View of Oscar Murillo, Trades Hall & Institute, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, 2019
Image © Oscar Murillo 2020. Courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and David Zwirner. Photo by Matthew Hollow.

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INTERVIEW WITH OSCAR MURILLO

For some years now, Oscar Murillo has been making work in aeroplanes. Out of necessity as much as desire, the Colombia-born artist now calls many places home. He has recently shown in New York, Shanghai, Cambridge, Baku, Venice, Ramallah, Gwangju, and Sydney – a non-exhaustive list. The critic Viktor Wang has dubbed Murillo's 'expanded practice', which utilises these ad-hoc studio spaces, 'flight mode'.

How to describe Murillo's work in 2020? He is so prolific that I saw three discrete, overlapping shows of his works within a single summer. The artist, who exploded into the art world in 2013, is in a fecund phase. Though Murillo was initially synonymous with loud and expressionistic oil pantings, his work today spans mediums — video, drawing, installation, sculpture — and is united more by its themes than by any unified aesthetic.

I first met Murillo at the top of David Zwirner gallery in London on a Monday morning in June 2019. He had just started installing his show, *MANIFESTATION* (2019), that would open that Friday evening. He refused coffee, professing that he was pumped on the adrenaline. We sat on couches in front of a Luc Tuymans painting – *THREE PERCENT* (2017), a ghostly bluish close-up of a face in profile – that he would reference several times. Later, as we walked out, he gave brisk instructions to the crew who were installing his paintings and constructing a pavilion for an opening night performance. In the fall, we spoke again — I in New York, he in Colorado — a week before he became one of the joint winners of the 2019 Turner Prize. We spoke one last time in April during the COVID-19 pandemic, while we were both hunkered down for the foreseeable future in New York and Colombia, and revisited some of the newly unstable assumptions of our previous interviews and of the art world at large.

View of Oscar Murillo's Surge (Social Cataracts) at Turner Prize 2019, Turner Contemporary, Margate
Image © Oscar Murillo 2020. Courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, David Zwirner, and Turner Contemporary. Photo by David Levene.

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Murillo is thirty-four, still young for practically a household name. He graduated from the Royal College of Art with an MA in 2012 at age twenty-six, and his paintings commanded six figures by 2013, the same year he was part of a major group show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. These works used vivid oil paints on sprawling, unfinished, patchworked canvases, and some were scrawled with wry buzzwords like 'yoga', 'chorizo' and 'coconut water'. But being something of a trickster, he followed up his buzzy painting debut with the exhibition *A MERCANTILE NOVEL* (2014), turning New York's David Zwirner gallery into a working chocolate factory, staffed by Colombian friends from home. (Murillo's hometown of La Paila is the site of the massive Colombina chocolate factory, which has employed four generations of his family.) Pointedly, nothing was for sale.

He also has a flair for the dramatic gesture. For a residency later that same year at the Rio de Janeiro mansion of collector Frances Reynolds, he went undercover as a member of the cleaning staff right up until the closing gala, when he raged against Reynolds and his rich friends in a polemical speech. When he painted, as he did for the 2015 show *THE FOREVER NOW: CONTEMPORARY PAINTING IN AN ATEMPORAL WORLD* at the MoMA, he casually tossed his canvases on the floor. En route to Australia for the Sydney Biennale in 2016 he flushed his British passport down an airplane toilet, because he wanted to 'reboot' his life journey, the way his father had when he emigrated to London. (He was detained on arrival, deported to Singapore, and went back to Colombia for a while.)

Murillo's lifelong preoccupations — migration, trade, capital, family, settlement — mean that his work veritably vibrates with globalisation-anxiety. But by the last time we spoke, the pandemic had disrupted both the notion of a 'frequent flyer' and the hyperglobalised art world in general. Assembled when hardly anyone was in 'flight mode', this conversation can be considered, as Murillo describes his own shows, as a 'frozen moment'.

Oscar Murillo, Manifestation, 2019
Image © Oscar Murillo. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.

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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Are you still making art during quarantine?

A OSCAR MURILLO — No, I'm not making art. I'm back in La Paila, my hometown. I was working here for maybe a week earlier this year, initially with the intention of making more work, and then national lockdown measures kicked in, so making art didn't seem important anymore. I found myself in a situation where it's no longer about thinking or conceptualising; one has to act. It's no longer about a proposition in a museum show or a gallery exhibition. So I collectivised with my friends and teamed up with the municipality. We were given permission to deliver food and my studio space became a kind of food distribution center. So what we keep there is lentils, protein, canned tuna, hygiene essentials, and we're just giving them away. In Colombia the welfare state is almost nonexistent. So right now it's very privileged to say there is no distinction between art and life.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Who are you quarantining with?

A OSCAR MURILLO — I'm with my parents. My kids are in London. It's the longest stint I've spent here since my childhood, before I moved to London when I was ten.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — In the past, you've talked about constant transnational travel as part of your practice, where the aeroplane itself is a kind of studio at a remove. There's also the huge number of countries where you have both made and exhibited your work, from Azerbaijan to Australia, over the past decade or so. Do you feel like a sea change is afoot?

A OSCAR MURILLO — My life has been about movement for a long time. I spend a lot of time in transitional spaces, like hotels and aeroplanes. In a way, that life is no longer. It's completely at a standstill. Even my previous times in La Paila were very provisional, for a week at a time or a month at most, for the holidays. I've been preparing for a shift — which I did not see happening this quickly! — but I'd begun preparing myself to spend more time here in La Paila, and bought some studio space. I obviously never assumed that it would be in this context, but I'm very excited to embrace the uncertainty. It almost takes me back to when I was a young artist in art school, making work without an audience. I didn't know what was going to happen.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — When did you begin making art?

A OSCAR MURILLO — When I was born. I'm not joking. In my village. I would say I have a relationship to a certain place, to nature. I'm not idolising the nation or my identity. I grew up in the context of my village— but it could obviously have been anywhere. If anything, I want to eradicate those ideas of difference which bring about hierarchies.

View of Oscar Murillo, A Mercantile Novel, David Zwirner, New York, 2014
Image © Oscar Murillo. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Photo by Scott Rudd.

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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Many of the black canvases that constitute your ongoing series *INSTITUTE FOR RECONCILIATION* (2017–) are displayed on the floor, as in your recent solo show *VIOLENT AMNESIA* at Kettle's Yard (2019). These canvases, which are coated with black oil paint, have also appeared like flags, like at the Venice Biennale in 2015, draped at the entrance to the central pavilion, as if for a funeral. Are they signals of grief, mourning?

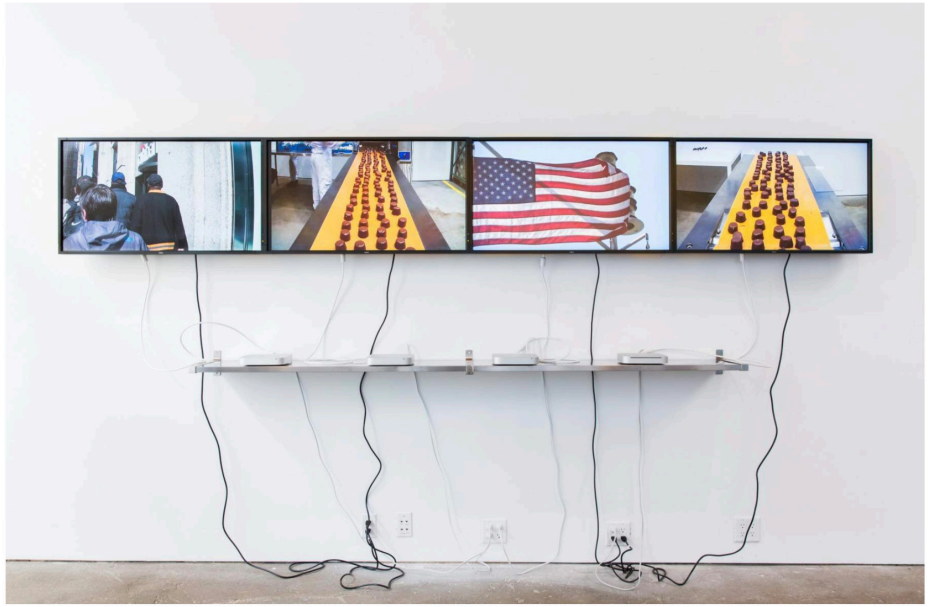
A OSCAR MURILLO — In these works, black became a kind of universe and a constellation unto itself. But I was already experimenting with the technique of applying paint onto canvas when I was at school, because I was attracted to the density. I saw density as the ultimate kind of pull. So, more than the colour, I have been working on the technique for years. I discovered it in school, through experimentation. I wanted to create intensity, a kind of void with this applied, superficial endeavour. I've always used the same pigment, an ivory black; I wanted the surface to be very material, it wasn't about a painterly illusion or about a dimensional plane. I'd say more than anything the series is definitely 'about' painting. I was thinking of Jannis Kounellis, who said that the bourgeoisie paint to create a dimensional plane of form and shadow to give you an illusion of space, whereas he, as an Arte Povera artist, used paint in his practice more as a factual thing, almost as a material and physical tool. I'm also alluding to Richard Serra, in his thick applications of oil stick. I work with paint in the same way. It's like you can pick up the paint from the canvas. The visible brushstrokes become a void in the context of each installation.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — *INSTITUTE FOR RECONCILIATION* was a kind of leitmotif through the Kettle's Yard show, where the black canvases were displayed in the two main galleries, but also in St Peter's Church, upstairs in the historic Kettle's Yard house, and outside. Do you feel a sense of sequence, in the way that one show leads to another?

A OSCAR MURILLO — I don't really think of shows as individual projects. The way I work is much more porous. Each show is a stop, you might say, in an ongoing essay. They are effectively a frozen moment, like putting a pen down and revealing what you've written to the public. With *INSTITUTE OF RECONCILIATION* I always use the same materials, linen and oil paint. The works change according to the location, but as the site changes, everything about the work changes too. This comparison might sound a little flippant, but if you're a painter, if you show paintings in one place or another the paintings themselves will change.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — The show was named after *VIOLENT AMNESIA* (2019), a large work of stitched-together canvases hung on steel rods, imprinted with an upside-down world map and birds. I read it took you three years to make.

A OSCAR MURILLO — The stitched canvases do take me a while. Quilting, stitching, bringing one material in with the next. I find materials mainly through travel: they jump out at me and I collect them. Over time they enter the lexicon of the studio – like an advert for condensed milk, 'Healthy Boy', that appears in the work, which I found in Thailand. These fragments get silk-screened and oil painted and manipulated. The title alludes to the loss of memory – both as a position from which to make things and as a metaphor.



View of Oscar Murillo, A Mercantile Novel, David Zwirner, New York, 2014
Image © Oscar Murillo. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Photo by Scott Rudd.

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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you think forgetting the history of labour is a privilege?

A OSCAR MURILLO — Maybe it is. Maybe that's where all hypocrisy is born. Painting has many connotations, including turmoil, unrest, and disorderly geographical terrain. The show opened with a John Donne poem, 'No man is an island'. I was thinking about Okwui Enwezor, who died in March last year. You have a poet from the sixteenth century that speaks to us, and I feel that Okwui will forever be a strong voice in culture. So I wanted to divert the vortex of the moment and kind of marry this poem and someone who is already, to me, a historical figure.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — In St Peter's Church, the black flags are shown alongside five papier-mâché 'Mateo' figurines, inspired by Colombian effigies of politicians or public figures, typically made for New Year's Eve. Are you drawn to sacred spaces?

A OSCAR MURILLO — I grew up as a Catholic. Until we moved to London in 1996, and that kind of died. If anything it's family I'm drawn to within my work – my dad's story. *MY NAME IS BELISARIO* (2016) is an audio piece that describes his journey from La Paila to North London. It's a kind of public service announcement. I wanted his story to be recorded. My dad and I did this residency together in Texas in 2015, and I said: Listen, you talk about your life story so much, why don't you just write it? We can incorporate it into something and then share it.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You did a residency with your dad?

A OSCAR MURILLO — Well, it was a trip to Artpace San Antonio. It was like going on holiday with my parents. Nothing profound, just family spending time together. And at a residency you need something to do, so we did that. I also brought my uncle with me to Anyang in Korea a triennial in South Korea, the 5th Anyang Public Art Project, 2016]. Why not? It's all about relationships.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You kind of exploded onto the scene in 2013, when your paintings rapidly appreciated on the market. What was that like?

A OSCAR MURILLO — I mean, it can be painful. Obviously, the first time you're born in some kind of public space people don't really know you. There's this constructed idea of you. It's like a form of initiation in which people feel entitled to say things and you simply have to run with it.

View of Oscar Murillo, Violent Amnesia, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2019
Image © Oscar Murillo. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner. Photo by Matthew Hollow

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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — When you have to engage in the art market personally, going to fairs and so on, do you feel resistant?

A OSCAR MURILLO — I think that my engagement with the art market has shifted and changed dramatically. Initially there was much more curiosity as to how that part of the industry worked. So going to art fairs was an extension of that curiosity. That changed several years ago; now it's something that simply exists in parallel. Of course it's important, it will always be important, but I think it's not really a big deal. It's part of being an artist to have relationships with entities like galleries, part of the business side of things. It's about having some understanding, more than an animosity. In a way it has nothing to do with the rest of what one does as an artist: in the studio, travelling, museum shows.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Have you had many jobs outside the art world?

A OSCAR MURILLO — Of course. I used to work as a teaching assistant at a secondary school in East London. I also worked as a cleaner when I was in art school, and in construction in Colombia as a kid. I think being a kid on building sites was very much about simply being attracted to those environments – the smell of concrete, and so on. It wasn't necessary considered work per se. It was part of being a restless child… which is still the case.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — What did the shift to London mean – moving from La Paila in 1996?

A OSCAR MURILLO — It was important. I think that I was given this very specific idea that making art was a possibility. Drawing especially became important. And that created a desire to learn more about it, to be connected to it, to channel my energy toward it. To be able to root the restlessness and give it a name – a symbolic name – which is art.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you try and teach your kids about art?

A OSCAR MURILLO — No, I don't want to demand anything of them. I want them to find it on their own. I think that's too bourgeois, you know, this idea of instruction… if they're really interested in it, they'll find a way.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — There is a certain way that you make labour visible in your work. I'm thinking of your residency in Rio de Janeiro in 2015 at the collector Francis Reynolds's house, where you staged a kind of protest by working alongside the service and cleaning staff instead of making art.

A OSCAR MURILLO — Yes, that was a manifestation of my work at the time. I think I was invited and given a space there for the wrong reasons. I don't think that I would ever be invited into that kind of situation again. They were thinking about sensation, and they saw this character that was being sensationalised at the time. I said yes, just like any other invitation. It's almost like the body is responding. I say yes to things. So far, it's been very important. I like getting into situations.

View of Oscar Murillo's Collective Conscience at Turner Prize 2019, Turner Contemporary, Margate, 2019

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Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Like when you flushed your British passport down an airplane toilet?

A OSCAR MURILLO — I had to go back to South America and get a new visa. It took several days. I don't have a British passport anymore.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Does it affect your mind space, the act of travelling so much?

A OSCAR MURILLO — Travelling has been a tool for accumulating knowledge. It's work. I am always thinking — when travelling, on planes, anywhere — is this important? In sport, you constantly have to be in shape, it's not like you can take a year out and be like, 'Oh, yeah, I'm going to go back into it in a year, two years from now.' I think it's this marathon of just constant discipline. Showing and thinking and travelling and looking and digesting is all part of that process.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You mean for the past five, six years, you've been in this marathon?

A OSCAR MURILLO — Of course, of course. Longer even, maybe nine or ten years.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — And you've never experienced something like creative block or a stress fracture from constant output?

A OSCAR MURILLO — No, because there are kinds of situations that you set up and put in place to make sure that doesn't happen. Formal things like making paintings – it's not even about painting itself, but a release of energy, a physical kind of exercise. Like making drawings on the plane. A way to be continuously engaged. All these different infrastructures allow continuity of thought, of process.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you think this lifestyle, productive as it has been, can be sustained in an era of climate collapse?

A OSCAR MURILLO — To be honest with you, I have to hold my hands up and say I don't know. I'm not trying to eschew the question, but I think in a way, sadly, the awareness of climate collapse has not halted or shifted my ideas. Because even the idea of climate change is such a privileged discourse already. It's the West that can afford to say that this is not the right approach. For example, in the last couple of years, you have someone like Greta Thunberg, a white privileged kid who becomes the face of climate protest. I'm not saying that I'm not in a privileged position. But it has a lot to do with class.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You incorporate so much economic history in your works. Does your interest come from talking to workers, activists, economists, or something else?

A OSCAR MURILLO — It comes innately, from asking how and why things happen, why our world is the way it is. For me, these questions are inherently economic. It's almost like I want to lift up the floor.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Does this relate to your 'floor painting', where you place folded, unstretched canvases onto the floor, rather than, say, a wall – as you did at MoMA New York in 2015?

A OSCAR MURILLO — When I choose to just simply show paintings on the floor, I'm thinking about the floor as a disruption. I'm always considering the architecture of an exhibition space: the floor, the ceiling, everything. It's about disrupting the formality of a space.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — The idea of the 'mercantile novel' appears throughout your work – in the title of your 2014 exhibition at David Zwirner, which recreated a La Paila chocolate factory, and pencilled onto photos and drawings of Sheki, a factory town in Azerbaijan, in the series *ORGANISMS FROM ALL COUNTRIES UNITE* (2016). Are you examining in the relationship between the novel and commerce?

A OSCAR MURILLO — I see the novel as a mirror, a social mirror that helps to understand certain parts of society, the underclass, and the discrimination faced in a different part of the world. So literature was another way to understand the concerns my work. But I'm also playing with meaning. In its nineteenth century form, the word 'novel' routes back to the Industrial Revolution, which I use as a kind of starting point to talk about trade relations. I'm interested in seismic shifts. In the industrial era, machines began to replace bodies in factories. Then we could jump to the 1980s and the UK miners' strike, for example, and to the shift that Artificial Intelligence is going to create — these shifts are not new. Responding to that, a lot of my drawings have this kind of automatic nature. Downstairs at David Zwirner, I'm showing a video of a huge drawing I scanned, which started as an automatic exercise, writing the letter 'A' over and over again. It's a kind of download. For the performance alongside this automatic drawing video, I have this religious song that I'm going to sing, it starts: '*Alabadé*', Praise Him.

I'm working class. It's not about money, it's about a kind of character. Last year, I was accosted by some protesters, who demanded to know how much I earned in a year, like they were trying to expose some kind of moral – look at this young artist who works with a very corporate gallery. I didn't really have a problem with that question being asked, but the art world has never been good at having a conversation about class. It can talk about race, gender, conflicts in different parts of the world, but never class. Ultimately, whether you're Black, Chinese, whatever, the reality is that 90 per cent of the art world comes from some kind of elite position. And if they don't, they completely eradicate race from the picture.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Although you work in many different media, including performance, you continue to paint. What is it about the medium that keeps you returning?

A OSCAR MURILLO — I think painting is important, personally for me but also as a vessel of communication and infiltrating, certainly. It addresses cultural beliefs that are still so rooted and it's still very entrenched. And I think of where my paintings end up. Maybe, like Luc Tuymans's, in beautiful bourgeois houses somewhere in Europe or the US. So I think of my work in the context of a vessel to infiltrate certain spaces. It's almost to say that there's no point throwing stones from the outside if you can be inside and have that communication and dialogue that starts in those spaces.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — How much does your biography inform your work?

A OSCAR MURILLO — You could use the context in which any artist was born to understand their work. Take Tuymans: he has a very specific European identity and history, in relation to the Second World War and also Belgium, and his work is part of those histories. I too grew up in a context that allowed me to do the things that I do in a very specific way. So yes of course it's biographical – but I would say it's not Biographical with a capital 'B'. To say 'I'm bringing in my life story at every juncture' – that's something else. But one thing that is clear to me is that my family and my friends, and everybody that I connect with, are human resources for my work.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — For *FREQUENCIES* (2014-present), a collaboration with the political scientist Clara Dublanc, you solicited canvases from schoolchildren in Azerbaijan and Singapore to then incorporate in your work.

A OSCAR MURILLO — It's for children between ten and sixteen. Human beings at that age are not fully dogmatised. In the process of becoming assimilated into whatever society it is in which they are growing up they have unique viewpoints. I see them as recording devices. I'm interested in getting their feedback through drawing and through longevity. It's very constant and systematic, because a child is at school for five to six hours a day.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Are the children compensated for their work, so to speak?

A OSCAR MURILLO — When you put it in those terms, you are already cutting out the creative process – as if it's a job, or these children are 'working' for me, and that there is no philosophical proposition. First of all, it's a collaboration. Second, it's not a factory context and what these kids are doing is not manual labour. It's closer to an exchange or social experiment. Of course there is also a more capitalist angle that you're referring to: labour and work. If and when this work enters a system of distribution through sale — which is not yet the case, because the project has not gone that far — compensation would be in the context of a charitable body. A foundation, rather than an individual. That's important.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Last fall, you and three other artists – Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Helen Cammock, and Tai Shani – made a historic decision to accept the Turner Prize as a collective, calling in a joint statement for solidarity in a time of political divisions. Is the Turner Prize obsolete?

A OSCAR MURILLO — I don't really care. For us, it was very punctual to the context in which we were nominated. Next year, it might not make sense for those four artists. Maybe they won't think in the same way that we did. We just felt like it went against our principles as artists if we were to pit ourselves against each other. To which you might say, why didn't you withdraw? But we didn't even know we were in consideration. If you think about it, the Turner Prize and its success is really not about the prize itself. The success of the prize for the last thirty-four years is that it prides itself on controversy; it's a bit of a marketing machine, the way the Tate runs it. Like, why do you have to go on TV to accept it? To its credit, it has a very respected jury, but the structure of the prize is very speculative. Anyway, if you look at its history over the last five to ten years, it's a little bit of a dead prize.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — One of the works you included in your Kettle's Yard show is by Alfred Wallis, a self-taught painter and fisherman from Cornwall. The painting, *FRENCH LUGSAIL FISHING BOAT* (undated), is small, representational, site-specific. What made you want to include it in a show of what is almost entirely your own new work?

A OSCAR MURILLO — I think in that painting I see a lot of hope. It's almost like using a footnote in a piece of writing. His painting becomes a footnote. It's about his relationship to the sea and his relationship to a specific part of the world, and to time. It's also in conversation with Okwui Enwezor and John Donne. There are always different points of reference that can steer the conversation in a certain direction. In my way, it's a kind of homage.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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