

PABLO HELGUERA

A JOURNAL OF THE YEAR OF THE PHARMACY

OCTOBER 15, 2021 - JANUARY 22, 2022

SHIRLEY FITERMAN ART CENTER 81 BARCLAY STREET NEW YORK, NY 10007 BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE, CUNY

Pablo Helguera's **A Journal of the Year of the Pharmacy** is a large-scale exhibition drawn from autobiographical materials and diaries. The project investigates aspects of the self as a portal to larger issues to which we are all connected, including our past personal histories, shared cultural contexts, education, work, and social interactions.

Helguera's work has often engaged in diaristic practice—the highly intimate and vulnerable communication that tries to make sense of a particular moment in both personal and collective ways.

A Journal of the Year of the Pharmacy is a project that explicitly falls into this category. The project, a direct reference to Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, was developed over the course of the Covid pandemic period. Defoe's oft-cited work during the Covid-19 pandemic is actually a fictional narrative of the effects of the Plague written 60 years after it occurred; it is nonetheless a vivid description of a social and health crisis that resonates with our contemporary experience of the current pandemic.

Divided in four installations and accompanying monologues connected to the artist's reflections during the period ranging from March of 2020 to the present (and that are accessible via QR code), the exhibition reflects on topics such as the role that geography plays in our personal lives, our desire for escapism, the complexities of cultural identity, walking as a process of learning, and the psychology of those who play a supporting role in the arts.

The installations, consisting of period re-creations, museum display strategies, video, and works on paper and canvas, include *Colonia Nápoles* (referring to the neighborhood where the artist grew up in Mexico City), *Chamber Music* (about the relationship between the aesthetics between 19th century classical music and contemporary art), *Evanston* (about the artist's school years in Chicago), and *The Art Technician's Syndrome* (an installation about the artist's reflections as a museum educator for three decades).

Preamble

Over my adult life I developed a mild obsession with pharmacies. It was not until about a year ago when I finally realized the true reason for that obsession. Pharmacies, the boring commercial kind, underscore the equalizing fact that we all have bodies, rich and poor, smart and not, beautiful and ugly, and we all are going to face the end of life.

A year and a half ago, in March 2020, I woke up with a fever. I had lost my sense of smell and taste. As my fever climbed to 103 and I had hallucinatory visions, the nights became visits to the abyss. My head was on fire and my body shivered violently. I dreamt of the Commendatore, the stone statue that arrives in Don Giovanni's lair to take him to hell.

Nearby our house in Brooklyn people started to die by the hundreds per day. I learned of colleagues and neighbors who had been taken away.

Then one morning, the fever broke. I began a long way to recovery. I had been spared this time.

Colonia Nápoles

The entrance to our house was a storefront that my dad had made by retrofitting the garage. It was called Helguera y Compañía. My grandfather had created a small bathroom and kitchen supply business in Mexico City that prospered, and he had mentored my dad, his eldest son, to lead it.

A row of toilets, sinks and medicine cabinets were lined up at the store's entrance so that clients could browse the merchandise for sale. Colorful, patterned tile samplers lined a back

shelf, showing the products by various fabricators that were available ...

There is something odd about bathroom showrooms; it feels a bit embarrassing to be in this public space that's typically a place of privacy, as if you were expected to go to the bathroom in the plain view of strangers.

Later, when I worked in art museums, I thought of those showrooms. I thought about display.

Chamber Music

... the thing I remember the most about our family's living room in the house on Arizona Street is the cigarette smell, even though none of us who lived there were smokers.

We did have ashtrays, lots of them, of every shape and form, mostly my grandfather's collection. Many of them were made of glass. As a child, I was

fascinated with them.

The second thing that the living room makes me think about is music ...

It might be strange for some to think of a household in Mexico where the only music heard was Bach, Mozart, Brahms, Debussy or Ravel.

The third thing I remember when I think about the living room is the household objects.

... family heirlooms inherited from our grandparents and sometimes our great-grandparents. None of them had any significant monetary value, but the amount of stories and family history they contained made them treasures to us.

... everything you need to know about art and museums, you can learn in a 19th century living room with a fireplace surrounded by family heirlooms, and

from a toilet showroom.

Evanston

When my family emigrated to the United States, we brought a lot of those things with us. They became our only physical connection to our past in a country that seemed to be made of plastic, where the majority of things looked attractive and practical but had no artistic value—they were 99 cent objects. Those 99 cent objects were not real for me, perhaps because they felt disposable. In contrast, the objects that my mom had brought from Mexico were irreplaceable. One of them was a sío, a silver finger bowl, filled with warm water and lemon, used to wash your fingers while eating an artichoke—a remnant of a luxurious life that felt so remote at that time.

The Art Technician's Syndrome

I started working in museums back in

1991. I was a recent art school graduate, coming from performance. So ever since that time, organizing live events has been a natural activity for me. I enjoyed the rituals around it. Having an official ID hanging from my neck, working in the safe and spacious backstage, sitting in a quiet office.

The difference between me and my co-workers at the museum was clear. I was a practicing artist, while most of them were not.

When I left my museum life, as often happens when leaving a job, I took my personal items in cardboard boxes.

Inside were a number of notebooks, yellow pads, and journals that documented every conversation, every reflection I had as an art technician throughout those years. To-do lists. Reminders. Things I had heard someone say that were resonating in my brain.