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Pictures from a conversation

By Michael O'Sullivan
Friday, Dec. 30, 2011

If you divided the [Mexican Cultural Institute's](#) latest, two-photographer showcase straight down the middle -- Muriel

Hasbun's pictures on one side and Pablo Ortiz Monasterio's on the other -- you'd have two pretty interesting bodies of work. Left intact, it makes for one fascinating conversation.



MURIEL HASBUN

Make that "[Conversacion](#)," the Spanish title for what this exhibition, in essence, is: a lively dialogue between two witty and engaged interlocutors who, over the course of a year, chatted with each other using nothing but pictures. Like the best repartee, the show has a jazzlike, free-associative rhythm.

Here's how it worked. On Nov. 18, 2010, Monasterio, who lives in Mexico City, e-mailed a photo to his friend Hasbun, who's based in Washington. Monasterio, who had just been in the District for FotoWeek, sent the image as a way of thanking Hasbun for picking up a camera he had asked her to buy him. It's not much of a photo, just a picture of hands holding a book. (On a plane back to Mexico, Manasterio shot the lap of the guy sitting next to him as a way of trying out the camera.)

But something about the throwaway image reminded Hasbun of one of her own pictures, so she sent him a shot of a hand caressing a side of beef, taken from a series of slaughterhouse images she had taken in Mexico. Monasterio responded with a third photo, a sign for a restaurant or butcher shop, featuring a cartoon pig.

The back-and-forth e-mails continued for a year. The 48 pictures they sent make up the exhibition, which is hung in chronological order.

For that reason, you couldn't divide the show straight down the middle, even if you wanted to. The works alternate between Monasterio's pictures and Hasbun's so that you get a sense of the dialogue unfolding as it happened. There's a narrative of sorts, even if it's one the viewer must supply. There are no captions, other than dates. The last piece in the sequence is a short, abstract video, sent by Hasbun on Nov. 9, 2011. Coming full circle, it includes shots of clouds photographed from the inside of an airplane. It's an apt metaphor for the long-distance collaboration.

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It sounds like a gimmick, doesn't it? Still, the show works as more than a game. It opens up a window, not just into how artists think, but into how they see. It's also sheds light on how we, as viewers, construct meaning out of seemingly meaningless clues.

Sometimes, Hasbun's and Monasterio's responses are based on subject matter. As with any conversation, there are recurring themes. Hands, eyes and other body parts figure prominently. Occasionally, a shape, texture or color will be echoed. At other times, the connection between images isn't formal at all, but conceptual, picking up on an idea, theme or feeling - sex, death or sadness, for instance - and expanding on it, or taking it in a startling direction. A photo of a cartoonish outline of a naked woman's torso is followed by a photo of a bed, which is followed by a photo of a dead cockroach. Somehow it makes sense.

At times, the juxtapositions are laugh-out-loud funny. At other times, they're profoundly moving.

It isn't that Hasbun's photos -- or Monasterio's -- can't stand on their own. But as with any other conversation, listening to just one side presents an incomplete picture. The whole of "Conversacion" is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Story Behind the Work

By Michael O'Sullivan

Friday, Dec. 30, 2011

"Conversacion" did not begin with a show in mind. It was just two friends engaging in an exchange of visual ideas. But after a dozen or so images had been sent, it was clear that there was more potential here than just an e-mail thread.

All of Hasbun's photos were chosen from material she had shot during previous visits to Mexico, but otherwise there were no ground rules. Sometimes e-mails would fly back and forth every other day. Then weeks would elapse without contact. Monasterio, according to Hasbun, was the more impulsive of the two artists, shooting from the hip. Hasbun would often belabor her response for days before hitting "send." Monasterio, who has authored many photo books, was used to thinking sequentially. Hasbun's work is less literal and more allusive.

One curious pair of photos seems to depict this difference: a crude wooden sign in the shape of a taxi. Hasbun's picture came first, but it was met with an uncharacteristic silence from Monasterio. Then, while Hasbun was visiting him in Mexico, she nudged him about his unresponsiveness. Monasterio asked her to take him to where she had gotten her shot of the car. She showed him, and he snapped a picture of the sign, too - but from the back.

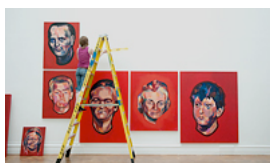
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