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Desnudo con cámara triple, 1973

© Carlos Jurado

Carlos Jurado: Master Alchemist

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Honolulu, Hawai'i, USA.



Autorretrato con sombrero, 1977

© Carlos Jurado

Carlos Jurado is known as a painter and photographer, but his art wouldn't be what it is if his life weren't art. Many photographers, especially members of photography clubs, can be quite obsessed with the latest technical gizmos, as if those extras could magically increase the quality of their seeing and art. Jurado's approach to photography reflects a very different direction. He stays close to photography's origins by using the most basic camera, a box with a tiny hole—the pinhole camera. Using this “archaic” camera, Jurado shows us how unimportant equipment is relative to the photographer's skill, artistry, and quality of seeing.

But the moral isn't to disregard equipment or techniques. In fact, Jurado's love of tools and methods is another aspect of his art: he builds his own cameras and invents his own processing techniques. For example, he built a camera that takes three images simultaneously on the same negative: wide angle, normal, and telephoto (see image on facing page). What better way to demonstrate the constructive nature of photography...and of “reality.” Furthermore, true to his heroes of photography, Fox Talbot, Niepce, and Daguerre, Jurado has explored their “alchemic processes,” expanding upon them and inventing new ones, including an “addichrome” process (involving a separate color screen sandwiched into the negative both while photographing and printing the image, a process which allows him to create unique color photographs). But Jurado does not identify himself as a technician—he feels more comfortable with the term “alchemist,” which adds an aura of magic to his work. Keeping a sense of wonder lies at the heart of Jurado's *joie de vivre*—it pulsates in his art and in his life.

Jurado's subjects are often commonplace objects. He is not searching for the unusual, but somehow manages to transform his daily surroundings into an uncommon world. Often, Jurado uses little objects, bibelots, that sit around his home—he has made several images of a toy skeleton which was lying around the house. Some critics interpreted this as an obsession with death, but as Jurado says: "They tell me that I have a fixation with death because I shoot skulls. The truth is that I shoot them because they are in the house, and they are in the house because my wife, Chichay, likes them." In his life and in his art, Jurado illuminates the endless ways the constructive nature of reality fools us and preconceptions mislead us.

Recently I had the privilege of meeting this great artist, and with the translation assistance of his daughter Zinzuni, gathered some of Carlos Jurado's thoughts on his approach to photography.



PG: Do you feel that photography has changed your way of seeing?

CJ: It's an interesting question. I had not thought about this before. Many times I see things and think, this could be a photograph. So, in some way not a lot...it does change, it does give a new way of seeing, but it is not conscious.

PG: Would you say that photography has enriched the quality of your life?

CJ: Yes, any activity that you take seriously enriches your life. It is a new possibility to communicate something.

PG: What attracts you to pinhole photography?

CJ: It's a medium that satisfies me for many reasons. For example, the atmosphere that I get is not possible with other, modern cameras. My education is as a painter, and pinhole photography is more related to painting than to traditional photography. Practically, this gives me more freedom. I can make any format I want, including angles that conventional cameras, for commercial reasons, do not permit. But that is just one reason. Mostly, what I like about the pinhole camera is that it allows me to explore beyond our conventional limits.

Editor's note: In addition to the present article, photographs by Carlos Jurado appear on pages 26, 58, 162, 184, and on the back cover.

PG: Could you describe your inner photographic experience, such as states of consciousness? Do you have to be in a specific state of mind to see an image?

CJ: There are two aspects to it. One is involuntary and has to do with the space I am in. Then there is another one that I planned beforehand, or that I have to do to serve a purpose...a specific theme show, for example. I have to make a distinction here because there are different types of photography. If I go to the Chiapas where there is a social movement, I have certain ideas about taking certain kinds of photographs. I have to open my heart to understand what is going on to be able to do it right. But the kind of work I do is not documentary.

PG: Does your relationship to your subject change through photography?

CJ: That object that is there, real, will have a completely different presence in the image. It's not the same, it's another thing. And that other thing is my creation. But with pinhole photography, each time I make a photograph, it's an adventure. This doesn't happen with a conventional camera because I know exactly how it is going to come out. Not so with the pinhole camera: it's much more exciting!

PG: Is that part of the excitement of pinhole photography, that feeling of not knowing?

CJ: Not exactly, I like it because of the different effect that I can't get with another camera. Perhaps it's a way of communication that is closer to my personality: it is all interior. For one reason or another that I cannot define exactly, I am solidly opposed to a system of life that makes it mechanical. I know that I don't have it right, but the pinhole photography is closer to an act of magic than an act of technology. Although I know that in reality pinhole photography is also a technique, I don't experience it that way. I prefer feeling its magical side.

PG: Is there a spiritual dimension to your photography?

CJ: Not religious, no. It does not transform my personality, but there is an effect with several ramifications. It's like being in front of a piece of white canvas. I know what I want to do but not exactly how—what it's going to be at the end. In that particular moment, of course, it can be a different dimension, sometimes frightening! The creative process cannot be easily explained: sometimes I have to work on something ten times over. Then, a new dimension opens up and I know what I want, but I never know when the opening will come about.

When you are going to execute an act of creation you really have to be in a different dimension to go through and achieve what you want, but that act of creation, whatever it is, gives you that dimension that is not the one that you have in your everyday life. And an act of creation

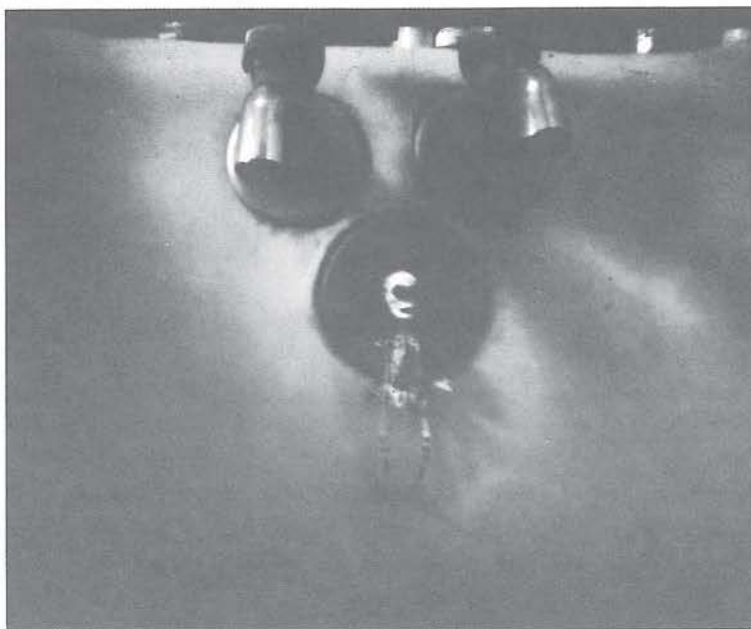
can provoke many different creations. In painting, for example, you are working on a particular part, and in my case, if I am not satisfied, I cover it up, sometimes I even scratch the canvas and have to patch it in the back—in that moment there is a dimension that is awfully hard. In some other cases things come out well, the way I want, and then I hope the path will remain clear.

The greatest satisfaction in life is when a piece of work exactly fits my intention. Then I feel fulfilled for several days. This can really change my dimension. When there is a problem that I

can't resolve, either in photography or in painting, I can't sleep, my relationship with everybody becomes very aggressive, I feel poorly until I resolve the problem. It can last for days. When I finally resolve the problem, I feel fulfilled in every respect. I am not religious at all, but I would say what religious people would say—that I have found God.

Photography, like any other

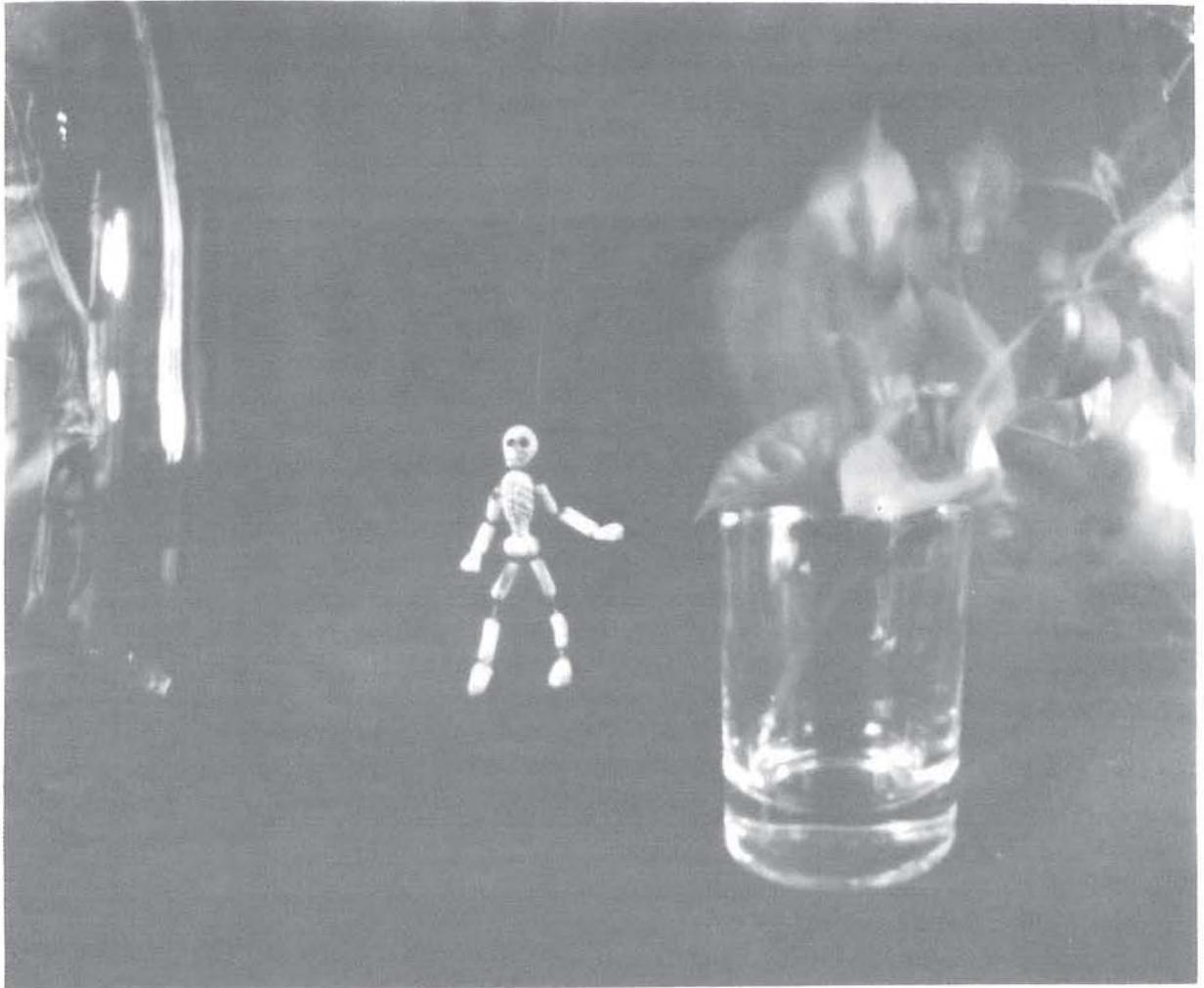
artistic expression, gives you another point of view of everyday life; that's what creation is for—to create other worlds. But of course it depends what kind of world you want to create. Some artists like tragic things or grotesque things, and there are people who like seeing that. I think that life is complex, difficult sometimes, and art should express beautiful things. In Mexico, mural paintings are very popular. But if a painter were to decorate a hospital or put the history of medicine on its walls, a patient who came in would be terrified to see how his legs would be cut off. Art should be the opposite.



Aborcadito en la Bañera, 1996

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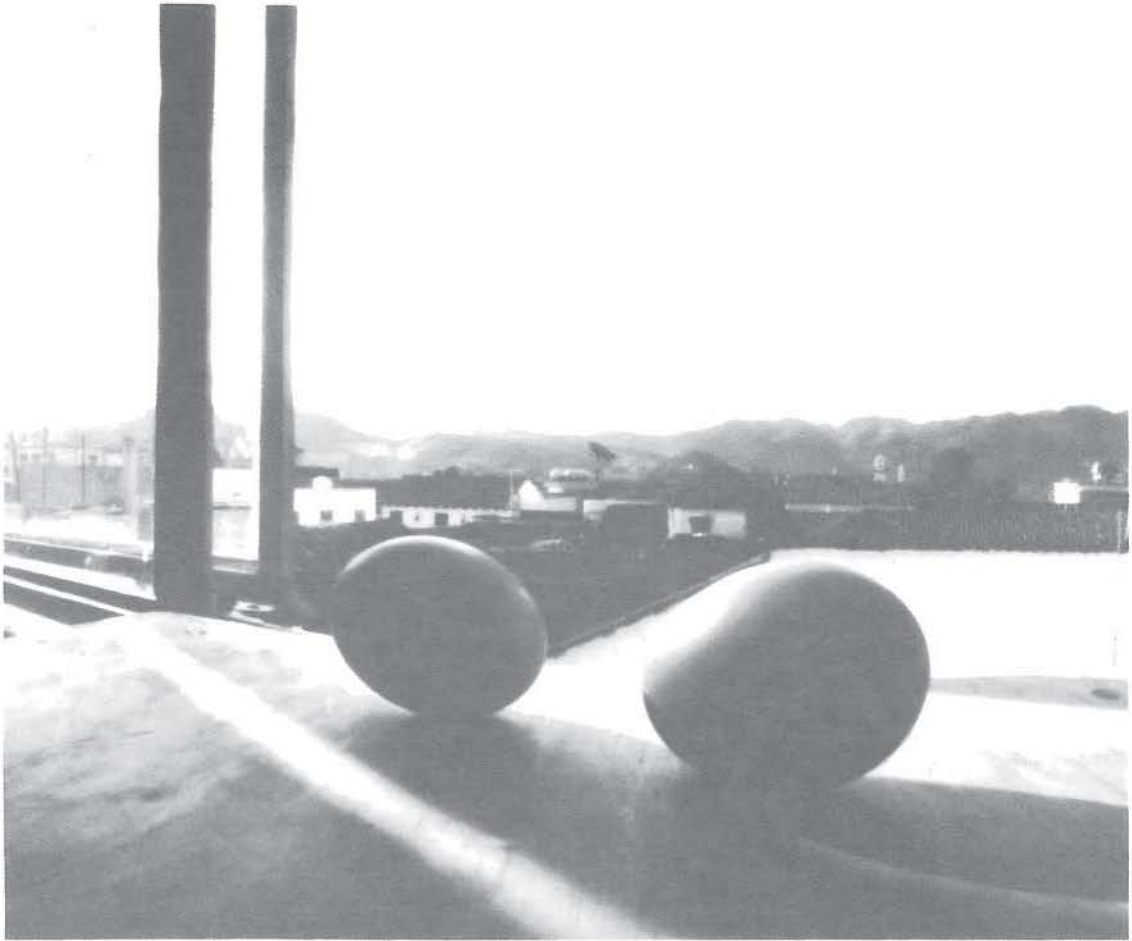
Aborcadito con Vaso, 1996

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Desnudo en la ventana, 1973

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Naturalez Muerta II, 1992

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