

INTERVIEW

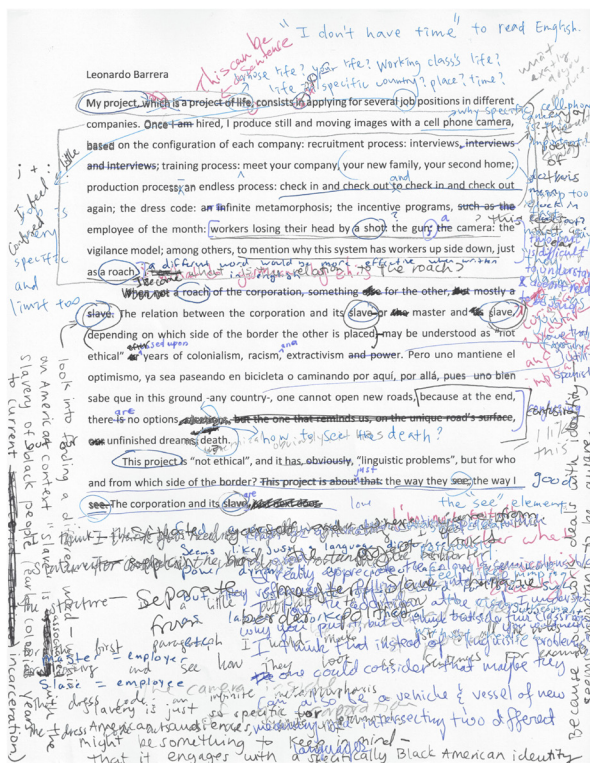
Digital Drawing Room: MFA Fine Arts featuring Leonardo Barrera

Interviewed by Karl Daum



Starting May 10, you can view work by students in the MFA graduating class on the website 2021.CCAMFA.art and in the [Class of 2021 Showcase](#).

Works in this series were written by students in Glen Helfand and Maria Porges' respective graduate writing seminars this past fall and spring.



From the book *Just Next Door*, 2020.

Karl Daum: Tell me a little bit about your work.

Leonardo Barrera: My current project is a performance that looks back on learning English after my parents were deported from the United States. I started transcribing conversations I was having with strangers. I would ask them to take photos of me, and without their consent, I would record their voice and then transcribe the recording into a word document. It was basically a process of listening to myself speak a foreign language while understanding myself as an image and as a voice. The work explores the space between photography and text, and how these two can merge to create a cinematic book.

KD: What are some of the challenges around showing work?

LB: I was worried about the films because they have to do with my experiences doing sex work in San Francisco. My encounters are not just sex, however. These could be something like drinking wine or having breakfast, or watching a film.

KD: How did you make this work? What is the process?

LB: My projects are made with a cell phone camera. I approach this work through the poor image, an economic perspective represented by the pixel's terrible quality. I'm using images as fragments, which can create a narrative through montage.

KD: Tell me about the people you encounter during this process. What sort of connection do you have to them? Who do you become when in relationships with them?

LB: It became a very intimate relationship with them. They got used to my presence, and I got



Stills from the film *Do you know how to make eggs*, 2021.

used to theirs. But I always thought about the character that I created to fulfill each person's individual needs. I'm still in touch with these clients. I worry about them. I ask if they're doing OK, if they're eating well. One of the sex clients became my partner. So it gets very blurry, separating art from life.

KD: How do you handle consent in your work, especially when it comes to entering space and taking images or being imaged?

LB: As soon as they started sending me videos of themselves or me, I knew that I had a lot of material to create a film. And so, I created this film first. Then, I asked them if I could use that footage, because if I had asked first, they would have tried to edit or create the narrative.



Still from the film *I am royalty even in poverty*, 2014.



Slaves of the Month, 2014.

KD: Why make the work? Why make art at all?

LB: When my parents were deported, my dad started his own butcher shop in Mexico. He hired me when I was eight years old. When I was eighteen, I applied to a university to teach English as a second language, and I wasn't accepted, but that was the only career open to me. To avoid my dad's butcher shop, I decided to make art and applied to the University of the Arts in Aguascalientes. But it's not that I started painting when I was five years old or got my first camera when I was eight years old. It's more that at eight years old, my first toy was a knife to cut meat in a butcher shop and art was the way to avoid that reality—to create something else.