



~ TALKING PICTURES ~

INTERVIEWS WITH PHOTOGRAPHERS AROUND THE WORLD

Alasdair Foster / 31 July 2021 / [Americas](#)

Cecilia Paredes: Artist of Nature & Artifice



© Cecilia Paredes 'Blue Landscape' [detail] 2007

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like the bowerbird looking for a treasure...

Introduction

The eye is caught by colour. Pattern engages the mind. Ambiguity fuels the imagination. This is no mere accident; these traits have evolved as essential to long-term survival. Colour changes with ripeness, with hotness, with disease; it calls to us, warns us, hides from us. It is by recognising and understanding patterns that we can order the world around us, describe and anticipate its ever-unfolding narratives and, in turn, represent this knowledge in symbolic configurations of our own devising. But it is ambiguity that engages us most strongly. The uncertain must be investigated, analysed, assayed against memory and made prescient in the mind's eye. While the play of young animals and children prefigures the dealings of adult life (conflict, cooperation, danger, love ...), the skills we now associate with story-telling and the arts invert the process, repurposing the traits of survival to a kind of play. It is a reflexive kind of play that seeks not just to understand the exterior world, but ourselves. For it is through that understanding of self that we can reach out empathically to conceive the interior life of others.

The 'animals' and 'landscapes' of the Peruvian artist Cecilia Paredes draw on and articulate this interior experience. Her body takes on the form of a fabulous animal or lies camouflaged amid the ornate designs of chintz and wallpaper like a fugitive being in a prehistoric jungle. Is this the lair of the predator or the hiding place of the prey? Perhaps neither... For Cecilia Paredes, it is the marginal beings that she loves most. Animals that are often misunderstood. Loners.

Her work with fabric designs began when she moved from Peru to the USA. The lot of the migrant is to become subsumed into the patterns of another culture, another way of life. To survive one must blend in; learn to be something else, someone new. But are we lost to ourselves as we dissolve into the alien landscapes of the new? These are questions raised by her images, not answers given. The disappearing act is in the eye of the beholder. The woman remains whole and uncorrupted, we just have to work harder to perceive how she inhabits her newly acquired animal form or harmonises with (while remaining distinct from) the florid patterns and stylised foliage. Form holds the truth; pattern the context. And it is our evolved sense of self-preservation, repurposed to consider the internal life of others, through which we have the possibility of true insight.

Alasdair Foster



© Cecilia Paredes 'Gargoyle 3' [detail] 2002

Interview

Alasdair: As an artist you work across a range of media, what drew you to work with photography? What does it do that other forms of visual art cannot?

Cecilia: Photography is the only medium that answers back to you and it always surprises me. You think you are in control, but photography has a mind of its own! ... You take a shot of a deer in the woods. Fine. But what you have also done is record something far more interesting as well; something that you were not consciously aware of at the time. Perhaps the dramatic way the light falls across the ground... So, if you take notice of what the camera is showing you, you will have to start all over again and rethink your whole purpose, because this new insight changes everything. This process of revelation fascinates me.

You have an obvious fascination with nature, so I am interested in how this has evolved into artifice and the ways you play with opposing pairs of ideas such as nature/culture, visible/camouflaged.

It started in the year 2000; that was when I made the first works in the animal series. I placed some dragonflies on my back like wings. It was a very autobiographical work: I wanted to fly! [laughs] I took a liking to impersonating animals. I love Nature and I am drawn to marginal animals like skunks, armadillos, snakes ... the outsiders ... I feel more comfortable with them.

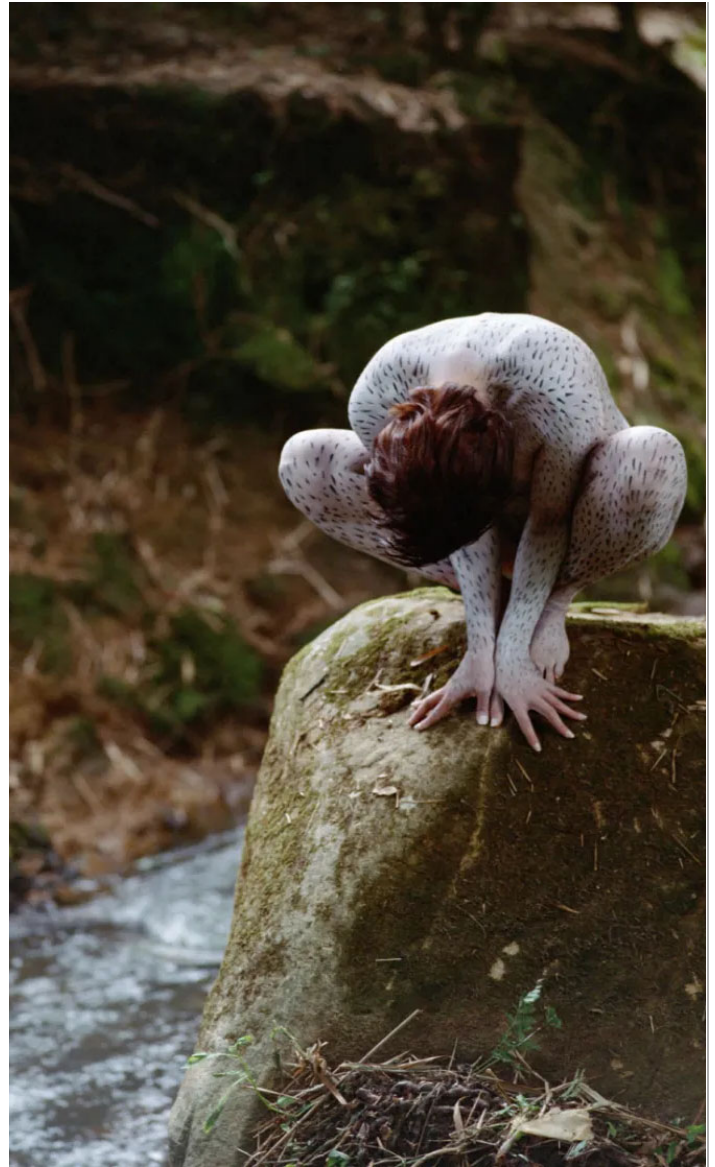


© Cecilia Paredes [Left] *'The Flight'* 2000; [Centre] *'Fish in Water'* 2001; [Right] *'Curious Skunk'* 2003

This was the first time I used photography to make art. I started with a Hasselblad, thinking that this way I was going to record everything well. But the camera is so perfect that it showed me instead all the errors, the minutia, even the hairs on my arms coming through the body paint. So, after seeing all that detail, I had to rethink my whole process.

How did you resolve these issues?

I learned to acknowledge that the image we think we want, the experience and the final photograph do not necessarily all agree. So, I started incorporating what the photographs proved was there, even though I had not anticipated or wanted it at the start: hair, wrinkles and imperfections became a part of my work.



© Cecilia Paredes [Left] 'Gargoyle 2' 2002; [Right] 'Dawn' 2005

The early series of 'Fabulous Animals' – gargoyles and gnomes, grotesques, mythical hybrid humanoid/animal creatures... This seems to be another way in which you play in the liminal area between animal and human...

Yes, I try to erase differences between gender and species in my work: animal or human, female or male, it does not matter at all. It's the character that counts... This is a common thread linking all my animal and plant series.

I started working with images of fabulous animals because I feel very close to the stories of myth; they explain many things in a very poetic way. And then there is my theatre background; I studied theatre when I was at the University in Lima.

You described your images as 'photo-performances'. Is the artwork the photograph or the performance, which is then documented by the photograph?

The performances are done in private for the camera only, so that I can photograph a particular action. For the public, the photograph is the artwork. However, for me personally it is another matter. I get pretty much caught up in the performance itself and sometimes it stays within me for a long time.

How much is pre-planned and how much evolves once you are in front of the camera?

Absolutely everything is planned, up to the last detail. I hardly need to speak when we are shooting, because everything has been said and rehearsed before. But then the camera speaks, and that's another story...!



© Cecilia Paredes 'Fish Head' 2003

What ideas were you exploring in the animal performance works?

I was trying to *feel* how they feel.

For example, I was in the market and saw that the fishmonger had this huge spine left over after filleting a fish. I took the spine to my studio; I wanted to impersonate a fish. I chose a pose that looked as if I was entering the water. I was so immersed in the performance that I did not notice I was bleeding. The spines of the fish had pricked my back, making a real bond with me, yet I had felt no pain at the time. My connection with the fish followed me for quite some time. I couldn't get rid of the smell; it clung to my hair and body for several days!

Your 'Landscape' series involves overlaying textile and wallpaper patterns onto the body.

Yes, the pattern in the background is repeated on the body using body paint. There is no computer manipulation or Photoshop used. I like the texture of the brushstrokes on the skin.





© Cecilia Paredes

Upper: [Left] 'Costa Rica' 2007; [Centre] 'Nocturne' 2009; [Right] 'Bed of Roses' 2009
 Lower: [Left] 'Chrysanthemum' 2009; [Centre] 'Dreaming Rose' 2009; [Right] 'Both Worlds' 2011

You are the model in the images?

Yes, with only a couple of exceptions, I am the model.

Who designs and applies the make-up?

I chose a section of the design from the pattern that I have selected for the background. I begin by experimenting; painting my assistants. I take photos and then, when I am happy with the results, I paint myself or my assistants paint me by copying what I have done. It depends on which part of the body we are working with at the time.

Many of the patterns have an East-Asian style.

Yes, some do have this influence. I am a fan of Eastern culture in general. And then, in 2010, I was invited to visit China for three months and I was captivated by its history and sensuality. I find that the more I learn about the world, the more I love that there are so many ways of seeing things; so many different perspectives.

Which comes first: the pattern or the pose?

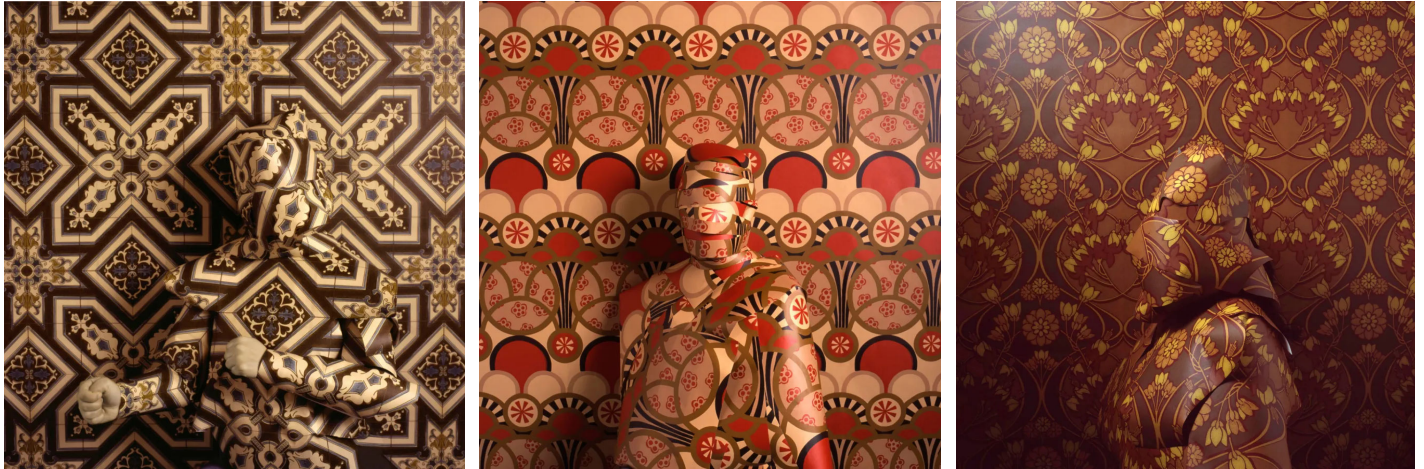
Well, first comes the *idea*. That then suggests the pose, and finally I search for the pattern. Searching is a big part of the work. I call it hunting; like the bowerbird looking for a treasure...

What ideas are you exploring in these pattern works?

That is a bit more complex. It goes back to a major change in my life when I moved to the United States of America. That's when the 'Landscape' series started. I think the first one was made in 2006. These works talk about migration and re-location and longing... My life now is pretty nomadic, so behind each image there is a story about a place I have been attached to but had to leave, or a new place where I am living now ... how we have to come to terms with such circumstances.

Have the images evolved as you come to terms with your nomadic lifestyle?

The series started with a static figure. Later the figure gets to participate in the action by moving and imitating the background. Then, in the 'Warriors' series, the character interprets, grabs, destroys and appropriates the wallpaper for her own needs and purposes.



© Cecilia Paredes [Left] 'Warrior 3' 2011; [Centre] 'Warrior 1' 2010; [Right] 'Warrior 2' 2011

Tell me about the 'Warriors'.

At first, the idea I had when I made the 'Warriors' series was to construct another identity out of the patterned paper – like when one uses a mask. Then I had the idea of interpreting the phrase 'paper tiger', bringing another level of meaning. The work begins to question how the idea of a uniform, costume or form of dress may come to define a person's attitude.

Where do you show your photographs?

I normally present a solo show every two years, in a public venue like a museum or institute. Then come the biennials, the group shows... then there are the commercial gallery shows, and, increasingly, the phenomenon of the three-day event at an art fair.



© Cecilia Paredes 'Elusive Paradise' 2010

Do you think photographs are accepted as art these days?

Yes. It happened in the last thirteen to fifteen years and I have had the privilege of witnessing it. Before that it was viewed more like engraving or drawing, a second-tier art. This is not the case anymore and, when viewers look at my work and respond with a similar depth of engagement that they would with, say, a painting, I am truly happy.

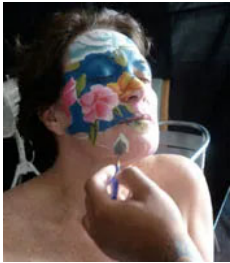
What photographic projects are you working on now?

I am currently developing a series that involves architecture. I have just done a series in Saint Petersburg. Let's see what happens... I am still in the dark stage, not knowing exactly how it will develop and, that most difficult part of the creation process, the *why*...

What, for you, is the most important thing about being an artist?

To work as honestly and hard as one can. That's not easy. Art does not have a nine-to-five schedule; it stays in your mind 24/7. You must persevere: become feverish, obsessed, with a one-track mind for your work only. It's hard! But then the world is evolving with such greed and corruption... for me, art is a form of salvation; a place to find solace. Art and Nature.

Biographical Notes



Cecilia Paredes was born in Lima in 1950. She studied fine art at the Universidad Católica de Lima, Cambridge Arts & Crafts School (England) and the Academy of Fine Art in Rome. She subsequently undertook residencies at the University of Pennsylvania and the Banff Centre (Canada). As a student in Lima in the 1970s she engaged in intense political activism, which caused her to be exiled from Peru, along with her husband. She lived in Mexico for five years and in Costa Rica for almost a quarter of a century.

Her work has been widely exhibited in festivals and museums in the Americas, Europe and Asia. Festivals include Havana Biennial, Venice Biennale, Pingyao International Photography Festival (China) and the Bienal de Arquitectura de Canarias, while museums include the Tabacalera Promoción del Arte, Madrid, the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, and the Museo de la Fotografía, Bogotá. She now lives and works between Lima and Philadelphia.

Cecilia Paredes preparing for a shoot
