

Colombia through the senses

By JOHANNA ZULETA

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Let us start by remembering what Colombia's essence is... within its name it carries its own destiny. Colombia takes its etymology from Cristoforo Colombo, and Colombo's name derives from the Latin *columba*, which means dove. On 24 September I was in Bogotá, and was invited with a group of guests relevant to the country's arts and cultural scene, to unveil the sculpture that Fernando Botero generously donated to the nation: a dove, plump, white, and confident; to express his solidarity and support for the transcendental process the country is undergoing. My belief is that, at this point in its history, Colombia is more determined than ever to achieve a lasting peace, for the country's very name is a promise in itself.

Over the past twenty years, Colombia has been struggling to break free from the chaos that followed the cartels, in an effort to reinvent itself, to become one of the most modern and socially innovative countries in Latin America, bringing together all strands of society to work towards the creation of a new, progressive politics. This revolution found its first expression in Antanas Mockus, a mathematician and philosopher of Lithuanian descent who became mayor of Bogotá in 1995, and began to transfigure contemporary Colombian politics, at a time when the country had reached rock bottom. With the premise "What would an artist do?" he

transformed the social psychology of the

city. From training policemen as mimes, proclaiming a citizens' manifesto dressed in spandex as a superhero, to inventing a 'vaccine' against violence; Antanas managed to engage youngsters and empower people at all levels of society, not only in the capital, but also the entire nation, and even internationally. His legacy is so strong that Doris Sommer, Prof of Romance Languages and Literature at Harvard University, foregrounded him in her research on how art can transform societies. Find out more about this work through her book *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities*.

Places with nothing to lose can afford to experiment with radical urban solutions. In the case of Medellín's notorious Comuna 13, transformation was effected through, among other things, libraries and funiculars to reconcile and integrate social and geographic spaces.

In *Art as a Therapy*, Alain de Botton defines the seven functions of art as "remembering, hope, sorrow, rebalancing, self-understanding, growth and appreciation". To which we could add, helping a traumatised society to understand itself and its problems. Art can dissolve differences, foster understanding, facilitate dialogue, and ultimately reduce conflict.

However, arts and culture are a broad church. At the other end of the spectrum art can also be experienced as snobbish and alienating. Another problem, is the tendency of the "centre" to pigeonhole artists by national origin, so many successful artists quite rightly object to being exoticised. If they belong to a certain place or have a common trait it is that they address the atemporal and the universal and seek to transcend time and space.

If writers

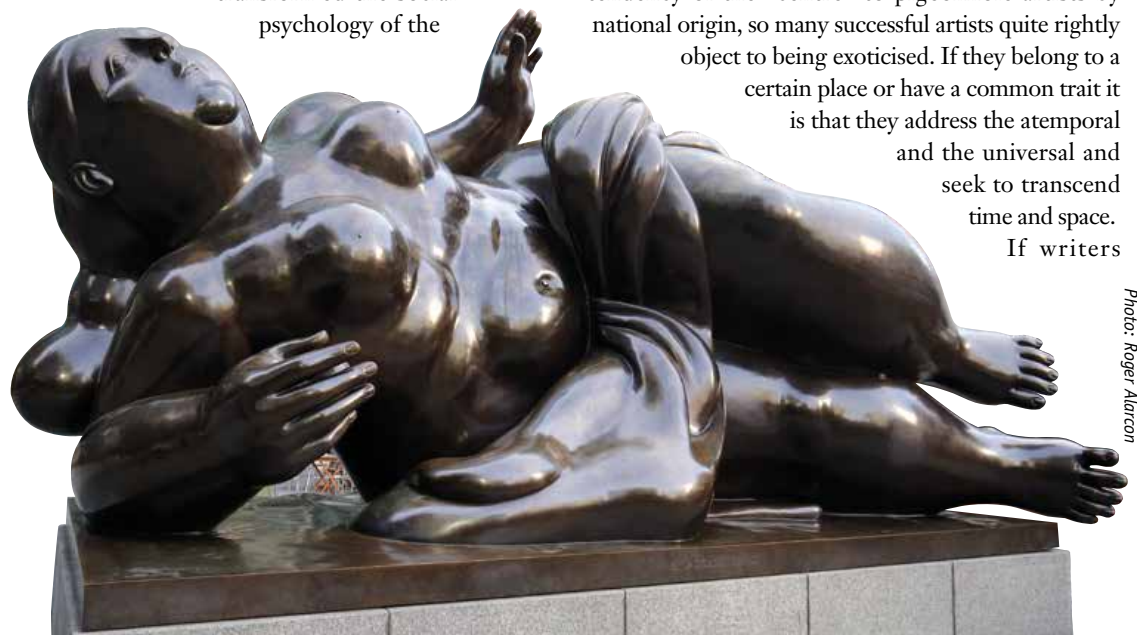


Photo: Roger Altman

At five tonnes, *Venus*, in London's Broadgate is one of Botero's largest pieces and her generous curves are ever popular with passers-by

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and artists who have gained worldwide recognition sometimes prefer to ignore or transcend their local, regional or national roots, we must remember that it is the richness of popular culture that drives them. No artist is born in a petri dish: he or she is the product of the sounds, smells, and stories of their childhood. Our late Nobel Literature laureate, Gabriel García Márquez, is perhaps the most famous example of this. Whereas in Europe, popular culture is largely dictated by the media, in Colombia complex traditions of music, crafts and poetry thrive and evolve everywhere, in both urban and rural environments. And it is this deep civilisation that convinces me that culture, high and low, is the greatest and most complete road towards an advanced society on the world stage.

My own trajectory led me to this conclusion on a personal level. I grew up in a family of writers and journalists, nurtured by the works of Estanislao Zuleta – perhaps Colombia’s quintessential philosopher of the 20th century– imbuing me with the idea that it is a citizen’s responsibility to improve society. At first I thought that the way to do so was through politics; I started a civic movement, Acción

Colombia, at the tender age of sixteen. After idealism met reality, and with a limited scope of action in the ’90s, I decided instead to study international business, and follow this path with an emphasis on corporate social responsibility. At eighteen I broke my back in a serious car accident, and after a long convalescence, decided to come to London, where my holistic recovery was complemented by studying contemporary dance, thanks to a grant from the Prince’s Trust. I marvelled at Britain’s democracy of culture – the fact that museums are free and this access to knowledge is available to anyone – but also at its ignorance regarding Colombia. People

knew little about us beyond the old stereotypes and misconceptions, and although I was in the cultural capital of the world, I found there was hardly anything happening that involved Latin America. This is when I decided to start building those bridges, casting that net. Very few places in the world offer you this opportunity, and it is thanks to London that I grew to discover my vocation as a cultural entrepreneur, and also to come to the realisation that in fact this was the most powerful tool for social change.

The bridges I attempt to build are buttressed by the way in which the worlds contained in Colombia and all Latin America have always been international, that is to say a mixture of indigenous, African, and European cultures. Gabo’s biographer Gerald Martin once told me: “In London we are so proud of being multicultural, this is perhaps something of the past 50 years – whereas Latin Americans have known what it is to be multicultural for 500 years.” History and memory have been key themes, but the irrepressible sense of being a ‘new world’, constantly in formation, makes our art scene especially groundbreaking.

In all this bustle of activity, I do feel that the existence of mediators, curators and promoters has an essential, and often underappreciated, part to play. I love to foster these channels of communication, like a form of crosspollination. It is important to understand that success stories don’t happen





independently or overnight, they usually require a whole ecosystem to support them.

Botero, for example, has been accompanied by another groundbreaker, **Felipe Grimberg**. Born in Colombia, and educated in the USA, he is one of the pioneers in the profession of art dealership in the country. Today he is on the International Advisory Board of the Center for LatAm Studies at the University of California in Berkeley. He is also the Director of Felipe Grimberg Fine Art, based in Miami since 1999. During this time, he has sold the largest number of artworks by Botero of any dealer in the world. After a journey of more than 20 years, he has published a book, *Selling Botero*, which portrays the true nature of a dealer's relationship with the artist, and other stories including the creation of collections, relationships with gallerists and mentors, and the thieves he's met along the way. Felipe's presence in the UK is increasing. He will soon be presenting his book in London. Find out more at www.FelipeGrimberg.com

In the literary arena, the publisher **Bill Swainson**, has devoted his career to the dissemination of Hispanic writers in the English speaking world. During his period with Bloomsbury he sponsored translations of Carlos Fuentes, and supported new generation authors such as Juan Gabriel Vásquez. He commissioned the biography of García Márquez, by Gerald Martin and other non-fiction writers including Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, author of *What if Latin America Ruled the World*. Currently an independent publisher, he was awarded an OBE for his services to literary translation.

Since I began my project, the Hay Festival has found a receptive home from home in beautiful Cartagena de Indias, much to the enchantment of visiting writers and readers, as well as other Colombian creators who have likewise been acclaimed in Britain.

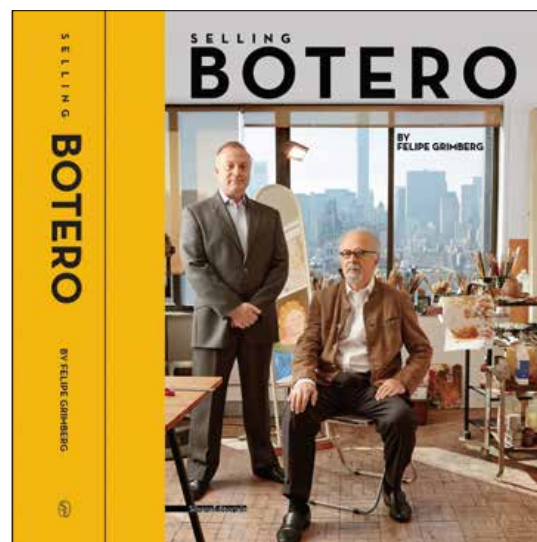
Doris Salcedo, unusual in remaining based in her own country, was both the first woman and the first Latin American to receive a TATE Modern Turbine Hall commission in 2007. "Shibboleth is the first work to intervene directly in the fabric of the Turbine Hall.

Rather than fill this iconic space" and it still remains one of the most admired works to have inhabited the museum, and the only one that would leave a permanent mark.

Carlos Jacanamijoy, a native of the Inga people, son of a 'Taita' (shaman), born in and influenced by the Putumayo jungle, his language describes the world through intuition before reason. His shamanic heritage is his medium in this search for truth – between naivety and ancient wisdom, he plumbs the depths of the soul, returning to the roots, rescuing ancestral traditions and their intrinsic values in moments in which they were unappreciated. The first artist of indigenous descent to have graduated from the School of Fine Arts in Bogotá, he has been described as a Colombian abstract expressionist and has been exhibited at the Smithsonian Museum, both in New York and Washington, DC. www.CarlosJacanamijoy.com

Santiago Montoya, could also be seen as a historian, or sociologist, he makes art made of money, exploring the ready-made product, using the aesthetics of materials to introduce meaning, examining the value of money as well as the symbology incorporated within money, and what we worship. In his monograph, *The Great Swindle*, Montoya "looks at paper money as a platform of political propaganda, exploiting iconic pictures to bolster power and embed imagery in the national consciousness". He is represented in London by www.HalcyonGallery.com/artists/Santiago-Montoya

Another outstanding example is **Oswaldo Maciá**, born in Cartagena de Indias, and based in London since 1993. His works are held in a number of collections, including the TATE and Daros, and has been included in the most prestigious exhibitions all over the world among them the Venice Biennale, Havana Biennial Cuba and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid. Maciá seeks to question our assumptions about knowledge and



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Top left: Martamaria Carrillo & Laura Riascos, the female spirit of rum

Bottom right: Art dealer Felipe Grimberg, and his compilation book of 20 years' work, *Selling Botero*

No artist is born in a petri dish: He or she is the product of the sounds, smells, and stories of their childhood

Top right: Carlos Jacanamijoy's 'Algarabia y Silencios', 2012

Centre: 'Gabo - The Magic of Reality' Kate Horne's documentary film, nominated for an Emmy

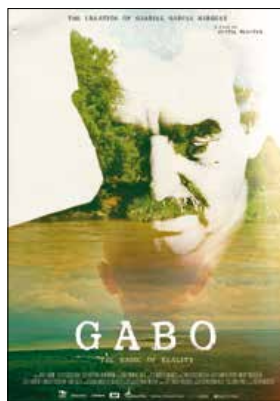
Bottom left: Santiago Montoya's 'Use Me' - a meditation on the amorality of money

perception through his olfactory-acoustic sculptures. "I am particularly concerned with how the stimuli we receive from the outside world are translated into images and information through our senses. And how this intake of information is mediated by what we think we know." For him it is vital to search for what we don't yet know, for perceptions that involve us with what is 'unfamiliar, outside of language'. "I want to create questions that can't be dispatched or rendered pointless with an 'I know'." I highly recommend you to read his Manifesto for olfactory-acoustic sculpture. www.OswaldoMacia.com

Taste is another sensual perception and culture does not only mean high art, as is the case with **La Hechicera**, Colombia's most exceptional rum. Laura Riascos, rum baroness of the Caribbean and patron of Latin American arts, was inspired to pursue her true calling by creating a brand that would honour her family's tradition as the single most knowledgeable craftsmen of fine rums in the country. Casa Santana is an unassuming little bodega that has been ageing and blending the best rums for over twenty years in the historic port of Barranquilla. Their most celebrated product is La Hechicera, a masterful blend of mature rums, aged for between 12 and 21 years in barrels that once aged bourbon. The Latin inscription that graces the bottle translates into Resolute in Being, Gentle in Execution - a reflection of the values that have made this exuberant rum into an instant classic. Laura, her brother Miguel Riascos and brand manager Martamaria Carrillo, are responsible for marketing the brand in international markets and have carved a home for it here in the centre



of London. La Hechicera is now the favoured luxury rum brand in the likes of Harrods and Fortnum & Mason and graces the cocktail menus of The Ritz, The Dorchester, Chiltern Firehouse and Quaglino's. After winning multiple awards they have successfully placed Colombia back on the rum map. For a taste of temptation visit www.LaHechicera.co



An Englishman who made the journey the other way, is the late travel writer Michael Jacobs. *The Robber of Memories*, 2014, follows the trail of García Márquez down the Magdalena river (a journey Gabo himself made recalling Bolívar). Olivia Laing says "he travels upstream towards what comes to seem like a heartland of mystery, magic and darkness." Anybody who

dreams of exploring Colombia can start by reading this entrancing book, which also for so many Colombians revealed the country in a new and profound light.

In another Macondean ellipsis that takes us back to García Márquez but in the form of film is the documentary on him by Kate Horne, *Gabo: The Magic of Reality*. 2014. "More than just a biography, this film follows the interwoven threads of García Márquez's life and work to reveal the incredible power of human imagination." The film is produced and co-written by Kate and has just been nominated for an Emmy award. The first international film to have been produced about Gabo, with the sponsorship of Discovery Channel and the blessing of his family, featuring his siblings, and among other guests Bill Clinton. Clinton particularly emphasises Gabo's political significance as the go-between for a first attempt at a US-Cuba rapprochement. Once again, an example of opening the door for dialogue and reconciliation. Further details can be found at www.GaboTheFilm.com. With avatars like these, Colombia gives me hope!

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Special thanks to Loreto Herman, Sir Chris Bonington, Frida Sjöholm, Hernando Mestre and www.Newlink-Group.com

