

Gris-gris contre l'abus

Antecedents

Almost every major or touristic city in the world harbors a clouded or overt proclivity related to deviant sexual practices by locals or visitors. Sexual services involving minors or children are an emerging and escalating social pattern, of which many causes and expressions could be linked to patriarchal mores and globalization (Pinto Leal. 2010:1). “Transactional sexual abuse” is traded for cash, goods or favors (Staff, 2010:1), a social phenomenon occurring throughout the world, but more intensively and explicitly, in Third World cities. These practices are better known as child sex tourism (CST) or commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC).

Sex abuse tourism provides an alarming picture, which seems both a social problem and an economical one (Staff, 2010:1), whose solicitors come from local regions and from First World countries. Some of the men that contract such services, do so based on the superstition that having sex with a virgin can cure HIV/AIDS or that children are more “pure” and less likely to be transmitters of STDs!

According to a study of UNICEF released in 2009, it is estimated that 2 million children throughout the planet have been cajoled or forced into the macabre market of sexual abuse and exploitation, while around 150 million female individuals and 73 million male individuals worldwide have suffered any one kind of sexual abuse (Mojica 2009:1).

Many doubts about our humanity arise when *imagining* the pain these children undergo while being exploited sexually, and moreover, knowing that they can be as young as 4 years old, in some of the circumstances. Let us formulate a set of questions that may help us understand how we might be instrumental to this phenomenon or how we could avoid indirectly contributing to it: Are these children propelled into sexual exploitation due to the material prestige desires kindled by a media consumerist game in which, to a degree, we participate and foster? Are these children propelled into sexual exploitation due to their poverty? How and in which conditions is the sexual commercialization of children set in motion? Why do some men recur to this criminal option? How do the notions of taboo and of the private and public dichotomy help veil this activity? How do the lack of sexual and media literacy facilitates this practice? How are values of courtship, conquest, family preservation, individualism, and material accumulation contributing to this social pattern? Are the notions of *kinship* and solidarity towards this type of worldwide predicament dropped under these values? How can we, as professionals, help this crime against children receive the attention it deserves or directly become involved in helping raise consciousness about it?

Production

The realization of this visual arts project that is in *permanent* progress has been conceived to, once it reaches the eye, unleash playful, childlike and metaphoric associations that invoke, in the spectator's subconscious, the existence of this phenomenon. The objects utilized to make the assemblages allude to the toy world, the exercise of biomedicine, foods children reject, commercial exchange, in addition to other allegorical elements, which combined compound a simple *text* that any person will find

easy to interpret and deconstruct. The objects are placed to form patterns, which are repeated as a series of confined cheerful realms, altering, from one to the other, some of the elements, in order to invite the spectators to involve themselves in a game of *seeing* and *comparing*, ultimately flowing into an image recitation intended to foster a *gaze* that soon proves mystifying and *eye-opening*.

Assemblages are composed with objects and toys available in the market for common children. During scouts to acquire different objects that could enrich the message of this project, it was appalling to confirm that toys are highly gendered and stereotyped. Children's entertainment articles that apparently are designed to develop attitudes related to roughness, empowerment, warfare, technicality, conquest, difficultness, dominance, exploration, competition, density, and durability in boys vs. softness, passivity, communication, emotionality, beauty, facileness, home caring, submissiveness, sedentariness, hairdressing, bodily appearance, fragility, and obsolescence in girls, flood the sex and color shades separated shop shelves. It has been quite difficult to find dolls or effigies that *incarnate* boys or girls as they simply and really look during childhood to adolescence, either not labor-wise stereotyped, sexualized, trivialized, or brutalized. Representations of boys are mostly associated with ferociousness and cruelty, while those of girls tend to communicate compliance and gentleness. This body of work has been assembled with what the mainstream North American toy market offers, added to other objects that contribute symbolic value.

The objects shaping one of the triptychs are colored marbles, tongue depressors, toy coins, dolls, smooth pebbles, sardines, jalapeños, and snow. A sunset atmosphere evokes

the passing from the brightness and clarity of a warm diurnal light to the dimension of twilight, of the unknown, of bedtime, of fairytale storytelling, a space where children face uncertainty and fear of that which may shadow their bliss or turn *wrong*. The background for this series is a snow pulverized by very low temperatures, element in which children are allowed to play provided they are properly clad and supervised. The coldness and barrenness of snow conjures the frigid and immobilizing feelings that materialize during an episode of sexual abuse.

Thus, these visual *amulets* aspire to elicit, at first glance, an aesthetical experience in relation to easily identifiable and universally known objects, while stimulating reflections, emotions, and ethical connections to our social, economical, and ideological environments.

Nonetheless, most of the objects depicted in the assemblages seem to be displayed in a frolicsome and playful manner amid lighthearted and spirited colors, the arrangements are shown in outright frontal perspective with the intention of highlighting the graveness of this overlooked social behavior.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) and child sex tourism (CST) are crimes against humanity in the form of loathsome contemporary slavery.

Artist's Statement

Gris-gris is a voice developed within the African-American hoodoo folk magic tradition that refers to an amulet, which protects the wearer from evil and procures luck. The talisman—worn around the neck—is made of a small cloth bag containing a mixture of

herbs, oils, hair, nails, grave dirt, and other personal objects. Depending on the combination and nature of its components, it may also be used to propitiate lovemaking.

Inspired in this cross-cultural costume and compelled to express deep concern and pain regarding a troubling social and political dilemma affecting every country in the world, this work of visual arts has been assembled utilizing assorted symbolic objects that enables us to listen and socially convey a *close-up voice* of bi-dimensional protest.

This photographic work addresses the *burning* or *freezing* crime of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, which leaves indelible scars on them, and shaping, perhaps, one of the most infamous links of a chain connecting patriarchal capitalism to sex, which seems to travel within widely accepted social and economic pathways and mechanisms. Many personal and social patterns, covering intricate and abstruse pathways, may encourage the materialization of such encounters between ignorant adults and alienated children.

Anthropological thought, feminist theory, and the potential of photography as an artistic/pop culture product conflate in the creation of images that invite pondering and awareness, while conveying a call for activism from the spectators through an eye that cannot be shut, and in any form that meets their desires, gestures, capacities, responsibilities, and involvement in order to promote change.

References

Mojica, José Alberto

2009 2013, Fecha límite para acabar con la explotación sexual de niños y jóvenes. El Tiempo. <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-4710543>, accessed June 10, 2011

Pinto Leal, María Lucía

2010 Globalization and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:CeK4moHXsAsJ:www.violes.unb.br/artigos/Globalizacao%2520e%2520ESCCA%2520-%2520ingles.pdf+sexual+commercialization+of+children&hl=en&gl=co&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESgYx-IXVpd71cVPEMNF8wkIda02g0w83-mvBkfvfy9abfcQOHYD99at7U8zG7PlwKaugRJ2ga04JxMMgJtD7QGI3Ot9hSKVexbesv_86sigHLzilB_nDjBLwKEmZhXfBE4_GB1R&sig=AHIEtbRALSMIwZq7uMdhsuDT6doaymyQ9AA, accessed June 10, 2011

Staff, Stabroek

2010 UNICEF Study links child sex abuse 'business' in some Caribbean territories to tourism. <http://www.stabroeknews.com/2010/business/04/03/unicef-study-links-child-sex-abuse-'business'-in-some-caribbean-territories-to-tourism/>, accessed June 10, 2011