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Art | In Conversation

G. T. PELLIZZI and RAY SMITH with Phong Bui

by G. T. Pellizzi and Ray Smith

A week after the opening of *The Executive of Nonfiction: Bender Paintings* at X Gallery (February 5–March 8, 2012 series 1), T. Pellizzi and Ray Smith paid a visit to the duo's headquarters to discuss with publisher Phong Bui what led to their first collaboration.

Phong Bui (PhoBui): It's an unlikely collaboration. One of you is an older, seasoned veteran of the '90s art scene and the contemporary art world, and the other is a younger generation. The elder is a younger artist, who, up until his solo debut at Y Gallery last year, was primarily associated with the alternative Brooklyn Bridge Quality Foundation. How did the show come about? And why were you both interested in Executive Paintings of the executive of Nonfiction as a subject?

G. T. Pellizzi: Well, our relationship goes back pretty far. I worked at Bui's institute when I was 16. In a sense Ray was one of my first real art teachers, and we have been close friends for a long time.

Ruth: Ray has been a patron saint for many artists, old and young.

PhoBui: And I shared a studio with Ray for the last three years. Last Thanksgiving he invited me to visit his family's ranch, the Tierra Ranch, which has been in his family for generations. Tierra means Earth. It's located in Bernardo, Texas, which is right at the border of the U.S. and Mexico. I realized that the idea of the collaboration pertained.

Ray Smith: I think the spirit of collaboration was certainly revived at the ranch. We at the South Texas Ranch Institute, which is a non-profit, we have artists, and Gilma Gonzalez—decided that we were going to come up with this communal idea called "universe-universe", which is the university of the universe. Pretty soon we began conversations with many artist friends including Sam Shelton, Julian Barbour, and Jason Lanier, who is famous for popularizing the term "virtual reality," as well as philosophers like Ronen Gaillard. So this whole idea of a community of artists in a sense had been in the air for quite a while. We had been talking about it. T. Pellizzi joined around on the building, he was very heightened that spirit, he also brought with him the new spirit of collaboration. That's how I was introduced to Ryan High Quality. I instantly found what they were doing very exciting. Also, when Ryan first came to the ranch 10 years ago, he and I did discuss some potential long-term collaborations regarding the landscape in terms of architecture. At that point, Tiona was about to study architecture at Cooper Union so he was interested in making the most of the natural resources and materials that were already there in the land. But what you're then in a sense, the Tierra Ranch Institute, it's a kind of a contemporary monastery would be better. The whole area is lonely, with a very low population density, probably no more than maybe three thousand people in three million acres. Because it's right on the border, it's really no man's land. It's the landscape Cormac McCarthy wrote about in *No Country for Old Men*.

Ruth: It is far from the infamous Armstrong Ranch where Dick Cheney shot Harry Whittington!

Smith: It's literally right next door.

PhoBui: It's also right next to King Ranch, where the movie *Giant* with Rock Hudson was filmed.

Smith: Although both that novel and film are fictional, the basic idea of the ranch is very accurate. It's a very large ranch and it's been in operation. Most of those ranches were created right after the Civil War, with the exception of my family's ranch. It belonged to Spain, and then at some point the Spanish crown granted it to my great-great-great-great-great grandfather. But the real development of course happened after the secession and the formation of Texas into a republic.

Ruth: So one can say that you're both Mexican-American artists of different heritages but who share similar cultural backgrounds.

PhoBui: Yes. I was born in Mexico and spent a lot of my early childhood there. My mother's family is in Mexico. Ray was born in Texas but grew up and went to art school in Puebla and began his career as an artist in Mexico City.

Smith: I moved to New York in 1965, which was my first experience of America in terms of living in it.

PhoBui: Also, our families both had houses in Cuernavaca, another coincidental happenstance.

Smith: It's like what they say in Mexico: God makes the men and dig initial each other, so we were both eventually end up in the same neighborhood at one point or another. And in the '70s, I met Francisco, Tomás And, in New Mexico, then in Mexico, and we both knew a lot of people in common so it was like meeting a brother who had been in the same family that you had just never met before.

Ruth: Given the history between you two, where does the execution of Nonfiction fit in?

PhoBui: Ray's great great grandfather was partners with Maximilian. Ray's family owned the land that Maximilian was encamped with Maximilian. Actually, Maximilian had knighted Ray's great great grandfather, And Mariano, Ray's wife, is great great granddaughter of Mariano Escobedo, the general who captured and killed Maximilian.

Ruth: Opposites attract, shall we say? [Laughs.]

PhoBui: But it's even more uncanny because Ray and Mariano met at Maximilian's castle in Innsbruck, Austria, actually on the bus to see the grounds.

Ruth: Weird. And you looked at each other and fell in love right away. [Laughs.]

Smith: Well, something like that. I don't know if we fell in love, we fell in lust.

PhoBui: And then Mariano says, "So what are you doing here?" and Ray says, "Oh well, my great great grandfather was knighted by Maximilian." Then Ray asks, "What are you doing here?" and she says, "Well, my great great grandfather killed Maximilian."

Smith: [Laughs.] So now if you go back to the history of how these ranches were created after the Republic of Texas formed, it's an odd coincidence—it's just a really weird time in history because Texas became a republic so they're Republicans and Bexis Jones is a liberal Republican, which is not the same as being Republican, so it's known today, with the conservatives. Liberal Republicans are Democrats. But Bexis Jones was a Republican in Texas. Nevertheless, it's those days these ranches in essence got formed by alliances between the opposing forces, across the border between the Republic of Texas and the French crown at that point, or probably just the conservative generals on the Mexican side.

Ruth: Which brings us to the Manet painting.

PhoBui: All of these different histories and backgrounds built up and eventually led to a dinner conversation in which we began to talk about William Bouguereau's elegiac paintings and Hide de Saint-Pierre's "Mourning Paintings," and so on. We realized that, given the whole history of Maximilian and the family, including the ranch and the broader political context of the border, transposing the action in this painting into being the action that generates the work would be a really beautiful thing, as a tribute.

Smith: A kind of exclusion begun to bows, and this was Thanksgiving so my kids and friends are all there. At the ranch we've accumulated a lot, so there's a dump we figure is 150 years old and it because a kind of archaeological site. We've found all kinds of stuff there, and we've dug around, and remember family lineage, that grandma used to cook tortillas on that oven, or that tractor blew up one day—because somebody was smoking and they were dead and blew it up—there's a memory for the place. We also discovered that the ranch's been was filled with all kinds of pants: car pants, house pants, gloves stained, for manuel—endless different uniform and brand names. We said to ourselves, "What the hell difference does it make what's in it?" So we just took as much as we could carry out to the dumpsite. There was a pigeon with all these old linoss at one end, which became like a shooting gallery.

PhoBui: We placed various paint cans on top of the pigeon and started to shoot at them. It was just like transposing the paint into body bodies.

Smith: It's happened at our first moment because the whole idea and excitement had been building up between everybody.

Ruth: So it wasn't just the two of you shooting [laughs]. There was an audience.

Smith: Yes, just like in an actual executive where all the waiting and tension builds up until the moment of reckoning.

PhoBui: Actually, Bruno, Ray's son, also shot. We all had to be mind-blown to give performance in reference to the second of Manet's series of paintings on Maximilian's execution.

Nicolas Poussin, *The Plague of Ashdod*, 1630–31, oil on canvas, 85 x 120 cm.

Ruth: The London picture.

PhoBui: Yes, partly because the various panels look like Fragonard, similar to Manet's painting, and we used many pastels at once.

Ruth: How long did it take to decide it finished?

PhoBui: Five full days of actual production, but then there were several days planning, setting up, and all that.

Smith: So much of our set up we thought would be of some consequence, and of course, we were wrong. [Laughs.] I mean, no one could calculate, for instance, how much silver paint does a spray bottle explode into if you fire it with a 12 gauge shotgun? The splatter really covers an enormous amount of space. Once you penetrate the can with that many bullets, it was a complete mess.

Ruth: Too was the distance between you and the set up?

PhoBui: I'd say 25 feet.

Smith: The other thing that was mixed with the violence aspect, the violence of the shotgun blast, was that it was a very, very, very,