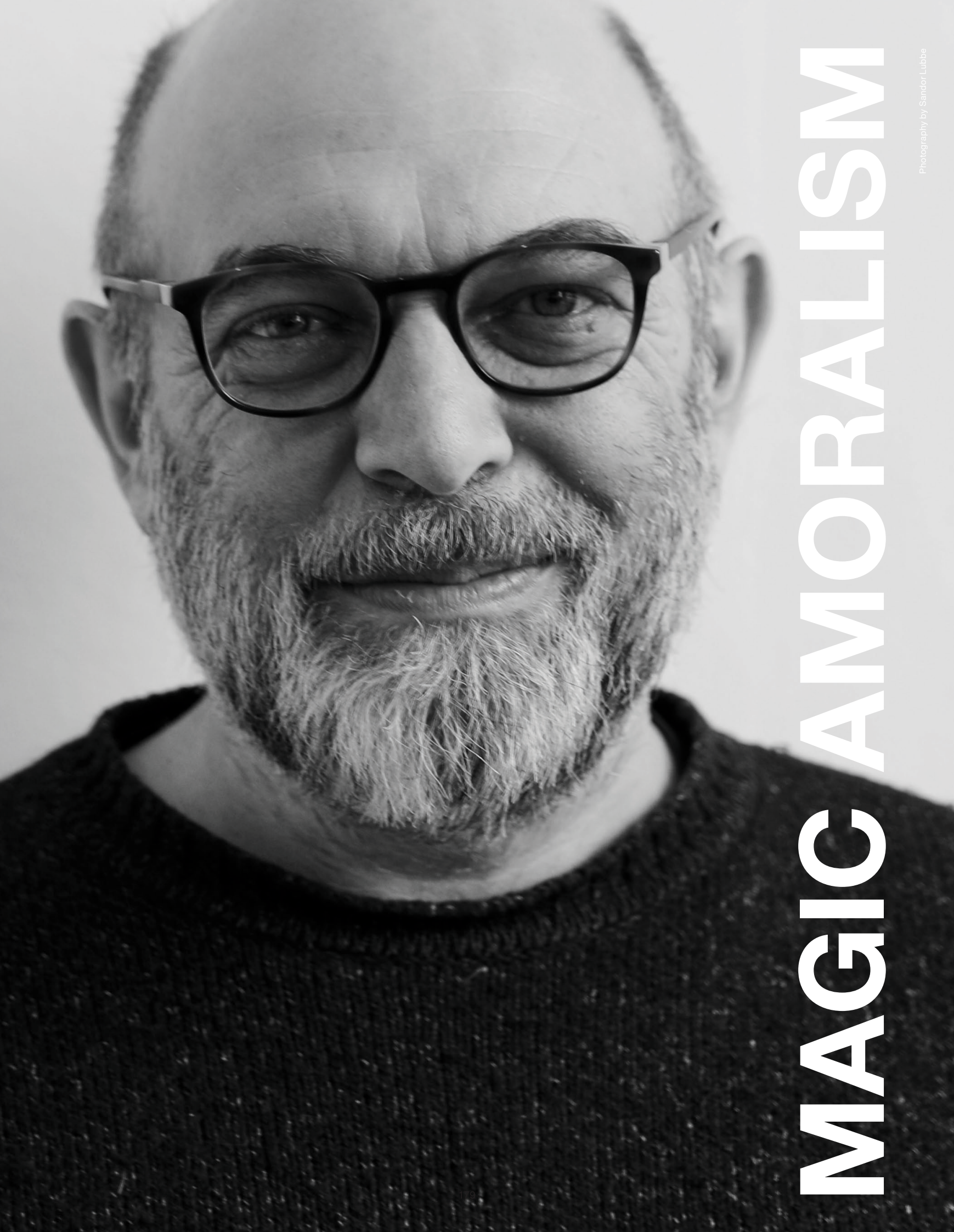




Carlos Amorales, *The Tongue of the Dead*, 2012, screenprint, courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York. Photography by Sandor Lubbe



Photography by Sandor Lubbe

# MAGIC AMORALISM





## An Interview with Carlos Amorales

by Catherine Somzé

Born to parents who were both conceptual artists, Carlos Aguirre Morales left Mexico upon turning 19 to embark on a journey that would last 13 years, rather than the two months that he initially planned. But traveling to Europe wasn't enough for the artist to distance himself from the legacy of a famous father whose long shadow seemed to bridge the Atlantic. Indeed, they shared the same name and profession.

In Amsterdam, while in residency at the Rijksakademie, he chose to work under the pseudonym of Carlos Amorales, combining both his parents' last names into one. He gave masks that resembled his face to friends in order to explore life for himself and organized wrestling matches with Mexican *luchadores* using the same disguise. He was staging the possibility of looking at himself and his struggle, from the detached position of someone else.

Traveling had always been part of the family history, though. His grandfather had left the French Basque Country to take care of family business overseas, and his father, Carlos Aguirre, had taken his own family to London to study in the early '70s at the Central School of Art. Amorales' father became instrumental in the development of a new brand of conceptual art back in Mexico a few years later. And so did Amorales, too, this time together with a new generation of Mexican artists who transformed the face of contemporary Mexican art in the early 2000s.

This spring, the first survey exhibition of Amorales' work to be shown in Europe will be presented at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam – the city where he gave birth to himself as an artist by lending his features to others. *ZOO Magazine* interviews him in the midst of a paradigmatic selection of works that illustrates the breadth of his artistic endeavour over the past 25 years. *The Factory* includes works in all kinds of media from drawings and installations to animations and neon wall pieces made in close collaboration with Amorales' studio, friends and family. Although heavily inspired by pop culture and curated by themes instead of biography, *The Factory* shows that, for Amorales, making art is still very much a personal affair.







**Catherine Somzé: Why did you decide to come to Amsterdam in the early '90s instead of Berlin, for instance?**

CA: It was really by chance. I had already left Mexico and was living in Mallorca where I felt like I was the only person under 30 on the whole island. It was really difficult and I was bored. I really wanted to study and be where I could meet more artists and be amongst young people. I knew someone who had done the Rijksakademie, and he told me about it. Then I applied.

**CS: But the Rijksakademie is a postgraduate institute. Weren't you too young for that?**

CA: They did interview me and saw potential, but indeed. They channeled me to the Rietveld Academy instead where I ended up studying for three years. Afterwards, I kept on applying. Four times, actually, until it worked. [Laughs]

**CS: It must have been like staying in a waiting room for years.**

CA: Like in a dungeon! [Laughs]

**CS: You were painting at that time.**

CA: I was doing set design, but that was really hard because you had to have connections, and I was 21 and didn't have them. So I started painting. That was the easiest and closest thing to me. At that time, I was at the Rietveld Academy, and it wasn't called painting anymore, but *vrije richting*, which roughly translates as "free direction." It wasn't traditional painting; it was more experimental. I could try other things. Then at the Rijksakademie, I really quit painting. I mean, I always did like drawing and continued to do so.

**CS: You have done many works that look like blown-up pencil drawings such as *Peep Show*.**

CA: Drawing is very much there, just as is writing. They are both movements of the hand. It's where it all starts and that's where things develop, sometimes in very large projects, or complex things like the wrestling project or a more traditional piece such as *Peep Show*, indeed.

**CS: How do writing and drawing relate to one another in a project such as the *Liquid Archive*?**

CA: I do visual archives, and *Liquid Archive* was a way of ordering things at first. At one point, you start collecting images from any source and then organizing them, and while doing that, giving them a meaning and a sense. It is very much like writing. It is a tool for creating narratives afterwards.

**CS: Images become a common vocabulary?**

CA: When you work with other people very intensively on projects – and I often do now – at a certain moment, these images become a shared language indeed.

**CS: Like when the butterfly silhouette from your installation *Black Cloud* became**

**disseminated by fashion and popular culture more generally. Your butterflies were found on dresses and even tattoos.**

CA: That's a very nice case, because I still don't know why it happened. Perhaps it's because the butterfly is such an appealing image or sparks peoples' imagination. But it's definitely a case of a form being taken over by the public who starts to do something different with it, as well as the fashion industry that pushed it further. That's the nice thing about language. It's like a pop song. Suddenly people adopt it and make it their own, use it in their own language or put it into another song. *Black Cloud* is a piece that spread in a funny way, and that's exactly the point with language. It's not something you practice for yourself; it's something you do in order to communicate with others. That's when it becomes language.

**CS: But in many of your works, the language is not legible.**

CA: It's more like references to language. There is a suggestion that what is written can be read. Forms and signs are there to indicate it's meant to be understood as a language, such as speech bubbles, but then it's unreadable.

**CS: Like in your work *La lengua de los muertos*, in which you use language to talk about the lack of a voice of those who died in the Mexican drug war and whose murder cases remain unresolved?**

CA: As well as the impossibility of understanding something. In that case, it's kind of a fantasy scenario in which the idea is suggested that the dead can be heard, although one cannot understand what they say. As if there was an afterlife. But on the other hand, it's referring to a very actual situation, which is the political situation of Mexico in the last years, which has become so complex and in a way so deceiving that you cannot grasp it anymore. There is never a full picture. The more I read – and there were all these books coming out, really trying to explain what was going on, and who were the actors of this narco war – the less I understood. The closer I had the feeling of getting it, the less I could get it. Which is often the case, I think, not only in that specific situation, but also in many others in today's world.

**CS: Your pseudonym means "no morals" in Spanish. Do you consider yourself amoral?**

CA: I like the idea of amorality, because a plant or an animal is amoral. It lacks morals but it is also not against it, so it's not "amoral" in a strict sense. But the pseudonym was more a word play, a language game with an ironic twist. Just like in the punk movement, you have "Johnny Rotten," and the "Sex Pistols." "Carlos Amoraless" became a way of playing with that, and the more I use it, the more common it becomes. I even became distanced from my own real name. Carlos Amoraless has become normalized now, it's just my name.

What I like about it is that because it has this kind of ironical distance, I never fully identify with it either. What I'm trying to say is that I am not a moralist. I do ask myself moral questions about the state of the world today, but it's not like I have a definite position on them. In a work such as *Orgy of Narcissus*, for instance, I do not condemn contemporary selfie culture. I don't judge whether it's shallow or not, but rather think about the existential position one has in the face of all these changes. I am not trying so much to understand or explain what is going on, but rather opening up the question of what is that world and what does it mean to be living in it. Recognizing that you can play with that.

**CS: How does Mexico compare to the Netherlands with regards to these complex realities?**

CA: When I came to Europe, I was 19. I was supposed to travel for two months and ended up living in Europe for 13 years. Part of my family comes from Europe. My grandfather was from the Basque country, but his mother tongue was French. On the other hand, I was born in Mexico. My parents are Mexican, I grew up in Mexico. So I always felt kind of in between two sides. I also have this kind of feeling that, in Mexico, I do not fully understand the culture because I am not properly or deeply rooted enough in the culture. So, in a way, I feel a foreigner in my own country. But then when I come to Europe, I feel more Mexican than ever. So, suddenly, I'm a foreigner. I have always felt this kind of ambiguity.

**CS: Being out of place?**

CA: And at the same time, not, because you connect to all these places as well. I look European, so if I don't speak, people think I'm from here, but then the moment I open my mouth, I become a foreigner – and the other way around. In Mexico, people think I'm a foreigner. Sometimes they even congratulate me on how well I speak Spanish. Yes, sure! [Laughs]

**CS: In the '90s, you designed a Luchador mask based on your own face, which you lent to other people.**

CA: It's a very psychological work and it's very simple. I am the son of an artist and we share the same name, so I was conditioned to be "junior" or "little Carlos," to take over whatever my father did. So I felt that whenever I attempted to make art, I was mimicking him, and on top of it, we had the same name. So it became like a really complex psychological thing. I think that's why I left Mexico in the end. With 10,000 km in between, and there was no internet at that time. I was far away and alone, you know. But, of course, you carry this kind of complexity and these troubles. You can travel as far as you can, but in the end, you can't escape yourself. In other words, I needed to create

a truly distant position to see myself from outside. That's where the idea of creating a double of myself came from. It became very useful. I could give my suit, my mask – which represented me – to somebody else and then there was no personal history anymore and completely new action could take place. Suddenly, it was possible to start building a new personal history. But then of course it is a very ironical process because it's a non-personal personal history in the end.

**CS: But then why choose a design that referred to the typically Mexican phenomenon of the Lucha Libre?**

CA: Again, ironically, it is not that much a Mexican phenomenon. Historically, wrestling arrived in North America through France and England, and the first wrestler in Mexico was an American. But then, of course, it connects to contemporary popular culture because people love it in Mexico, but it is a Gringo thing, after all. And this is exactly where things get interesting because cultural phenomena that might appear deeply Mexican at first often happen to have been imported, upon closer historical inspection – even national symbols. Culture, then, appears as something much more fluid.

**CS: And what about art then?**

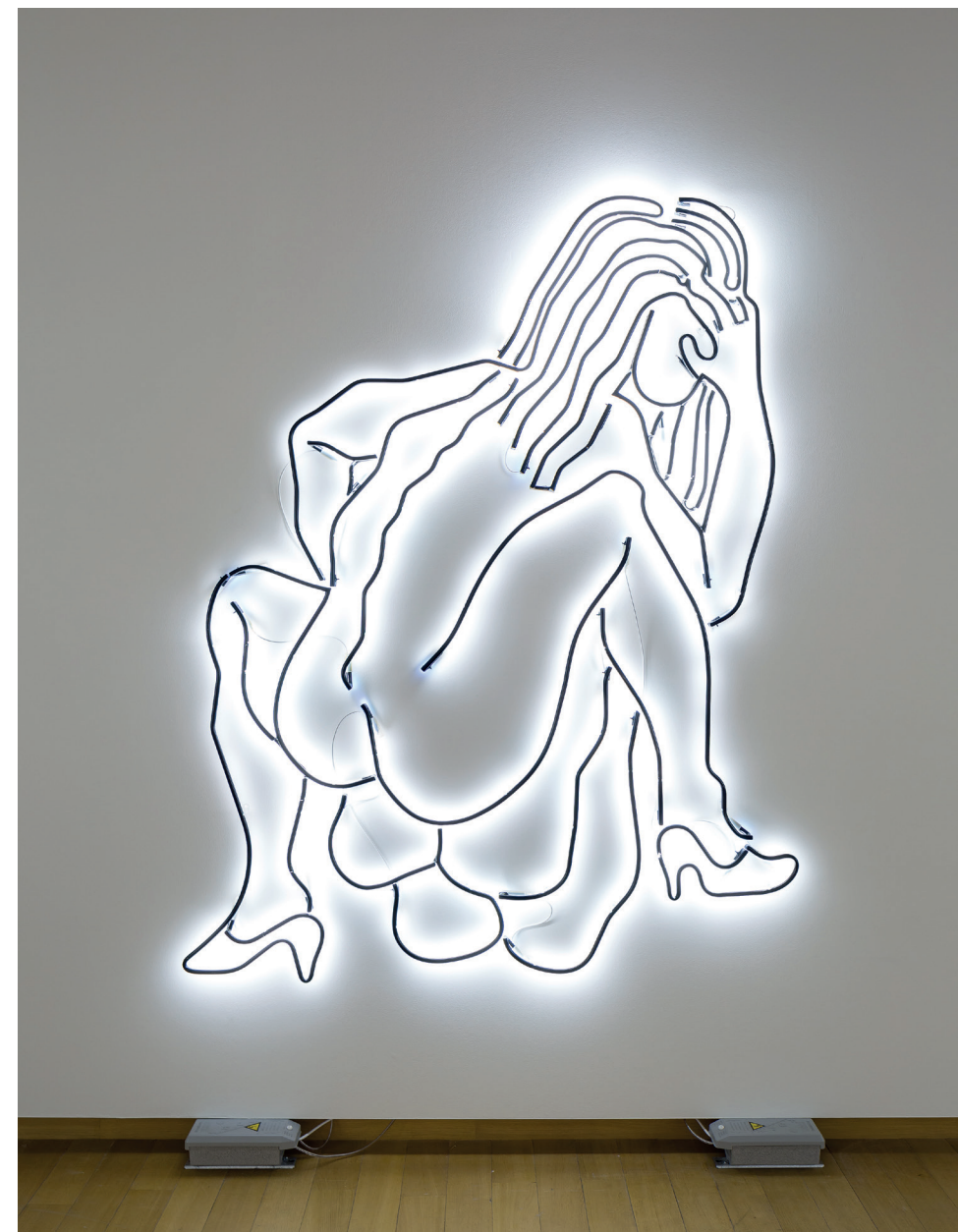
CA: When I arrived in Europe in the early '90s, I remember people saying that "serious" art was either North American or European. There was nothing outside of that. To hear that was like we "Mexicans" don't get it, we don't understand the language. And there had just been this exhibition in Paris, *Magiciens de la terre*, which was the first time a show had been curated for a major European art institution that involved non-European, non-American artists, some of whom are very important now. On the other hand, they still called it *Magiciens de la terre*, which translates as "magicians of the earth" that still appealed to some kind of primitivist cliché.

**CS: In your work, out of the ordinary creatures invade the realm of reality and banal objects come to life. This made me think very much of Magic Realism.**

CA: It could be. Unfortunately. [Laughs]

**CS: Why do you consider that an unfortunate association?**

CA: Because Magic Realism is really what defined Latin American culture in the '70s. When I was a kid, we read Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende, all these great writers. They were very important but it was also the culture of my own parents, the culture you wanted to escape. I was born in the '70s, so I was too young for the punk movement but, for me, that was what was much more exciting. To hear about these bands, poets, and characters. This is the type of movement that my generation was much more interested in. What was going on in the English-speaking world, all the subcultures from Europe and from the States, rather than the Latin American. My parents were left-wingers, communists. Most of their friends were exiled from Argentina, Chile. So, they very much carried that Latin American culture, and my generation really needed to break away from it. So we became much more interested in punk and pop culture.



From top to bottom  
Carlos Amoraless, *Peep Show*, 2019. Edition produced by Galería Albarrán Bourdais, courtesy of the artist. Photography by Peter Tjihuis  
*Interior vs. Exterior* (Amoraless Project), 1996 – 2003, chromogenic color print. Rocío & Boris Hirmas Collection Photography by Sandor Lubbe

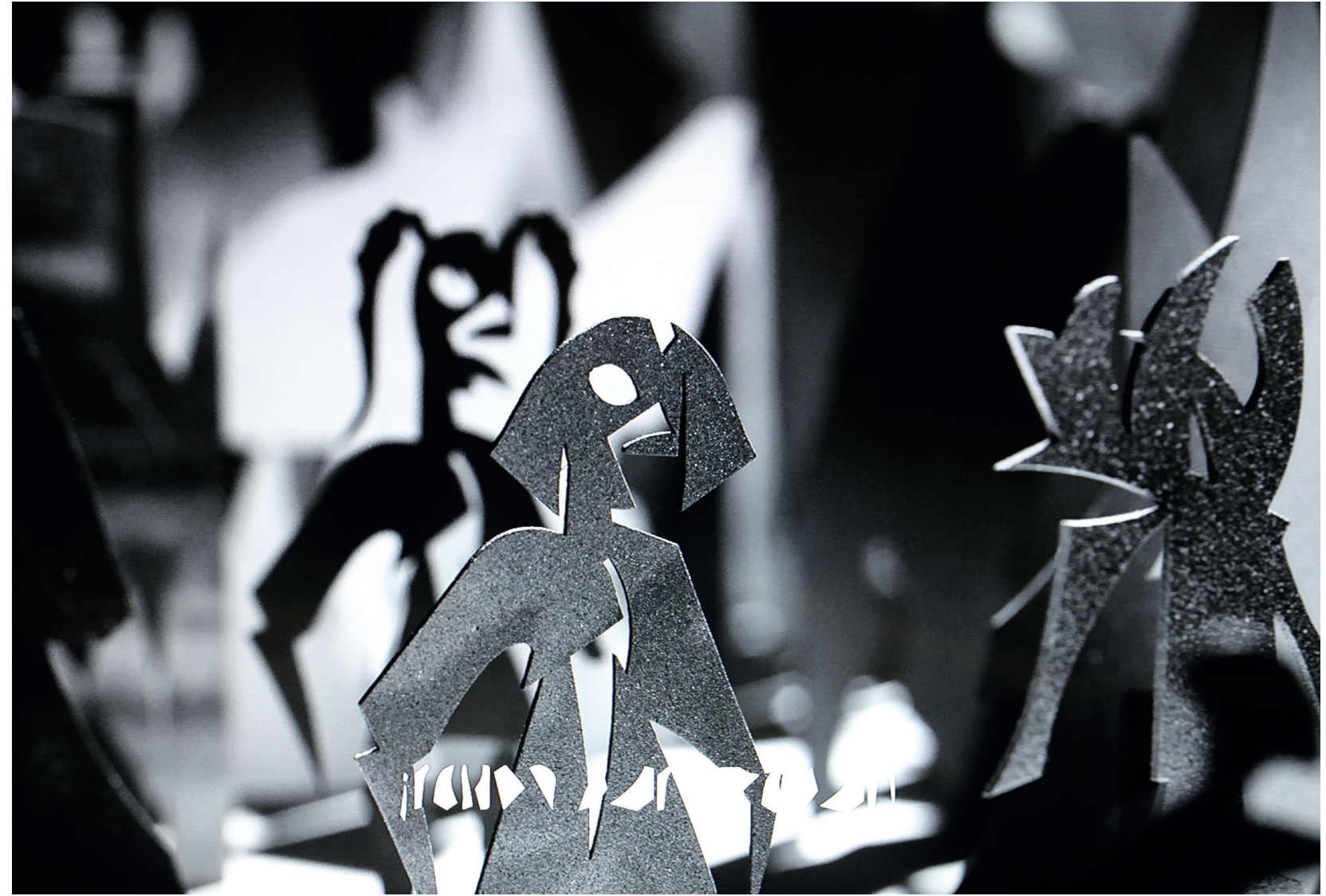
**“Drawing is very much there, just as writing. They are both movements of the hand. It's where it all starts and that's where things develop...”**





Carlos Amoraes, *We'll See How All Reverberates*, 2012.  
Thanks to the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York.  
Photography by Sandor Lubbe





Carlos Amorales, *Life in the Folds*, 2017,  
mixed media installation with video projection, black and white, sound, 50 min.  
Courtesy of the artist & Nils Stærk Gallery.  
Photography by Sandor Lubbe



**CS: Such as the Factory, Warhol's famous New York City studio, which inspired the title of your exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum?**

CA: Once, when I was 11, visiting a family friend, she gave me a book about Andy Warhol's Factory. Opening up that book somehow changed my life. I saw concerts and nice people, cool and weird and fucked up. This made an impact, especially, perhaps, because my father was much more political, serious. He put a lot of importance on things that to me didn't make much sense, such as what kind of faction of the left-wing you are. To me, it was really relieving to see Warhol's banality, which is also, in a way, pathetic and sad, but at the same time funny and glamorous. It felt new.

**CS: It felt like liberation?**

CA: It was to me. Also, my generation suffered from something very stupid. Concerts were prohibited in Mexico in the '80s because during a Queen concert, people had used marijuana, and the authorities forbade rock concerts for a decade. So, as teenagers, we grew up without them, with the exception of maybe a few Mexican bands – something very small. Of course, it affected our musical taste, but it also created a huge fantasy around them. I remember stealing magazines and looking at them and finding small details about the names of the bands, their dress sense, what they represented. It was a very exciting world to imagine. When I came to Europe and I had a chance to see all these concerts, reality was really colorless compared to what I had fantasized, of course. Imagination is always more powerful.

**CS: You include your family in your work. Both your sons play parts in your film *El no me mires* from 2015.**

CA: Deep down, all my projects come from very personal situations, so I work with friends, people I love, family. The moths have to do with the death of my grandmother. I made another piece after I had separated from the mother of my children. My new girlfriend is in another film. The project around wrestling comes from the troubles with my father, and my exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum could have been curated entirely from an autobiographical point of view, but that might not be interesting for other people. In a way, making art is a way to disguise these personal issues, to make them general and interesting for others. To make doors open to others to approach them. So, when people see these two kids, they might not think, "these are the two kids of the artist," but they might think about their own sons, or about being a son. Otherwise, it only becomes a narcissistic thing to do. On the other hand, how can you tell a story if you're not deeply concerned? From your own point of view, from what you've been living, your traumas, your desires. It's always a fragile balance.

**CS: The question of autobiography often becomes central in explanations of women's work, but less so, and differently, when a man is the artist.**

CA: So, as a man, you're supposed to make a big statement or something? It is interesting because when I was at the Rijksakademie in the mid-1990s, most men were doing scale-models and women were doing self-portraits with make-up, and it was almost as if, for me, the mask and the self were a female thing to do, whereas the male thing was

thinking about society in general. I did, then, actually think, "Ah, perhaps my work, in a way, is more connected with a female thing." Also, I had the great Joan Jonas, the pioneer of performance and video art, as a teacher. She became really important to me, and it is with her that I would have this kind of reflection. Being a foreigner also played a role in that, most surely. You are forced, somehow, to think about who you are, how you do things. It becomes much more of a personal research. Then, making work becomes less about self-affirmation than about showing your vulnerability. I think you're right in that. The very red lips of the mask are an indication.

**CS: Paradoxically enough though, studies have shown that in order to be seen as a great genius, a male artist does need to show female characteristics such as vulnerability.**

CA: At that point at the Rijksakademie, I could see very clearly this distinction, and it is much later that I read an interview with Mike Kelley in which he was talking about having been inspired by feminist artists and thinkers much more than by the minimalists. And Mike Kelley was very important for my generation. I suddenly discovered an artist whose work deals with subculture, with the vernacular, with the lowest of pop culture, such as wrestling. So I could feed myself a lot with that. I even did a video, which is not in the exhibition, in which I wear the mask and a wig. I rediscovered it two years ago. It was something I had filmed and thought I would never show. It's funny how all things connect.

Carlos Amoraless – *The Factory* is on display at the Stedelijk Museum, exhibition until May 17th 2020.

[www.stedelijk.nl](http://www.stedelijk.nl)



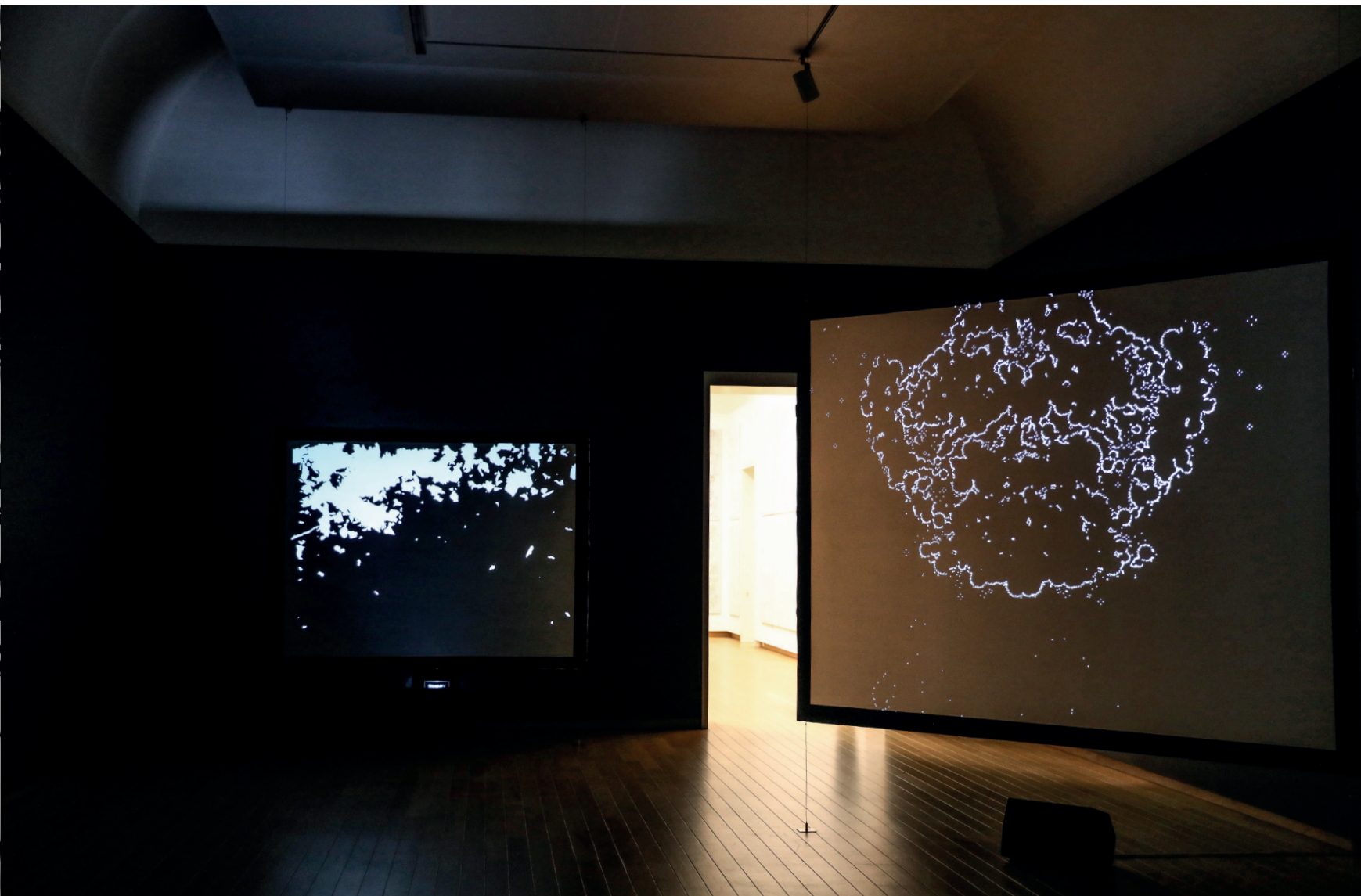
Room recording of Carlos Amoraless, *Aprende a joderse* (Learn to Fuck Yourself) 2019. Thanks to the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York; and *Dark Mirror*, 2008. Vanhonsbrouck collection. Photo: Peter Tjihuis

“Suddenly, it was possible to start building a new personal history. But then of course it is a very ironical process because it's a non-personal personal history in the end.”





Carlos Amorales, *Black Cloud*, 2007 (installation).  
Collection Diane and Bruce Halle.  
Photography by Sandor Lubbe



Carlos Amorales, *Psicofonías*, 2008,  
three-channel video, black and white and color, sound 3 min,  
courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto Mexico City / New York.  
Photography by Sandor Lubbe