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Pepón Osorio: Promoting Growth and Addressing Identity in Hartford

Michaella Kendrick

At the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Pepón Osorio's mixed media piece "En la barbería, no se llora (No crying allowed in the barbershop)" (1994) commands an audience. The bright red chair stands on a platform of black and white barbershop tiles, a monitor at the head of the chair showcasing a looping video of men sobbing. This piece may seem disjointed or even disturbing at first glance, but it is a comprehensive work based on Osorio's first experience of pain based on his identity as a latino male. As an artist, Osorio strives to comfort and motivate those who have felt similar pain because of their identities. He uses this piece to specifically target the Puerto Rican population in Hartford, placing emphasis on issues of race, masculinity, and violence in order to promote conversation and growth surrounding these issues. It also promotes growth within the contemporary art world, increasing the complexity and importance of the latino narrative.

Childhood memories often come into play in Osorio's work. They engage the audience and allow Osorio to connect with individuals on a personal level. "En la barbería, no se llora" is based on Osorio's first experience at a barbershop when he was five years old. The barber did not know anything about Osorio's hair type; Osorio is of African Caribbean descent, and his hair is fairly thick and curly, "kinky" as he describes it. He remembers telling his father, "he doesn't know how to cut my hair" (Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2014, 21:30-21:35). During a moment in which Osorio was supposed to make his father proud, the sound of the scissors became traumatic and the whole experience was painful. "There was a combination of race and a rite of passage into becoming a little man, and I think that they both came together simultaneously" (Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2014, 42:00-42:12), Osorio notes. The tears shed in the video portion of Osorio's piece are painful to watch and clearly express an enormous amount of grief. This grief is reflective of the grief Osorio felt during his haircut as he cried. A barbershop is a gathering place for men in many communities, and in the barbería (barbershop) Osorio creates in his installation, tears indicate a failure to demonstrate masculinity. Osorio processes and builds off of his experiences through art, and by sharing his interpretation of the effect this memory has had on him, he can connect with others who might have felt similar feelings of grief, shame, or disappointment and reach them in whatever state they might be in.

Osorio's mixed media piece "En la barbería, no se llora" intertwines symbols of race, masculinity, and violence in subtle ways that allow the audience to come to their own understanding of the piece. The bright red chair stands on a platform of the classic black and white tiles characteristic of a barbershop. Lining the arms of the chair are chucherrias (trinkets) which represent the Puerto Rican culture; some of these include baseballs, hair picks, and dolls. The chucherrias themselves create a sense of contradiction; Osorio includes traditionally masculine and feminine elements side by side to comment on gender expectations, lining the cruel metal structure of the chair with soft lace to make the contrast even more evident. Some of the chucherrias such as the hair picks are also stained with red paint to look like blood, alluding to the violence that can occur in communities where men are held to a certain standard of masculinity such as Hartford, from Osorio's point of view. Additionally, a nude, male body is silkscreened onto the fabric of the chair. Jennifer González points out that the inclusion of that

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image “invites us to read each chair as an individual body” (González 44) and that the silkscreened body “makes visible the kind of exposure and vulnerability that grown men may experience when in tears” (González 44). The small video monitor at the head of the chair plays clips of males of all ages sobbing uncontrollably. It is uncomfortable to watch because men are traditionally not supposed to cry, especially not in such a grievous manner. To Puerto Ricans, the small connections to their culture are very clear, but the video serves to capture the attention of audience members who might not pick up on the significance of baseballs or hair picks, for example. Osorio has carried this childhood memory with him throughout his life, and he wants others to recognize how this experience has affected his growth as a person and connect with the work based on their own childhood experiences.

This project stands out among Osorio’s work because it signifies a transition in his art. While speaking on a panel at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Osorio recalled the moment in which he realized that the people he wanted his art to inspire, such as Latinos who were having struggles with race and masculinity themselves, were not being reached since his art was only being shown in an upscale gallery setting. He describes a moment in which he told a coworker that his installation had been covered in *The New York Times* and found out she had never even heard of the newspaper. He commented that “the people [he] was collaborating with and the attention that the installations were getting were somehow dislocated” (Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2014, 22:00-22:07). He realized that something needed to change between his latest piece, “Scene of the Crime (Whose crime?)” and his next, so he took a new approach with “En la barbería, no se llora.” In her book about Pepón Osorio and how his work has changed over the years, Jennifer González describes how Osorio began the project by visiting Park Street in Hartford, an area known for being particularly violent. He talked with residents and began drawing connections between issues like domestic violence and gang activity, drawing on his past as a social worker in the Bronx to give him perspective. He transformed an abandoned building in a central location into an installation which would provoke a sense of cultural pride and connectedness throughout the neighborhood. This cultural pride is evident in Osorio’s use of bright colors, like the red color of the chair, as well as the cultural images I have previously described such as baseballs.

The opening of the installation was an incredible moment for the community and for the contemporary art world. Osorio broke barriers by creating this installation within a community before accepting any commissions. He even invited museum staff into this community which they would never have experienced were it not the location of his artwork. During the panel at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Osorio showed a video of the opening and described the events that took place. Free haircuts were offered outside and three bottles of cologne were broken on the steps outside in front of a crowd of people to symbolize masculinity and overpower the senses of the guests, again forcing them to confront their own experiences with race and masculinity. The event was “all about creating a presence that spoke of class and masculinity” (Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2014, 24:30-24:45). Since Osorio had only hired workers within a one-mile radius of the site, many community members who lived nearby attended and essentially had Osorio’s message delivered to their doorstep. The opening was a celebration; people were talking, laughing, and looking at the installation in a way it could not be seen in a museum. By changing his approach, Osorio made his art completely accessible to the community that had inspired him in the first place, an admirable and exceptional decision.

This exhibition also changed the role of the latino community and the portrayal of latinos in contemporary art. Osorio dislikes how latinos are represented in the media, believing them to be underrepresented and oversimplified. “The latino community is one that has been portrayed as very accessible” (ART21, 2001, 45:50-45:57), he realizes, and his goal as an artist has become to change the narrative. He wanted to make his work accessible to those Puerto Ricans within the community he was targeting, so he put it right in their backyard. On the other hand, museum staff who wanted to feature his work were forced to come to him in order to get what they wanted. Osorio pushes boundaries, saying no when most others would say yes. He rejects opportunities for money and fame in favor of connecting with people. Additionally, the richness of the culture he depicts through bold colors and symbols of cultural pride, such as the chucherrias, provokes a personal and emotional response within the audience. Osorio wants people to leave his exhibitions thinking about “who they are in relationship to what they have just seen” and starting “a negotiation, not only with the artwork, but with the public at large” (ART21, 2001, 47:46-48:02). “En la barbería, no se llora” demands that people find their place within the piece, provoking social, emotional, and spiritual reflection. It has opened doors for latinos to be more expressive and bold with their art, and by expressing both the positive and negative aspects of a community, Osorio expands the playing field for latino artists to address issues that the general public is uncomfortable with such as masculinity and domestic violence. Osorio’s art is about the importance of addressing one’s own identity, and that is not supposed to be a comfortable experience. He isn’t afraid to make people uncomfortable; his audience must face the reality of his work and the social issues he addresses.

By addressing issues of race and masculinity in the Puerto Rican community in Hartford, Osorio takes an important step for latinos in the art world. He addresses the ways in which a struggle with identity can cause insecurity and violence, and although he does not provide a solution for Hartford as a whole, he does give its residents the tools to examine the role of masculinity in their own lives. His work provides an opportunity for growth, whether that be Osorio’s personal growth as an artist, growth within Hartford, or growth within the art world. The thoughtfulness in each detail of his work creates a piece people can connect with intimately. His artwork can be used as a tool to dissect one’s identity and role within a community, and that is an invaluable gift Osorio has given his audience.

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