JUAN ANTONIO OLIVARES

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ARTIST JUAN ANTONIO OLIVARES PURSUES THE TIES THAT BIND US

KAYLEE WARREN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM JESS LAIRD

Multidisciplinary artist Juan Antonio Olivares creates work that doesn't simply ask to be viewed, but also draws viewers in closer to experience a reflection of themselves. Pulling from a wide range of mediums, from video and sound sculpture to performance and drawing, Olivares's practice seeks to remind us how, as individuals, we are much more connected to one another than we are separated.

Olivares aims to begin every work from a place of vulnerability. "So much of our lives are willingly put on display at this point," says the New York-based artist. "That can mean a turn inwards." This inward turn is demonstrated in *Molé culas*, his 2017 3-D animated film, exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2018, wherein a broken teddy bear narrates the story of the artist's move to New York and a painful family loss. Olivares sensitively marries the autobiographical with the fictional, extending this fusion to the surreal in his 2019 exhibition "Naufragios," which contained a 24-piece sound installation composed of seashells emitting overlapping audio of sounds such as Stephen Hawking speaking on the potential of extraterrestrial life and the mesmerizing croons of Nina Simone.

Accompanying the installation is a collection of hyper-realistic graphite drawings of sperm and egg cells, reminiscent of textbook scientific illustrations. "I have been drawing from Scanning Electron Microscopic images because these are the most accurate depictions of objects invisible to the naked eye," says Olivares. "These scans visualize things that are somewhat commonplace in completely unfamiliar detail." This paradox of the seemingly strange producing a sense of familiarity is encompassed in Olivares's precise yet visionary practice. Currently, Olivares is in the process of making two new animations while anticipating two upcoming solo shows, at Galerie Maria Bernheim in Zurich and ChertLüdde in Berlin, both planned for 2021.

The New York Times

NEW YORK TIMES
JULY 2020

Four Artists on the Future of Video Art

Hito Steyerl, Rachel Rose, Isaac Julien and Lynn Hershman Leeson talk about how they've been spending quarantine and just where, in this era of never-ending screen time, their work should live.

By Andrew Russeth July 22, 2020

Clockwise from top left: a still from Hito Steyerl's "Liquidity Inc." (2014); a digital print of Isaac Julien's "Lessons of the Hour (Lessons of the Hour)" (2019); a still from Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Lorna" (1979-84); a still from Rachel Rose's "Lake Valley" (2016).Clockwise from top left: courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin; © Isaac Julien, courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York; © Lynn Hershman Leeson, courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, N.Y.C.; courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise New

When coronavirus shuttered just about every gallery in the United States and confined many to their homes, museum curators and dealers had to improvise. Overnight, the only way they could show art was digitally. In some cases, this meant posting photos of paintings or using cameras to offer 360-degree virtual tours of exhibitions — to varying degrees of success. But then there were the works that were *designed* to be viewed on a screen, which have enjoyed a sort of a renaissance.

On many Friday nights since April, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York has streamed video art by Alex Da Corte, Juan Antonio Olivares and Adelita Husni-Bey, to name a few. Gagosian Gallery staged web shows with moving-image work by artists including Ed Ruscha and Douglas Gordon, Metro Pictures hosted a digital film festival over more than a dozen weekends, and the artist Nina Chanel Abney curated a two-week run of pieces by Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Solange Knowles and others at Brooklyn's We Buy Gold. Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art launched an online exhibition series with "Lake Valley," a 2016 cartoon-collage animation by Rachel Rose that follows a rabbitlike animal as it explores an enchanted world, seeking community. "Two-dimensional work or sculpture all comes out a bit flat on social media," says the filmmaker Isaac Julien. "I'm not saying people can't sell works. They do, in fact. But I think the moving image — it becomes its own form. It's not really compromised."

A WEEK DEVOTED TO ART

ARTnews Est. 1902

ARTNEWS
DECEMBER 2018

The Year in Screens—With 3D Teddy Bears, Absconded Identities, Violent Comedy, and More

Tala Madani, *The Audience* (still), 2018, single-channel animation (color, sound), 16 minutes, 8 seconds.

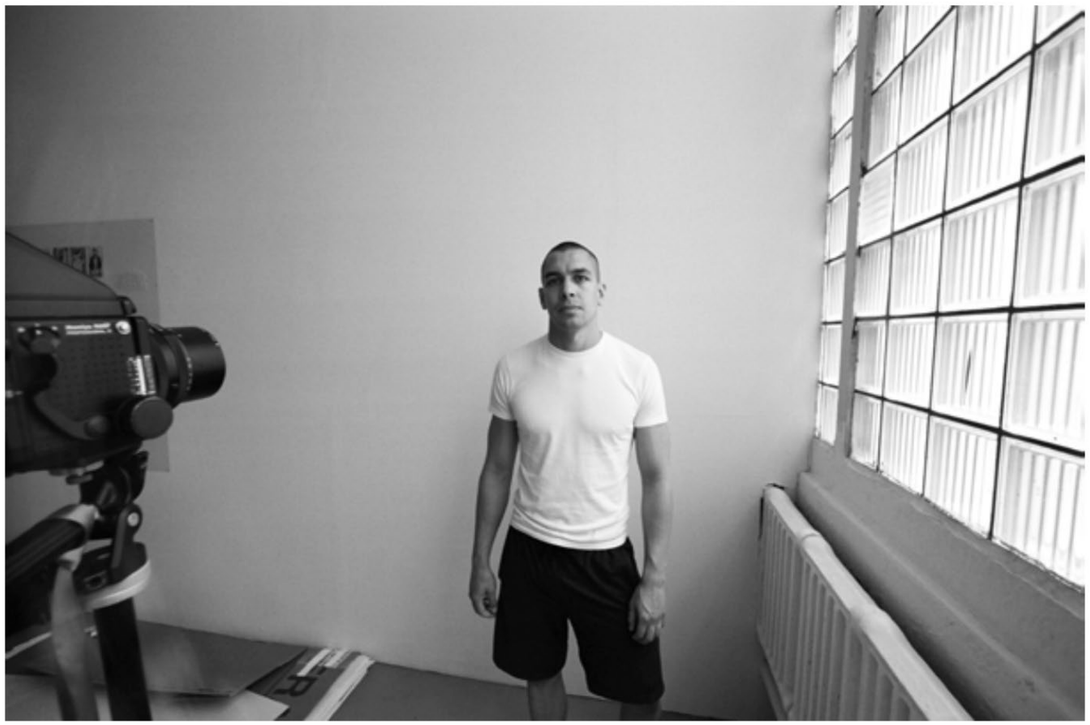
©TALA MADANI/COURTESY 303 GALLERY, NEW YORK

This year marked the 50th anniversary of the release of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which proposed countless new possibilities for filmmaking. In her 1969 essay "Bodies in Space: Film as 'Carnal Knowledge,' " Annette Michelson, who died this year at 95, singled out one of the movie's many innovations as paramount: the famous cut between a shot of a bone flung up in the air by a prehistoric primate and the image of a spaceship traveled from Paris to the U.S., but at least we got a taste of it with this one-night event for which the French artist screened a few of her videos. Included among them was *Saturday* (2017), a 20-minute showstopper that focuses on various forms of rest and relaxation, from praying at church to watching the news. It also ponders the ways that screens and digital images offer some sick sense of comfort—and with some of the most stunning uses of 3D in recent memory.

5. **Juan Antonio Olivares at Whitney Museum:** In a lovely one-work exhibition, Juan Antonio Olivares showed his 2017 video *Moléculas*, which features a 3D animation of a teddy bear that seems to mull over its own existence, in a melancholy exploration of how online representations of people can be haunted by a sense of disembodied loss. I was disappointed this work wasn't talked about more.

Suspiria (still), 2018, 152 minutes.

COURTESY AMAZON STUDIOS



OOO *For your solo debut at the Whitney Museum of American Art you bathed everything in gray — the walls, the carpet, the curtain; even the sound feels gray, a relenting rain beating against the piece's non-narrative audio and permeating our own space. It's as if you're animating the 4-D animation software — the medium you made* Moléculas *in — into a fifth, sixth, seventh dimension, where we, as viewer, are immersed, and left unsure of what dimension we're actually in. (The modernist room? The icebergs? Space and the sun? A dream? Yours or ours?) The process seems to be less akin to the immersive experience of film and installations, of the contemporary canon, and to have more in common with Renaissance painting, where linear perspective was deployed to structure a multiplicity of stories and times within a single painting and single story, for the viewer to look upon. Why did you choose to work in Cinema 4D, 4-D animation software?*

JUAN ANTONIO OLIVARES

JAO "I didn't really, I was just in Dusseldorf studying with Christopher Williams, who, ha, doesn't use Cinema 4D, and just playing around with it on my own, and saw that it really freed you up to compose meticulous images, both real and imagined, and in multiple dimensions. In the digital space of animation, at least in the way that I worked with it, you start from nothing: it's an empty space, and then you add the elements you want to begin to simulate. It's a type of freedom — anything is possible in that space. It also creates a high level of control and intentionality, which is inherently different from shot or captured video.

It's similar to the way I chose the Teddy Bear to deliver the narrative as it seemed like a universal symbol of empathy and I wanted to encourage viewers to project themselves into this scenario, which plays in endless loop. I didn't intend the piece to be a conversation with my father, I was actually writing my own script as a teddy bear when I saw my father, and I — his life was so different than mine, leaving Peru, the revolution — I wanted to know if he thought the world was maybe better for realities, and at a certain point the conversation reached a place I didn't expect and I asked him if I could record the conversation; he agreed, and I placed my phone between us to record. It was about three hours long. A few weeks later, as I was toiling on the hair of the teddy bear, it struck me that the conversation could become the voice of the teddy bear. I like to work off of impulses — it helps me reach a place beyond my control in the work.

Once I was more embedded in the fiber of the story, I began to make editing decisions that I thought would open up the material, I worked hard to distance myself from the material, which two years of working in 4D Cinema achieved — and yes, I believe in the energy of sites. I didn't really want the work to be about a conversation I had with my father. This is the second time that *Moléculas* has been shown in New York, and each installation of it adapts to the architecture and context of the space in which it is being exhibited. Every space has a feeling, a character, a history, and I try to work with it rather than obscure it or impose an idea onto it.

Does that answer your question? About medium? It's funny, that's what Christopher said to me too, about my work, medium being more like a Renaissance painting than a film."

BOMB

BOMB MAGAZINE
MAY 2018

BOMB

3D Teddy Bear: Juan Antonio Olivares Interviewed by Elizaveta Shneyderman

An immersive video installation at the Whitney.

Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Thomas Mueller.

Like the stereoscopic effect of 3D images, Juan Antonio Olivares's constructions reach the eye for which they are intended and fuse into a single composite image. Veering into magical realism, Olivares's dream-like, animated tableaus sketch a world that feels more real than it does accurate. Over the course of a month, Juan and I parsed out the psychological acuity undergirding his work. We discussed 3D simulation as a vector for projection and translation, unwieldy intergenerational transmissions, autobiographical withholding, site-specificity, vulnerability, and reconciliation. Meanwhile, I'm still churning over a particularly potent quote from his recent video work, *Moléculas* (2017), currently on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art: "Sometimes I think I should go back and bring her somewhere else. / But I realize it's pointless. / There's no solution. Anything I do / is fiction / to clear my conscience / which is absurd / you shouldn't … / do things for …"

—Elizaveta Shneyderman

Elizaveta Shneyderman
Let's start by discussing *Moléculas*, a 3D-animated mesh of interpersonal loss, science-fictive vista, and the fruitful lineage of the digital grotesque. The work oscillates from storytelling through the careful deployment of labor and loss, to soliloquy, and back to the psychic superimpositions of its evocative protagonist: a black-and-white teddy bear ripe for viewer projection. Can you speak to its construction—the multidimensionality of 3D as a vector for projection and pluralism?

Juan Antonio Olivares
This is my first video where I use primarily 3-D simulations. It came from an interest in what felt like the medium's conduciveness to viewer's immersion and projection, as you say. It's a curious and somewhat absurdist aspect of humanity that we can relate to these animated fictional characters so easily. This is not something new, however; there are plenty of examples of folklore and fables that use a similar technique of developing fantastical characters that a broad audience can relate to.

ES
In general, I think contemporary art has a similar tendency to scoop up and recontextualize mythic subjects particularly *because* they are not easily subjugated to reality. I like your choice of the bear as our narrator because it feels intentionally linked to childhood. Can you speak to that choice?

JAO
Many of the scenes or the characters I make come to me as visions or hazes in my

head, and I follow them. The teddy bear chose me.

ES

Ambling in and out of the cinematic frame, the bear's self-reflexive confessional goes uninterrupted. Imagery of a psychoanalyst's office, the overflow of water, and even textural spacescape (the processing power of a graphics card unable to capture the overly real render comes to mind here) float atop uninterrupted utterances. As a result, the effect is a surrealist suspension—a sense that the altogether effect is in illustrating the intricacy of everything at once.

Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Thomas Mueller.

JAO

I love the stories of Jorge Luis Borges, Isabel Allende, Roberto Bolaño. There's an effortless profundity and an emotional charge to their stories that I admire. When I was first starting to work on this video, I was writing a script for the model of the teddy bear. A few months into the process of that, I saw my father, and we started to have a conversation about some parallels I saw in our life: I wanted to know if he thought the world was better when he was my age in comparison to now. At a certain point the conversation started reaching a place I didn't expect, and I asked him if I could record the conversation; he agreed, and I placed my phone between us to record. It was about three hours long. A few weeks later, as I was toiling on the hair of the teddy bear, it struck me that the conversation could become the voice of the teddy bear. I like to work off of impulses—it helps me reach a place beyond my control in the work.

ES

So the work is biographical—an archive of both a moment you shared with your father and a potent memory of his. The vulnerability of family becomes very public. What did it mean for you to immortalize this moment in particular, as a son and as an artist?

JAO

I worked hard to distance myself from the material. A long part of the two-year process of this video came from listening to the audio over and over again. Once I was more embedded in the fiber of the story, I began to make editing decisions that I thought would open up the material. I didn't really want the work to be about a conversation I had with my father (and for a while I did not acknowledge that it was his voice). I wanted anyone to be able to relate to this narration. As I mentioned earlier, it was a three-hour conversation, which I then edited down to ten minutes. I decided to cut my voice out of the text, and to remove any specific names, dates, or places to abstract this material more. The perspective of the video switches from first to third person at different points. Depersonalizing the material made it more relatable, I think.

ES

I think so too. It's not entirely impersonal, either. It's this unique feeling of bearing witness to someone's extreme vulnerability, but having no other option. You just listen.

JAO

One of the unexpected results of this work was how many people have come to me with their stories after seeing it. It can be intense—once a complete stranger found me and wanted to tell me about the loss of their mother. I think it's a manifestation of how this work tries to reach people at a universal level. I feel very humbled to hear their stories.

Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Thomas Mueller.

ES

Suspended in the lush aide-mémoire of the protagonist's psyche, the work is like a project of parsing out evidence that integration and disintegration work concurrently. Can you discuss reconciliation and how it is a manifestation of its namesake, *Moléculas*?

JAO

I like to think of art as a way of connecting to people, even beyond the present. This project was a catharsis in a way, and I wanted to share that experience, maybe even lead a path to it for the viewer.

ES

I think your work masters the reflexes of emotion, plucking at the heartstrings without trading off genuine feeling. Editing plays a huge part here. What was your strategy to ground the material?

JAO

Editing the narration, animated footage, music, and sound effects together is very important to me. At a certain point everything is floating around, and even though I have a plan of where I imagine things might go, I start experimenting with different sequences and transitions viscerally. I want the editing to come from my subconscious. I try to let the material speak for itself so that I can feel it as well.

ES

I get that sense in the editing—that although the oration/dictation is on a linear track, the images seem not to abide by the laws of physics. But it's the surrealism that makes it more real.

JAO

In the digital space of animation, at least in the way that I worked with it, you start from nothing: it's an empty space, and then you add the elements you want to begin to simulate. It's a type of freedom—anything is possible in that space. It also creates a high level of control and intentionality, which is inherently different from shot or captured video. Waiting on a scene's render time, I would let my mind wander and suddenly a light bulb shattering would appear in my head, for example, and then figuring out how to simulate that would excite me. Maybe it's these impulses, which come from a deeper, more visceral place, you're sensing.

Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Thomas Mueller.

ES

The work builds in melancholia. But in its final moments, the bear granulates into fuzzy particles as if to clear a viewer's conscience. I want to glean your vision of the ending. How do you consider it in relationship to the whole?

JAO

This work explored a kind of brutal reality. Not too long before I started working on it I read *The Last Messiah* by Peter Wessel Zapffe (this text is definitely one of the influences on *Kokomo Lost* [2015–16], my previous video). It's such a dark, nihilistic text. It really shocked me when I read it. It took me a while to shake off Zapffe's pessimism, but I found one of the angles of his perspective that I ultimately disagree with is that I don't disregard the power of human emotions and connections with each other. That is really the beauty of life, the substance of existence to me.

ES

Moving to your other work, including *Kokomo Lost.* There is a precision to your sculptural approach. Your subjects, usually by way eccentricity, rupture any quotidian possibilities. What I love about your work so much is that, rather than fetishize a nonlinear sequence, you successfully enumerate the structural qualities absorbed in daily life and the objects held within it. The construction of *Kokomo, Aside* (2014) and its site specificity resonates with this idea.

JAO

I believe in the energy of sites. This is the second time that *Moléculas* has been shown in New York, and each installation of it adapts to the architecture and context of the spaces in which it is being exhibited. Every space has a feeling, a character, a history, and I try to work with it rather than obscure it or impose an idea onto it.

Juan Antonio Olivares: Moléculas *is on view at the Whitney Museum of Art American in New York until June 10.*

Elizaveta Shneyderman is a writer and curator based in New York City. Her work has been published in Artforum*,* The Brooklyn Rail*,* RHIZOME*, and* SCREEN: Art and Media*.*

video

Read also:

Screen Interactions: Howardena Pindell's Video Drawings by Olivia Gauthier

Courtesy of the artist

Juan Antonio Olivares
"Moléculas"
Whitney Museum of American Art
02.03 – 10.06.2018

The conjoining of a crisply computer-animated, anthropomorphic teddy bear with an emotional family narrative in Juan Antonio Olivares' short film *Moléculas* (2017) brought to mind both of my favourite sequences from Pixar movies: the opening montage of *Up* (2009), in which an elderly widower's life story flashes before us; and the Proustian moment from *Ratatouille* (2007) in which the eponymous dish returns a restaurant critic to the halcyon days of his childhood with his mother. In Olivares's hands, this bear with a missing arm functions as a ventriloquist's dummy for his father's voice. To begin, we hear (or read the English subtitles of) his father recounting his first memory of his mother (Olivares's grandmother) finding him in a snowy copper mine in his native Puerto Rico. The snow was "crying out" to him; there will be more tears before we're done here.
Later, Olivares's father, having emigrated in the 1970s, hears the news of his mother's death over the phone from his brother; who tells him not to come, who says it's so hot in Puerto Rico that she has to be buried tonight, they can't wait any longer. He describes how he went to run a bath and suddenly felt a wave of guilt for having treated his mother so selfishly, a wave that he would feel every day for the rest of his life, and the bear's glassy blue eyes fill with tears and all the taps begin to overflow. It's a heartbreaking, soppy scene that might have come straight from the Pixar studio. But having used these sentimental tropes to draw us in, Olivares and his father take us into a more unexpected place. His father explains how it's too late for him to change the past and so he can only live better in the present; how the things we imagine are nothing more than fantasies; how everything is chemistry; how "nothing is created, nothing is destroyed, things only change"; and meanwhile the bear hangs upside-down in a darkened room, falls to pieces, grows to an incredible size. The animation plunges into the bear through its empty arm socket, then outside of it into the Milky Way, then floats us through unknown abstract landscapes. As the baroque, chopped-up synths of Arca's "Family Violence" take us up the crescendo, Olivares's father describes the universe as a constant flow of atoms and molecules – the "moléculas" of the title – reminding us of how such particles are perhaps its only constants, how the hydrogen atoms that make up our bodies have existed since the beginning of time. Reality is presented as a series of displacements: of families from their homelands; children from their loving mothers; digital renderings from the objects they depict; and atoms and molecules as they're thrown out across the constellations, moving through the cosmos becoming one thing and then another for all eternity. **Dean Kissick**

Moléculas, 2017, High-definition video, colour, sound, 10'

Juan Antonio Olivares, *Moléculas*, 2017. HD video still. Courtesy: the artist and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Juan Antonio Olivares, 'Moléculas'

Whitney Museum of American Art

2 March – 10 June

Juan Antonio Olivares chose a teddy to animate the words of his father speaking about the artist's deceased mother in his recent film *Moléculas* (2017) because it's relatable. As he puts it, it's 'an almost universal symbol of empathy.' The bear reclines on what looks like a Le Corbusier-style chaise longue as he discusses pain, separation, loss, grief, and other topics usually too 'PG' for such a cute and cuddly creature. The result is a captivating animation about the nature of life and death on this planet. Tears well in teddy's eyes as he picks up a phone receiver. In another scene, an empty bathroom floods with water as the tub overflows and the camera plunges underwater and hovers in silence. It's at once reminiscent of all-encompassing sadness counterbalanced by a childhood comfort agent come to life.

Whitney Museum of American Art

MENU

JUAN ANTONIO OLIVARES: MOLÉCULAS

JUAN ANTONIO OLIVARES: THERE IS NO END

By Jane Panetta, associate curator

Juan Antonio Olivares, still from *Moléculas*, 2017. High-definition video, color, sound, 10 min. Whitney Museum of American Art; purchase with funds from the Film, Video, and New Media Committee. Image courtesy the artist

For Juan Antonio Olivares, *Moléculas* (2017) is a work fundamentally about empathy. It raises questions about separation, loss, and the pain that ensues—and how this process situates us in a universal cycle of life and death. The narrative of this ten-minute video is, arguably, nothing new. It is the stuff of great literature and film but also of our lived experience: born to parents and families we come to know and love, we inevitably face unavoidable loss and death. As Olivares (b. 1988) has explained about the anguish apparent in the work (and the effect it has on the viewer), "That's part of our humanity, that's part of our experience on this earth, to encounter the sadness that results from losing people in our lives."[1]

But Olivares's arrival at this story line is unique, and thus what results is distinctly meaningful. The particular audio track that forms the structural heart of the work and provides its narrative arc is Olivares's father speaking in Spanish.[2] Captured unexpectedly when his father came to visit him in Düsseldorf, Germany, where he spent two years at the Kunstakademie, Olivares spontaneously recorded the conversation, which unfolded over several hours. It marked an important moment in their relationship, one that Olivares went on to memorialize—somewhat abstractly—through his video and by carefully editing the audio file. For the artist, this discussion became a vehicle through which to explore larger existential issues, rather than simply a father relaying a remembered experience to his child. With it, Olivares aims "to convey the universality of immigration or displacement"[3] and to create something more broadly relatable. Through the making of the work, Olivares recalls striving to "really open up the material, and make it something beyond the conversation that I had with my father."[4] Ultimately, *Moléculas* establishes a sense of comfort or a predictable truth; while the story begins as something personal and self-referential, it is transformed into a far-reaching and deliberately abstract message. As Olivares explained in a recent interview, "I'm using myself to understand a more abstract sense of self."[5] Accordingly, the work never clearly reveals whose voice we are hearing or even what family the narration references—deliberate omissions by Olivares. Yet somehow the work's stinging impact is not diluted.

Moléculas is narrated by a stuffed teddy bear that is missing an arm. The seemingly banal object, which one might expect to be humorous or playful, instead painstakingly relays his father's difficult story while spinning around a modernist space that suggests, through various indicators, a therapist's office. The bear is at once a stand-in for the narrator, the person impacted by the story, but also for all of us, a notion that is underscored by its very ordinariness; Olivares describes the bear as "an almost universal symbol of empathy."[6] But beyond this, his deliberate detail—at certain moments we are able to peer into the hole left by the missing arm and see the bear's white stuffing—seems to signal our shared vulnerability and the reality of the pain we will all inevitably carry through our lives. This we know, Olivares goes on to suggest, as surely as we know our lives will end, and that the cycle will begin again.

For Olivares, "having a teddy bear deliver this story is a way of encouraging viewers to project themselves into this scenario."[7] Its appealing and seemingly familiar appearance lures us into the story and accompanies us as the narrative unfolds. We are startled by the ways in which a mere stuffed bear can bring us to such a difficult place, and so quickly. Within moments of the video's beginning, Olivares makes his bear relatable and sympathetic, often presenting it wide-eyed and in the center of the frame, allowing the synched voice we hear to have even greater impact. In a matter of minutes, we are stunned by our own grief, unexpectedly provoked through this seemingly unassuming and ordinary object.

At the Whitney, Olivares has taken great care to underscore certain aspects of the video through his use of the actual space of its presentation.[8] The gallery in which *Moléculas* is projected has been bathed in gray, with gray walls, gray carpet, and a gray curtain that subtly echoes the interior depicted in the work. For Olivares, the carefully crafted (and highly intentional) space seen in much of the video suggests a classic, modernist room (complete with Le Corbusier chaise lounge). It seems almost timeless, with only selected details suggesting the present.[9] (The deliberate inclusion of an iPhone on the desk, for example, provides one of the only connections to the current moment.) By carrying these domestic elements, however subtly, into the gallery, Olivares reinforces the immersive quality of *Moléculas*, but also, I think, heightens our ability to be subsumed by the voice relaying this story.

His use of non-narrative audio—the constant sound of rain that permeates the piece and the crescendo of music at the end, for example—also compels us viscerally into the piece. Upon entering the gallery, this combined physical and virtual space, we are unavoidably lost in this invented yet familiar world.

Also unique to the installation at the Whitney is a suite of graphite drawings by Olivares that are closely related to *Moléculas*. Each drawing (notably quite small, most only eight by ten inches) intimately depicts a specific frame or aspect of the video, individually made at a different point in his process: either before, during, or after completing the video. These are not straightforward preparatory studies (nor are they typical storyboards often done in conjunction with a film) but are instead works he created to better understand, or re-understand, the video itself—and to visually extrapolate certain key moments or ideas. Made using the animation software Cinema 4D (which Olivares taught himself to use while living and studying in Düsseldorf), the piece evolved over two years as a series of imagined and invented images he meticulously composed digitally. Accordingly, the drawings underscore the sense that the work comprises a series of carefully constructed compositions, delicately rendered digitally yet with the same tactile realism of the drawings in graphite. Much of *Moléculas* is black-and-white, with only certain moments appearing in color as the video progresses. (Olivares sparingly uses color in the video, employing it gradually and in particular moments at the beginning but then more boldly toward the end of the piece, as the narrative becomes more about our existential experience and our place in the universe.) Through the drawings, Olivares suggests an interplay between the seemingly disparate two-dimensional handmade works and the three-dimensional animation made through a digital, and ultimately more detached, process.

In many respects *Moléculas* is part of a larger conversation around what video and animation can do vis-à-vis the conflation of the real and the imagined, and to what extent personal or political truths can serve as important narrative catalysts.[10] In a 2017 review of an earlier presentation of *Moléculas*, the writer compares Olivares's fantastical invention fused with a certain realism to the work of artist Mika Rottenberg (b. 1976).[11] Similarly interested in drawing from reality to create works that simultaneously carry a social critique or narrative, Rottenberg's videos (she also makes sculpture and installation work) are almost absurdist, using humor to further complicate the work's relationship with the real. Like Olivares, Rottenberg feels no compulsion to dwell squarely in the realm of the straightforward; the work meanders and is inflected throughout with imagined elements, deliberately conjoining found ideas and material with the surreal. (Just as Olivares opts for his surreal storyteller, the bear, to relay the real-life narration, or allows the video to visually dive into a photograph resting on the desk.) However, the work of Mathias Poledna (b. 1965), an artist that Olivares himself identifies as an influence, may provide a more apt comparison, perhaps not in concept or conceit but as a result of the overall sensibility. Like Poledna, Olivares seems similarly interested in the intricate making of his animated work, and the possibilities it presents. In Poledna's *Imitation of Life* (2013), recently shown at the Whitney,[12] he painstakingly re-created a Disney-style animation using the original, handmade techniques.[13] While the work implicitly takes on a more exclusively conceptual note than *Moléculas*,

Poledna's exacting re-creation through video—which is in part about the capacity of what animation can do—feels very much related. As Olivares has explained about his work, and his interest in animation particularly, "I like that everything in a digital space or an animation space is intentional, so having this messy desk . . . is actually a byproduct of so many decisions."[14] Both artists share a keen interest in foregrounding their ability to compose and construct visually, and through animation specifically.[15]

The searing quality of *Moléculas* results from Olivares's deftness with both the technical and the conceptual. The work's intense emotional charge—which surfaces within the ten-minute piece acutely and almost miraculously—is achieved in part through Olivares's crisp and photorealistic imagery, what he describes as the mimesis of his internal thoughts.[16] Accordingly, this places the experience of the narration in the space of the real—and of one's own life. The sharp, seemingly banal interior (ostensibly a therapist's office) beckons us: *this could be me and will be me*. We will all make this inevitable journey in our lives, bumping along until we meet with sadness and, ultimately, our own end. But Olivares reminds us that we cycle back as molecules (or *moléculas*) into the earth, allowing the process to begin yet again on an endless yet predictable loop. The video concludes with the statement, "There is no end, it's here." For Olivares, there is a comfort in accepting the inevitability of the pain we will encounter. Empathy comes through what he conjures along the way, visually, narratively, and with his deliberate use of music and sound in this highly particular work.

1. Juan Antonio Olivares, interview with the author, February 13, 2018.

2. While the narration is in Spanish, the work is subtitled in English and elements in the video—notes on the therapist's desk, for example—also appear in English. Olivares subtly reminds us of his personal navigation of both the Spanish- and English-speaking world: he was born in Puerto Rico to South American parents but raised in part in the continental United States, where he now lives and works.

3. Juan Antonio Olivares, email to the author, January 17, 2018.

4. Olivares, interview with the author.

5. Stephanie Seidel, "Self-Abstractions: Juan Antonio Olivares's 3D Animation *Moléculas*, 2017," *Flash Art*, April 2018, 17.

6. Olivares, interview with the author.

7. Olivares, email to the author.

8. *Moléculas* has been presented previously in Düsseldorf and at the gallery Off Vendome in New York, both instances without the installation details or drawings that are part of the Whitney's exhibition.

9. Olivares describes this modernist space as being about a desire to create "a place of peaceful recollection" (interview with the author).

10. I am also thinking here about Maggie Lee's *Mommy* (2012–15), a video in the Whitney's collection about the death of the artist's mother that unfolds through a nonlinear, almost dreamlike structure composed of multiple, seemingly disparate parts but unified through the narrative of her mother's story.

11. Clayton Press, "A Review of Juan Antonio Olivares: Moléculas at Off Vendome, New York," *Arteviste*, February 26, 2017.

12. Poledna's *Imitation of Life* was shown as part of *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016* at the Whitney in 2016 and is also part of the Museum's collection.

13. Notably both Olivares and Poledna share an interest in maintaining a significant relationship between their video animation and more handmade processes or techniques. For Olivares, this surfaces though his creation of the accompanying graphite drawings which emerged concurrently with the overall process of completing the video.

14. Olivares, interview with the author.

15. Olivares has also discussed an interest in artists ranging from Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964) to Thomas Demand (b. 1964) vis-à-vis their hyper-attention to composing images through the meticulous placement of objects and various details.

16. Olivares, interview with the author.

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Exhibition

JUAN ANTONIO OLIVARES: MOLÉCULAS
MAR 2–JUN 10, 2018

REVIEW

Juan Antonio Olivares: *Moléculas*

A teddy bear becomes a conduit for human emotion

By Oliver Basciano

Juan Antonio Olivares, Moléculas (still), 2017, hd video, 10 min. Courtesy the artist and Off Vendome, New York

Off Vendome, New York 19 January – 4 March

"I think it's really a deep memory: it must have been from when I was very young," reads the first English subtitle of Juan Antonio Olivares's ten-minute HD-projected animation *Moléculas* (2017). The opening shot pans from darkness to the furry feet of a teddy bear, then slowly upwards to reveal the bear's belly, and finally its plaintive face. The bear's mouth is moving; it would seem that it is he who is speaking the words of the Spanish soundtrack. As the shot moves to a wider angle, the bear is revealed to be missing an arm. Ted goes on to recall how, as a baby, he crawled out the front door of the family home – situated near a copper mine – because it had snowed and he was curious.

The bear is sat on a therapist's couch. As he gets up from his horizontal position and limps over to a mirror, the 'camera' passes through the back of the bear's head, entering into his white stuffing-filled insides. Ted recalls his mother: what she looked like, how she was. There is an unscripted, hesitant feel to the monologue. We take on Ted's point of view, staring at his unblinking reflection as he notes, sadly, that his mother's life in the mining town was tough, that "she was forty but looked like a woman of sixty". The bear finds a photograph of a bathroom and designs for a house on the therapist's desk, and we then 'enter' the image of the bathroom, which in turn starts to fill with water from an overflowing bath – the memories get more painful. How Ted's mother loved him more than his brother; his mother's death; how he missed her funeral.

The bear begins to weep.

We never find out whose story this really is, for what body the bear is an avatar – it doesn't matter. It is the motif of the teddy bear that does. Such bears exist to be filled with emotions; stuffed with childhood anxieties, a steadfast friend when the world is an alienating place. And then adulthood encroaches and their magic disappears. The life falls from them; they are forgotten about or discarded (though the world doesn't get any less tricky of course).

Yet *Moléculas* is not about the social and psychological use of toys per se – though certainly we can recall Mike Kelley's work on emotion as a commodity here – but about us and our finite bodies and how we are also packed with memories and emotions, feelings and thoughts, until the moment we too are not. In the last scene of the video, the bear explodes – slowly, silently – into fragments that fall across the therapist's office. Death is a subject of art for the ages, but this work brings with it such delicacy of feeling – as the viewer becomes seduced by the anthropomorphism – counterbalanced by the shocking ending, that one does not begrudge the return to such a theme.

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Christie Chu (https://news.artnet.com/about/christie-chu-193), February 20, 2017

Juan Antonio Olivares, *Moléculas*. Courtesy of Off Vendome.

1. Juan Antonio Olivares at Off Vendome (http://offvendome.com/JUAN-ANTONIO-OLIVARES)
A recent graduate from the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Puerto Rican-born artist Juan Antonio Olivares presents an emotionally raw and poignant video work for his first solo show at New York's Off Vendome gallery.

Moléculas begins with the narrator's recollection of memories of his mother and expands into wider philosophical issues. Olivares told artnet News that his videos "evolve intuitively and impulsively over time."

The protagonist is played by a lovable plush teddy bear with crystal blue eyes, which provides a blank slate for the viewer to project onto. What makes the work so evocative is that it brings questions about life/death, love/loss, and family to the fore.

"Moléculas" has been extended until March 4, 2017 at Off Vendome.

Arteviste.

A Review of Juan Antonio Olivares "*Moléculas*" at Off Vendome, New York

February 22, 2017

Traditional art media do not ask much of one's time. Two- and three-dimensional works occupy space: on a wall, on a floor, or even suspended from a ceiling. To borrow from Robert Mangold, these works say, "Here I am. Plonk." You see it. You might walk around it. You either get it or not. Job done.

Video—time-based media—demands more of the viewer, especially when the work is flat screen and full frontal as opposed to immersive or interactive. (The current vogue.) To understand, "*Moléculas,*" you have to be willing to cross a threshold and succumb to another imagination in a depth of ways not required by more traditional entertainment or video.

"*Moléculas*" warrants a brief refresher course in elementary school science. We take for granted our DNA, our celestial beingness. A classroom definition

Arteviste.

defines a molecule as the smallest possible amount of a *particular* substance that has all the characteristics of that substance. A molecule is a universe unto itself that contains all our genetic material. It has mass. It is whole. It may (or may not) be somehow eternal.

"*Moléculas*" is more molecular chemistry—the interaction of particles, the formation and break down of bonds—than molecular physics, which governs structure and properties. The story line is a dense tone poem à la Terrence Malick about personal memory, love, and loss, familial bonds and, ultimately, the unknown. An amputated toy surrogate, a kuschelbär (or cuddly bear), realistically narrates the most basic human story in a strained, pained voice. It is the story of a mother's love, sibling rivalry, death, and regret. The bear ambulates the room in the unbalanced gait of an amputee, after hopping from the analyst's couch to confront itself in front of a multi-paneled mirror, which provides a self-reflective confessional.

Details are minimal, but important. The antiseptic architecture and furniture are more sculpture than décor. The office itself simulates a room from Le Corbusier's *La Cité Radieueses*, stark, antiseptic. The analyst's couch replicates the architect's often-copied chaise lounge. Most critically, the simple desk is strewn with artifacts, clues of an analyst's work: handwritten notes, cards, a lamp, and a computer. The latter is the technological heart of production, flickering, beating. The heartbeat is softly repeated in the soundtrack.

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This is not conventional art. Olivares, the son of Chilean and Colombian expatriates, ventures well into the territory of magical realism, which is primarily known as a literary genre. He challenges binary oppositions like life and death, acceding them merely as points in a continuous cycle. As a style, magical realism often warps the conventional notions of time, with events occurring and reoccurring with nuanced change. Mystery and ambiguity abound. But there is the profound sense that what has happened, what is happening, will happen again. This is the revelation of "*Moléculas.*"

The visual acuity of the video is startlingly crisp, even as it transtions from black and white to color, from photoreality to animation. The work is the product of two years' self-taught effort. After graduating from Columbia University, Olivares attended the Kunstakademie Düßeldorf for two years, as yet another acolyte of Christopher Williams. This is not an insignificant matter, since Williams is more likely to suggest paths and the means to self-confidence, rather than specific ideas and techniques.

Arteviste.

Frida Kahlo and Mika Rottenberg may be among the best-known Latin American proponents of this artistic style, which awkwardly straddles surrealism and photorealism. Where Olivares differs from both artists is that he neither accentuates nor celebrates the bizarre or grotesque. The bear is an unexpected, "fantastic" storyteller—a humble avatar, appearing in a conventional, rather Spartan setting of a psychoanalyst's office. The video achieves a heightened state of awareness of life's connectedness and delicate balance. It ends with the bear's gentle disintegration, like a dandelion puffball caught on the wind, with its own molecules scattered across time.

in nature nothing is created
nothing is destroyed
things only change
when you die
it's a type of change
when death changes us
we enter another type of life

Just as it is strenuous to imagine inner monologue void of language, it is difficult to separate the recollection of moments from how they are depicted on the big screen: in montage or jump cut, murky, romanticized and out of reach. There's something to note about the way fictions and Hollywood tropes subliminally inform memory and consciousness, how the mind can retroactively make arch plot points of events that transpire in life. Similar to film narratives, consciousness is a soupy concoction of assumed objectivity, personal perspective and elaborate embellishment, further obfuscating and complicating "reality" the more they interact. Working precisely in this liminal space, Juan Antonio Olivares understands how imitation can at times reveal deeper, more evocative truths. As said by Werner Herzog, "How important, really, is the factual? Of course, we can't disregard the factual; it has normative power. But it can never give us the kind of illumination, the ecstatic flash, from which truth emerges."

Olivares takes a tangential cue from Herzog, using film to render life not in its most epic form, but instead in a way both eerily familiar and distinctly unreal. Events as they are portrayed in his work often live in a space suspended between somber documentation and idealized reflection: *Act 3, Take 2* (2011), a long, banal take of a shower curtain veiling a woman singing Euridice's verses from the opera Orfeo ed Euridice, calls to mind melancholic musings of a past lover. In effect, however, these assemblages Olivares orchestrates never feel anything but wholly cerebral. His film *Kokomo* (2016) operates in the same way our brain might when configuring dreams after a day of binge watching: depicting a narrative cliché of a man stranded on a desert island, employing a kitsch directorial perspective reminiscent of reality television or blockbuster movies.

His newest film, *Moléculas* (2016), currently on view at Off Vendome in New York, marks a technical shift in Olivares' work, instead utilizing topical technological forms to excavate emotional revelations. The first scene opens with the voice of a narrator, in actuality relaying a real conversation Olivares recorded on his iPhone. This narrator is later revealed to be a virtual toy bear, which retells the story of a man's first memory. Every inch of Moléculas is digitally and carefully constructed by the artist, an indication that no detail should be taken for granted. The film and its elements are composed not as an attempt to convey reality, but rather the vivid nature of memory. The bear feels alive in the same way memories do: life-like, uncanny even, but also irreparably distant. The grey, dismal house he lives in is noticeably barren, maybe to imply that it holds more symbolic value as a visualization of the mind. Images of snow are mixed with sounds of summer rain, establishing a discord between what is imagined and what is true. The clash of fabricated format and honest narrative ultimately work in unison, conjuring a more profound sense of melancholy than sober documentary might allow.

The fascinating question at hand in these films: How is it that the mind can recognize deception while simultaneously being moved by it? "Whatever is sublime...does not lead the listeners to persuasion but to a state of ecstasy," wrote Longinus. Perhaps for Olivares, his view on the path to truth is the same.

Juan Antonio Olivares (Puertorican, b. 1988) is an artist who lives and works in New York.

His exhibition "Moléculas" is currently on view at Off Vendome, New York, through 25 February.

Allison Fonder is a writer and editor based in New York. She is co-founder of *Wut Magazine*.

Image:
Moléculas, 2016
(film still)
Courtesy of the artist and
Off Vendome,
New York

USING FILM NOT IN ITS EPIC FORM, BUT TO RENDER LIFE IN A WAY BOTH EERILY FAMILIAR AND DISTINCTLY UNREAL