



What Humans Do



Arnaldo Morales

BY LAURA ROULET

Arnaldo Morales's studio is a machinist's dream come true. Points of pride are a 1977 variable speed Bridgeport milling machine, a 1966 Logan lathe, and not just a Clausing table saw, but also a Delta Rockwell horizontal band saw. Morales has restored antiques like a 1914 Reed vise, a 1909 Chas Parker vise, and an Acme anvil circa 1907 to perfect, functional condition. In what could be a personal museum of vintage tools and machines, he creates industrial-organic hybrids that he calls "electrobjetos" (electro-objects).

"Alto Riesgo (High Risk)," an early solo exhibition at the University of Puerto Rico's Museum of History, Anthropology and Art in 1996, introduced the defining factors of Morales's work. His materials consisted mostly of industrial components, including refrigeration units, heating elements, high voltage lights, electrical transformers, and liquid mercury flowing through plastic tubing and spouting into metal basins—all reconfigured into interactive objects. It was dangerous to be a spectator. Not all of Morales's sculpture has been potentially lethal, but "high risk" is fair warning. His work is about the object and, equally important, about what humans do.

Morales was born in 1967 in Ponce, a city on Puerto Rico's southern coast. His father, a machine operator in the now-defunct

Opposite: *Manta-raya No. 14*, 2014.
Industrial materials, 138 x 24 x 276 in.
This page: *Vainilla Power No. 04*, 2004.
Industrial materials, 74 x 42 x 125 in.



Left: *Gold-Digger No. 06*, 2006. Industrial materials, 104 x 48 x 100 in. Right: *LMPSTno97*, 1997. Mixed media, dimensions variable.

petrochemical industry, often brought home spare parts and substances, even toxic ones, for his son to investigate. Morales remembers constantly building things, or disassembling and reassembling appliances. He continues his education as a self-described “industrial-archaeologist” with YouTube tutorials and Facebook home hobby pages, commenting, “I love the industrial world. I need these tools and machines to make my work. Anything I use, I research and get to know really well, in all its history. I am always researching material applications and functions.” Being able to fabricate his work in his own studio remains essential, allowing him to build in adjustments, such as attaching wheels to objects weighing hundreds of pounds, making his workplace as much an innovation lab as a sculpture studio.

A self-taught inventor and engineer, Morales turned to art in college, attending the Escuela de Artes Plasti-

cas in San Juan. An assignment for the Experimental Sculpture class taught by Charles Juhász-Alvarado—to create a sculpture from found materials—made Morales realize that he had been making art all along. Juhász-Alvarado, who is renowned on the island as a sculptor and teacher, recalls Morales being very focused on technique and skeptical about pedagogy. Every project he produced was a critique of the assignment. He was “already aggressive, physical, intense, and clever.” Morales still considers Juhász-Alvarado a close friend and a mentor who reinforced his commitment to meticulously fabricating all of his work himself.

Morales began exhibiting and winning prizes before completing his BFA in 1996. At the time, San Juan *Star* critic Manuel Alvarez Lezama declared, “An artist like Morales in a place like Puerto Rico is not only an exception but almost a miracle.” A desire for competition on a broader level drew him to New York City after graduation, where he has lived ever since. Though he frequently exhibits on the island, his career has become global; his work has appeared in “Greater New York” (2000) at P.S.1; “Pay Attention Please” (2001) at the Museo d’Arte Provincia di Nouro, Sardinia; “None of the Above” (2004)

LEFT: GREGORY R. STALEY / RIGHT: MARIAN HARDERS, COURTESY PUBLIC ART FUND, NY



Tenta-culosa No. 12, 2012. Industrial materials, 112 x 192 in. diameter.

at Real Art Ways, Hartford; “Wizard Chamber” (2013) at Kunsthalle Winterthur, Switzerland; and “NYC Makers: MAD Biennial” (2014) at the Museum of Art and Design, New York. The themes of these group shows offer telling indicators about his artistic diversity. “None of the Above” debunked the stereotyping of Puerto Rican art. “Wizard Chamber” paid homage to Nikola Tesla’s inventions. And the MAD exhibition celebrated “exquisite workmanship and skill.” Morales’s sculpture does not fulfill any notion of *tropicalismo*, which may exclude him from some opportunities. A Latino uninterested in identity politics, he observes that “the conversation about identity began when I moved to New York. My identity is attached to my person, but not to my work.” He declares himself fundamentally Puerto Rican, though his work would not be considered “culture-bearing.”

Island issues like gun violence and environmental degradation sometimes filter in, but the sculptures are about more universal themes than race or ethnicity. They provoke fundamental emotions, primarily

of anxiety and fear. Stepping near *Tatauee No. 97* (1997) causes a wall-mounted tattoo needle to lash out in a scorpion-like motion. When a viewer sets off an area sensor, *Hurán No. 98* (1998) sends two circular saw blades spinning through space. In the foot-activated, ceiling-mounted *Manta-raya No. 14* (2014), 11.5-foot-long steel conveyor belts are catapulted back and forth through the gallery. The performative aspect of the sculptures is activated by the viewer, causing an intense and immediate connection.

Not surprisingly, Morales gets occasional pushback from curators, who are trained to keep viewer experience, not to mention survival, in mind. Though he does concede to the placement of warning signs, for him, the experience is an adrenaline rush that he does not want to compromise. As he says, “My intention is to provoke. Throughout my life, I have studied psychological reactions. By instigating responses with my work, I try to build a dialogue—to make the viewer interact. I play with the meanings of fear, desire, ambition, and pleasure.”

Morales’s first outdoor sculpture, *LMPSTno97* (1997), commissioned by Public Art Fund, presented a unique set of challenges. Its intended site was nixed when curators decided that the 28-foot-high lamppost was too threatening for Times Square. When activated by pedestrians, the claw-like apparatus of this kinetic sculpture descended on a cable winch to a height of about



Hurán No. 98, 1998. Industrial materials, 74 x 80 in. diameter.

seven feet above the ground, which gave the unwitting passerby the alarming feeling of being the about-to-be-plucked prize in a penny arcade vending machine. It was moved to Brooklyn.

Dragonfly (2012), created at Franconia Sculpture Park in Minnesota and funded by the Jerome Foundation, combines benign and aggressive imagery suggesting human or insect flight. The rather menacing, blade-shaped body of the 26-foot-high dragonfly is balanced by a rotating Cessna airplane propeller, powered by a foot-activated air compressor or by wind. Here, the calm energy of the windmill transforms into associations with aviation and

modern wind turbines. The six-foot-wide propeller was acquired from a Minnesota airplane scrapyard in true industrial-archaeologist fashion. Though Morales uses found materials, it is not for their embedded meanings or original functions. The history of the propeller does not matter; it has been refurbished, rust and wear buffed away and new meaning created.

A recent series evoking marine life makes a clear environmental statement. *Tenta-culosa No. 12* (2012) appears to threaten viewers with the centrifugal whipping action of long nylon strands anchored to the ceiling. Like *Manta-raya*, this industrial-organic hybrid seems to be fighting back against human climate-changers. These are challenging depictions of oceanic creatures. Their titles, Spanish-English hybrids that Morales invents, suggest real words and are easy to translate into either language. The title *Hurán* is derived from the root of the indigenous Taíno word *huracán*, adopted into the English “hurricane.” *Hurán* also plays with Spanish adjectives meaning “standoffish,” which describes the defensive posture that viewers must take to avoid serious injury around the sculpture.

Gun violence has been a pervasive theme since Morales’s first New York solo exhibition at DeChiara/Stewart Gallery (1998). The title work, *Triobegun Ironik No. 98*, functions as a three-way shooting game, incorporating three compressed air nozzles as guns. The guns produce bursts of air, loud noises, and flashes of light. Though virtual shooting games are commonplace, this sculptural interpretation forces direct interaction among participants, resulting in explosive effects and unexpected psychological responses. It can be an outlet for aggression or turn into something fun and playful. The irony of the work is the self-discovery that can occur through the interaction.

Vainilla Power No. 04 (2004) sends a more direct political message about U.S. military aggression, crossing a medieval cross-bow with what appears to be a missile launcher. Imposing in scale, the aluminum and stainless steel elements include a baseball bat shaped into a missile head, a movie camera crane, and a milk tank cover. When triggered, the assemblage creates a gallery-shaking pneumatic jackhammer sound and a ricochet-recoil action for the shooter. Maybe this is Caribeño power fighting back?

The sex toy-inspired sculptures in the “Weapons of Mass Seduction” series evoke a mix of emotions as wide ranging as human sexual experience: pleasure, arousal, surprise, and discomfort, along with sadomasochistic pain. For the first installation at the Galería Carlos Irizarry in San Juan and the second installation at Galería Salvador Diaz in Madrid, Morales hired exotic dancers to demonstrate the pieces. They were instructed not to interact with spectators, which rendered any viewer participation voyeuristic. This series, which has been intelligently analyzed in Freudian terms, also has political undercurrents, relating to Morales’s outrage over the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, ostensibly justified by an erroneous search for “weapons of mass destruction.”

For all their anthropomorphic qualities and futuristic flare, Morales’s creations are surprisingly low-tech. He doesn’t use robotics or computerized controls. He is more interested in recon-

Armas de seducción masiva (Weapons of Mass Seduction), 2004. Industrial materials, installation at Galería Salvador Díaz.

stituting 20th-century technology than in researching cutting-edge innovations. His sculptures are a marvel to watch, in part because their mechanisms remain visible. Viewers can set them in motion and watch the cause and effect of their actions.

Looking at Morales's work, one might assume art historical inspirations such as Jean Tinguely, whose self-destructive *Homage to New York* (1960) came to life and fell apart in the MoMA sculpture garden. Or perhaps the work of Puerto Rican performance artist Rafael Montañez Ortiz, inventor of the Theater of Destruction. Instead, Morales points to Chris Burden's risk-taking 1970s performances and post-1980s kinetic installations, as well as the spectacles created by Survival Research Laboratories (SRL), a California-based industrial performance art collective, founded by Mark Pauline in 1978. According to the SRL Web site, this ever-evolving group of "creative technicians" stages "dangerous and disturbing mechanical presentations" involving devices such as a "shockwave cannon," a "flame hurricane," and a "high pressure air launcher." SRL's explosive events employ special effects machines in epic battles among robotic devices. Their FX performances are *Mad Max* or *Burning Man* apocalyptic—sensational, but not interactive.

For Morales, on the other hand, physical involvement, potentially dangerous and extreme, is a central part of the work. Viewers are warned in advance of the risks that accompany engagement. So, there is a buy-in, an implicit contract between artist and viewer; the encounter won't be casual or easy, but it may be thrilling.

Morales's work also reflects a neo-Dada use of the readymade, as well as a psychological affinity with Dadaist tendencies toward provocation and anarchy. Their recognition of the destructive and dehumanizing side of the industrial age finds an updated interpretation in his interactive objects. While Duchamp's "ready-made-aided" assemblages and 1920s rotary machines incorporate mass-produced



objects and encourage active viewer engagement, Morales's kinetic sculptures, often activated by the viewer, explore the physical and psychological connection between the human body and machine-made objects. Anxiety over the dehumanizing effects of the industrial age has become anxiety about the technological age.

This election cycle has brought growing fears of human displacement by machines to the forefront. Many people worry that technology is racing too far ahead of laws, government, education, transportation, and warfare. Fear-mongering about jobs lost to China and Mexico obscures the reality of the growing number of workers in the U.S. and around the world already replaced by technology—human labor no longer fuels industrial production and is rapidly being replaced in white collar jobs. Morales's work taps into these deep-seated concerns about the future of humanity in the age of machines. By teasing and validating those emotions, it provokes tech-terror while revering manual, human labor—what humans do.

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