you’ll find people eventually. It’s like a trip in which you want to go to see how it ends. You keep painting and painting because you want to see how it ends. I want to see my limitations? What are, you know, my assets?”

[Gracia]: “You showed me some of your recent paintings, in which there is a great deal of humor. Before you were a very serious painter, almost tragic in many ways, concerned with hard issues. And concerned with them not in a light manner but in a heavy, thoughtful manner. And now you are dealing with serious topics but in a lighthearted way, and using humor. That’s a huge change. There’s also a color change, you’ve become more colorful. So, what’s this about? Are you really changing?”

[Rodríguez]: “I am always changing. I don’t know where it’s going to end. This funny business started about three years ago. My wife had colon cancer and then breast cancer, and then came a cancer of the thyroid – so many black things! And I started to laugh at the serious things. They threw so many things at me and I’m laughing. But it’s not a crazy laugh. Just when you see so many black things, you start to look at the lighter side. So this series has a lot to do with that. I’m not escaping from the bad things, on the contrary I’m dealing with them. I’m not a very positive person, but the context is also very human and also full of follies, and it’s called the human comedy. It’s like Balzac, it’s an ongoing process that you’ll never finish because it’s absurd. I wanted to concentrate even more on human beings without any landscape, nothing surrounding them. Almost all of the paintings are very stark: you don’t see any background, just based on the caricature – but it’s not a caricature. Many of them are based on real people that I painted realistically and then I distorted them. It’s all about these different feelings. Because you have drama but also this sense of the absurd. And also in the way I am, I’m not a very serious person. In my everyday life, I’m always joking and I’m very sarcastic sometimes. That’s what’s coming out now. But maybe I’ll go back, but I don’t plan things --they have their own life, and they finish if and when they want.”

[Gracia]: “So you have a good sense of humor. Does that have to do with you being Cuban?”

[Rodríguez]: “There is a lot of that Cuban character in those paintings. One of the factors of Cuban painting is caricature. Everybody did it. [Carlos Antiguez??], even [Posinoz??] – it is [surprising to see Avala was a – ???] did this famous caricature in the newspaper. A lot of the Cuban character is it’s like that. It’s universal and also serious. In my case, it had a lot to do with the way I am. I don’t do anything Cuban but it’s there.”

[Gracia]: “So there is a Cuban connection. There is a traditional Cuban caricature and in a way you are doing something similar although they are not caricatures.”

[Rodríguez]: “Right.”

[Gracia]: “Yeah, nut about the previous work? Some of your previous work has to do with topics that are the result of the Cuban situation, like the Balsas – we even see the island in some paintings.”

[Rodríguez]: “Yeah. I left Cuba when I was 14 years old. That’s an age in which you aren’t completely Cuban, you’re not completely anything. I went to Spain for three years and then came back here, to Miami. So many changes of culture and different friends leave you rootless or displaced. I understand very well the sense of displacement, and that’s tragic, but also, if you think about it, it’s an advantage, because you’re not Cuban, you’re not American, you’re not Spanish. You start seeing life from a distance and that helped me a lot in my work. To see that this is too Cuban, or too American or too European. You’re not completely Cuban, you’re not completely American. I don’t speak good English, I don’t speak good Spanish.”

[Gracia]: “But you paint well, that’s the important thing, isn’t it? That’s your medium.”

[Rodríguez]: “I’m glad I do it right, because I can’t even dance.”

[Gracia]: “Tell us, how did you develop your technique and the style you have?”

[Rodríguez]: “I’m a self-taught painter. I have never been to any art school.”

[Gracia]: “So how did you start?”

[Rodríguez]: “Just by myself. I had an aunt in Cuba that was a teacher and she had painted for a while. At that time in Cuba there were no oils or anything of the sort. But she had kept a small box of oils. I painted very thinly and used very little canvas – she only had also one roll of canvas which I clipped very small. I wasn’t part of the government. My family already was leaving Cuba, so I couldn’t get the grants and support others got. I was considered anti-revolutionary, even when I was 12 or 13 years old. I wasn’t part of the worker’s paradise. So I started painting on this little canvas and saving as much as I could because there was no more. Then I turned to wood. And then I left Cuba, when I was almost 15 years old. Even today I save and I am very systematic about cleaning my brushes. When I finish with a tube of paint, it’s really finished. Then I went to Spain and I started doing a lot of reading by myself. That’s how I learned. Then I came here, went back to Spain, and kept working and going to museums. The best way to learn how to paint is to go to museums and see the masters.”

[Gracia]: “But what about the tricks of the trade because there are all sorts of tricks to painting. Maybe I shouldn’t call them tricks, let’s say techniques. How to do this and how to do that?”

[Rodríguez]: “I read a lot of books, but also it’s trial and error. You want to know which

medium works; I did ten paintings and ten different things and then I threw them away. But I was learning. Now I use just a very simple technique, just a little bit of medium and color, that's it. I used to be very elaborate preparing the canvas. Sometimes I still do it, because I get a kick out of it. I prepare the rolled canvas with glue and sand and I stretch it – I love to do that, but sometimes I don't have the time and sometimes it's very difficult, especially with a big piece. But the technique has been getting simpler. The painting takes you where it's needed, and with so many years of working, it's like a second nature. So, they just come out, they lead me by the hand."

[Gracia]: "Was there a moment when you became a painter? Were you in high school then?"

[Rodríguez]: "I always wanted to be a painter. They used to throw me out of classes because all my notebooks were full of drawings. And I always was a terrible student, always drawing. And I like to read a lot. I have many friends who are poets and writers, and I like to do my own research and explore my thoughts. It's like in painting. I want to do it by myself. I want to crash and start all over and go back again and that's what prepares you to survive. There are so many critics, so many people that don't like your work. It's very hard, it's the hardest. But, you don't care."

[Gracia]: "How did you feel when they first said, 'oh, this is no good.'"

[Rodríguez]: "You never like it, but you understand that there are people that have different points of view from yours. I myself like certain painters and certain others I don't like. I respect them, but I don't like them. The same happens with music. You like some type of music, and some type of music you don't."

[Gracia]: "Now that you mentioned music, that's very important for you. You always paint with music in the background, don't you?"

[Rodríguez]: "Always, yes. It's part of my way of painting. The brush strokes are made with music. I use different music sometimes for the same painting. I could use a flamenco for one part of the painting, and then Debussy. Music makes you emote, you get a certain energy from it, a certain thoughtfulness. Everything is there in the music, that's why I have eight thousand CDs."

[Gracia]: "I see that the whole house is filled with CDs. You have to paint a lot and sell many paintings to support your – well, what you would call it? Vice? Musical vice?"

[Rodríguez]: "Miami Vice."

[Gracia]: "One last thing about the technique. You have chosen a certain technique and a certain medium. The question is: Are these essential for you? You talked about watercolors also before."

[Rodríguez]: "Yeah, I draw from life exactly without any attempt to distort – exactly

what I see. A boxer needs to run, and a painter needs to draw; especially from life. You can draw your own style – and maybe distort it; and I do that also – but to keep my vision clean and ordered, I draw from life. It can be anything: a hand, a finger. You look at the subject and draw it exactly without any attempt to distort it or to make a statement – it’s a very cold way of doing it. That keeps your vision. I like watercolors, ink, sometimes I paint in acrylic – much less. But my favorite way of painting is with oils. Because I’m used to it, the colors, the labels. You know what to expect. All this is part of painting because you’re a worker at the end. That’s why I did a self-portrait painting, but I call it ‘The Worker’ not ‘The Painter.’ You work with color, with materials that somehow get transformed in a piece because you get the olive green and when you see the tube you put it on the paper and you alter it so much that when it becomes the olive green at the end of painting, it’s transformed, it’s alchemy. That’s why I like to read about alchemy. A good painter realizes painting is alchemy. The best proof that alchemy works is that in painting the medium is transformed into something else.”

[Gracia]: “Yes, something entirely different. Now, Arturo, what have been your major influences as a painter.”

[Rodríguez]: “I think everything. I’ve been influenced by painters, poetry, cinema, books, novels, philosophy, everything. It’s as if you made a batido in your head. You prepare your conscious level, and then you throw it out. For example in the poetry, I did a whole series of paintings based on Rameau’s Illuminations, and the fact is that I always read a little bit of poetry every day. You know, it could be one poem, it could be a whole book but...”

[Gracia]: “You don’t write poetry?”

[Rodríguez]: “No, thank God. What appeals to me in poetry is that it doesn’t have an order. It’s the closest to painting in all the arts – poetry is so plastic.”

[Gracia]: “I like to call literature, great literature, art with words. So, it’s the same thing that you’re saying. As a painter you have oils, canvas, and you use them. And the poet is doing the same thing, but with words.”

[Rodríguez]: “With words, yes. I have a ‘Macbeth’ by the Shakespeare Company and it’s very dark. All you see is the face of the actors. Everything is black. But what is wonderful about it is how the drama, without visual effects, comes to life because of the words and the acting – that to me is the perfect painting. In a way, it’s like the Meninas, it’s perfect. It’s nothing more or less. This is the kind of thing I’m interested in and poetry gives it to you that; a great book or music gives you that. But music is more work-like to me. Poetry is more mysterious and it takes longer to assimilate. Many of my works are based on poems. Many images are based on images from poems. It’s unconscious because there is not an order. There is only the order of the words – and in painting the order is that of the colors, the composition, and the drawing.”

[Gracia]: “But what about other artists. Have they influenced you?”

[Rodríguez]: “We would be talking for hours telling you my influences, because everybody influenced me. You know, sometimes I don’t like a painter at the beginning and then I end up liking him at the end. And vice versa. I was talking to somebody yesterday about that. You like a painter and ten years later you don’t. To me it’s an open eye, an open attitude. I love Mondrian, for example.”

[Gracia]: “I would think that you would.”

[Rodríguez]: “And yet, he is very as far from me as possible. I like Duchamp. What I don’t like is to have one mentality, that this is the only thing that works, or that this is not new enough or not trendy enough. I can’t stand that. You weren’t any more – you weren’t surrealist enough, you weren’t. You know, he’d throw you out. That’s why he threw out the best artists that he had in the group. And that to me is totalitarian. There is a lot of totalitarian feeling in the art world nowadays.”

[Gracia]: “A lot of control.”

[Rodríguez]: “A lot of control and created interest. But anyway that’s another interview.”

[Gracia]: “But you know, considering your almost exclusive interest in the human being, if you were going to integrate Duchamp in your work, you would have to have a man using the urinal in the painting. Don’t you think?”

[Rodríguez]: “Maybe I will. But the point of the Duchamp urinal is that you’re not going to use it. But why not? It could be.”

[Gracia]: “So there you are. And this brings us to an end. Thank you very much.”