THE CURRENCY

AN INTERVIEW WITH
CLAUDIO CASTILLO BY
SOPHIE DELAPLAINE

MARÍA PAULA SUÁREZ
ON HER ARTISTIC
PRACTICE

SPRING 2022

INAUGURAL ISSUE

ARTWORK BY
ELSA ÅKESSON+
JADE WU

Cover image: detail from *Grain Rain* by Jade Wu

FROM OUR DIRECTOR

It is with great pleasure that we will be publishing The Currency – a look inside what our students are up to – quite the inspiration for all of us. Wishing you the very best and a fulfilling time during your academic year and moving forward.

Sincerely,

Ann-Marie Richard

Director, SIA-NY

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Sotheby's INSTITUTE OF ART

I met Claudio Castillo, a Cuban-American artist, when I was strolling through Context during Art Basel Miami week in 2021. Having just finished my thesis on NFT Crypto Art for Sotheby's I was captivated by a digital artwork called GTMO which looked like a painting of a Florida Palm tree landscape inside a movie because the landscape kept changing and evolving. When I asked the woman at the booth about the work, she told me it was a generative work that reflects the real time weather conditions of the location which is chosen by the owner. She then led me to another work which was a generative clock featuring photographs of dictators which were gradually imposed by Coca Cola posters. I stayed to watch so that I could see what happened at the top of the hour. When the clock struck four several people had gathered around the work, the artist himself appeared and started to explain the concept behind the *Bad Hombres vs The Real Thing*, a generative clock. "This is my first political pieces where propaganda is ever present. At the top of the hour a blood bath occurs, the number of bullet holes signify the hour and the minutes are represented by the amount of visible poster. Other artistic events are triggered by the camera acting as a motion sensor, the audio is also generative. Essentially I'm demonstrating that the more things change the more they are the same." Figure 1, below.

Figure 1, *Bad Hombres vs The Real Thing,* 2021, still from generative clock provided by the artist.

Being familiar with work by other generative artists like Mad Dog Jones, *Replicator* and Kevin McCoy, known for creating *Quantum* in 2014, the first NFT, which tends to be geometric or look computer produced, these were the first generative work I had seen that looked both lifelike and as if it had been freshly painted. Claudio invited me for a more in depth look of his generative artwork at his studio on Brickell Bay in Miami, Florida. Inside the studio, there are monitors and more OLED monitors of all shapes and sizes displaying approximately 20 generative works including a fertility clock, whose themes include political (Hitler, Castro, Lenin, Consumerism), tribal, nature, religion and time.

SD: Thank you for having me.
I find your work to be intriguing and to have so many layers, symbolically and figuratively. All the generative art I have seen looks like it was created by computer, how do you create these rich saturated colors and achieve such an organic look to a computer-generated work?

CC: That is because the elements in the generative works originate from my watercolor paintings. Basically, I deconstruct my paintings then create programmable animated layers and use Flash or another software to put it back together or re-construct. The generative aspect is written in programming language AS3 and C++. The computer is not creating, it is just re compositing, sequencing and keeping time, I find that computers are great for that, not for replacing the human hand or imagination for that matter.

Most of my generative works have 6 layers, with each layer having 32 clips that are 300 frames long but vary. To see all the possible combination on a regular computer it would take something like 8 trillion years. I first started with 4 layers and have produced work with 10 layers, *Garden Punto* and *Fertility* has 12 layers. Other elements included in my works are video, photography, lunar and tidal cycles, sound, music, RSS feeds for real time weather; news, and stock market data controlling the work. In addition, each piece that you are seeing here is a computer with a camera acting as a motion sensor, although they can be projected or displayed on any size monitor or LED wall. When the camera senses movement or someone in front of the work, there is another set of actions that happens. In *Altar,* which is a generative clock with phases of the moon, different animals and birds appear as ghosts when the camera senses someone in front of the work. (He demonstrates by standing in front of the piece and a wolf and then a bird appears in a shadow form.) For this work I created a focus pull, where the foreground and background change focus based on a person's proximity to the work. The animals are represented as souls suggesting an afterlife and possible extinction. See *Altars* here.

SD: Are these works NFTs?

CC: Yes and no. My works can be very complicated, especially the clocks and once it is an NFT which means that it is immutable on the blockchain, you can't change the computer program, even if it has a flaw or customize it. Sometimes I adjust my work to the location and for that to happen, the code needs to be slightly changed like in my piece *Van Gogh Generator*. In the work the tide goes up and down, which is based on the actual tides, and reveals the fish or rather the bones of the fish. Originally, I based the work on Miami's tides which have dramatic fluctuations. When I sold a work to a collector in the Mediterranean the timing of the tide was correct, but I changed the positioning of the tides to be aesthetically in

keeping with location which has a minimal tide flow. I use NFTs as certificates and for provenance, the sheer size of each piece is 4 gigs and more which makes it impossible to upload to the blockchain, and using IPFS for the media in my opinion is still not a feasible option. So I have 2 types of NFTs: the software where the executable only is on the blockchain and video NFTS which are recordings from the generative software the media is stored in my cloud in that case. The art that I have as an NFT is presented in a gift box with lots of art goodies inside: a signed still from the work on metal with an acrylic finish, a certificate of authentication, 1 hour or more of video in an acrylic display by Infinity Objects and that same video at a higher resolution on the thumb drive so that a computer or a smart TV can run it. Every video, print is unique since it comes from a generative process. Figure 2, below.
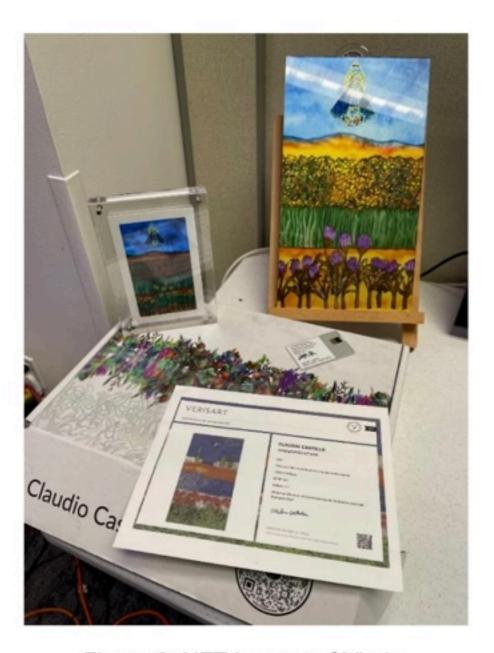

Figure 2. NFT box set of Virgin Apparition, photo taken by author.

SD: I see you manipulating the screen and seem to be able to go back in time in the artwork. How is that possible?

CC: Going back in time is only possible in my generative clocks, by dragging your finger on the screen you play future and past animations. All my works are touch enabled which allows the viewer to stop the generative process of the animated layer or layers and "compose" their image to then print or email. One can also screen grab a particular image and email it to themselves or gift a still or video to a friend. For the work Bonsai, I filmed a bonsai tree rotating and at the top of the hour a distinct minute long animation plays and the tree blooms, afterwards the work goes back into generative mode with the tides and moon phases being predicted.

SD: Wow this a clock? I would never guess. It looks like a surreal tree that is blooming. Figure 3.

CC: Yes, like many of my clocks, it is not obvious that it is a clock. In this case, the amount of blooms correspond to the hour. You must discover the secrets of the clock to know the time. They are designed to be thought provoking and entertaining. I also have a clock which includes emotion.

SD: How is that possible for an artwork to have an emotion?

CC: In *Banco Taíno* named for a tribe of Indians that were in the Caribbean that received Christopher Columbus, the Taínos are speaking their native tongue, the number of Spanish galleon ships on the horizon signify

the hour, the position of the moon represents the minutes from east to west and the sunflowers follow the sun while the lunar and tidal phases are predicted. The viewer can move the flowers with their finger on the touch screen. When the viewer stands in front of the screen the sunflower turns to look at the viewer and if the viewer stands still, without interaction the sunflowers get bored and go back to what they were doing before the viewer appeared.

SD: Wow, that must take a lot of time?

CC: (laughs) Yes, lately each work takes about a year to complete.

SD: What inspired you to create clocks as generative artworks?

CC: It's all about time. What is more precious than time? Certainly not money. I like

the paradox between the unpredictable and random features of generative programming combined with the accuracy of keeping time and just to make things more complicated I add in the lunar and tidal cycles. A flame or the waves in the ocean are generative, I believe in impermanence, where the only constant is change. I believe generative art to be alive, to be on going, impossible to repeat - a bit like life where your cells are constantly regenerating and you are the same but never the same, except of course life has an end (maybe), but generative art does not.

Generative art offers artists two peculiarities which are new to the art world: the most prolific output ever and the ability to produce new work after death.

Claudio Castillo has been producing generative art since 2005 and his works were first featured in the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, CA and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai Animamix Biennial in 2007. He is represented by Blink Group Fine Art Gallery, and TRESART .

Sophie Delaplaine is class of SIA-London, New York City 2022, where she studied contemporary art. Her focus of interest and expertise is in NFTs and the digital art market.

Figure 3. *Bonsai,* generative clock created in 2016,
still provided by artist.