



TO WATCH

## MICHAEL LINARES

BY KATY DONOGHUE

Last spring, a few months before his solo show “Unpainting” at Walter Otero gallery, we visited the studio of the artist Michael Linares in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Linares is a Conceptual artist who describes his practice as research into what is considered art and how we look at it—whether painting, video, or sculpture. He references art historical concepts in his work while creating something approachable, engaging, and often quite funny.

Take his “Wait until it grows” series. One of the earliest works he did in this series was *Wait until it grows (tree house)*, for which in 2006 he planted a small sapling in a tree house and then photographed as it grew each year. Or *Wait until it grows (hammock)*, in which a rope hammock languishes on the ground between two small palm trees, completely unusable. “I’m super-concerned with the life of the work after someone acquires it,” Linares told us. He said that when people buy a work of art, they don’t typically think about how it might evolve with age—unless it breaks, of course. This series forces you, with a helpful push from its titles, to think about an artwork changing with time. “We have to deal with entropy,” he said.

In 2010 at Arco Madrid he filled Walter Otero’s booth with a pyramid made of cheap Styrofoam coolers, a shape that referenced Sol LeWitt’s *Four-Sided Pyramid*. The coolers were filled with beer, and he encouraged passersby to help themselves. He had viewers look *into* his pyramid of coolers, find beers, and drink them. “I wanted to use alcohol as a social lubricant . . . to defy this [attitude] that people think they should have in the presence of Minimal art. And alcohol is

a good way to make a chaotic scene and that’s what happened. First you stop by this austere sculpture and after you start hitting on girls or whatever,” Linares told us.

A lot of Linares’s recent work deals with the process of painting (hence his recent show title, “Unpainting”). “I’m always looking for a way of making a painting without thinking in a conceptual way . . . there is no way to escape the seduction of the materials and the process of thinking about painting,” said the artist.

While visiting his studio, we saw a rough cut of a video he was making inspired by the Lumière brothers’ 1896 film of the serpentine dance. The quick and elaborate gestures of the dance were used to showcase the capability of film to capture movement at that time. Linares found himself amazed by the use of color hand-painted onto each frame, not to represent reality, but purely to achieve an aesthetic. The video he was working on, filmed with an underwater camera, showed him washing the “painting off my hands,” the colors of paint following the progression of colors in the Lumière film. “I think they were super-amazed by it and they just forgot about reality or about representing reality and started making moving paintings, as I understand it . . . because for me it’s a painting.”

Linares likes to toy with our perception of reality in art, too. In 2012, he painted a mural on the exterior of the Bass Museum in Miami that at first glance looked like a haphazard paint splatter, but was made up of “flat paintings” that he painstakingly made over several days to look

like a spontaneous paint splatter. “You see that the scale of the splatter is not possible,” said Linares. “That is something you start thinking, after you decide to stop and think.” The trick is getting a viewer to want to stop and think, which Linares’s work often successfully does.

What we found most compelling during our visit to Linares’s studio was an audio library album collection he had created of art or philosophy texts read in Spanish by Puerto Ricans. Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory where only about 20 percent of the population actually speaks English. Yet most of the books in the school system are in English, while teachers speak in Spanish. “You were reading in English, processing in Spanish, and trying to apply it in Spanish. It is a mess. It is a conceptual mess of a perception and it is a language mess,” Linares told us. And when he went to university to study art, he found that the art and philosophical concepts he was trying to learn were written in an English level far beyond his comprehension. So in 2010, he decided to publish an album of translated Spanish audio, with accompanying texts in English, on subjects like Readymade and the fundamentals of Conceptual art.

After hearing that, his works’ many allusions, layers, and winks became a whole lot clearer. Linares is bringing chaos to Conceptual art, perhaps because the way in which he was first introduced to the movement was a total mess; a mess he’s been investigating and researching ever since, and from which he is making some really exceptional art.



Opposite page:  
Installation view of Michael Linares  
"Unpainting" exhibition at Walter  
Otero Gallery (April 11–May 17,  
2013).

Above:  
**Michael Linares**  
*Prisma/girl*  
2013  
C-print and frame  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist and Walter Otero Gallery