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“Red Devils to Hell”: An Interview with Artist Óscar Melgar on the Decline of Panama’s Painted Buses¹

Óscar Melgar (1968-) is the most prolific contemporary painter of Panama City’s famous “red devils.” These are the used and flamboyantly decorated school buses which are imported from the United States and which provide public transportation in the capital. Their name reflects their base color red and also refers to Panama’s colonial “devil dances,” which are equally showy, loud and sometimes aggressive. Melgar and other commercial artists adorn the vehicles to hide their age and to increase their visibility and their chances for attracting customers. The city’s bus system is privately operated, and rather than relying on one or two concessionaires, the network is dependent on dozens of small operators, who often converge on the same streets and who literally race against one another for their earnings. The paintings basically act as a form of advertisement and as a way to outshine and even humiliate opponents. They first materialized in the mid-twentieth century and were closely connected to Panama’s booming rumba scene and to the bars and cabarets, which opened their doors to U.S. servicemen during the Second World War. Much like the walls and stages of these venues, the red devils employ elements of Afro-Caribbean aesthetics. They tend to appropriate aspects of popular culture and to mix portraits of actors, singers, and athletes with high-toned colors and zigzag patterns. The owners’ children also frequently appear in the vibrant representations on the back emergency doors. The designs and pictures create a public spectacle capable of astonishing and drawing in passengers, especially when combined with thumping reggae, horns, screeching breaks and the rhythmic jingles of the *pavo* or assistant shouting out the destination.

Óscar Melgar entered this business in the early 1980s. He apprenticed for three years under Andrés Salazar, the genre’s leading figure during the late twentieth century. Subsequently, Melgar studied at Ganexa, Panama’s private art academy. At the beginning of this decade, he emerged as the most prominent painter in the genre and went on to decorate literally hundreds of buses. Melgar’s red devils are easily identifiable, as they are characterized by their “explosive” nature and his tendency to fill even the most marginal spaces with cartoons and assertions boasting of greatness and with playful or malicious faces sometimes lining the bumpers. The buses are packed and erupt with attitude, as well as with fluid and surprisingly delicate imagery of mermaids, flowers and pastoral and religious scenes. Saints and virgins appear on the buses, alongside wizards and fantastic monsters, castles, pagodas and professional wrestlers. Today, dozens of these creations circulate through the capital in what may be their last weeks of existence. Motivated partly by a long string of accidents and a broader desire to reform the urban environment, Panama’s President Martín Torrijos has announced the construction of a system of “articulated buses” to be placed under the control of two major businesses. In addition, he has declared his determination to remove the red devils from the entire city.² In an interview in Panama on July 17, 2008, Melgar reflected on these changes and the apparent termination of the decades-long artistic tradition.

SZOK: Óscar, in the past, there have been efforts to do away with the red devils. Do you think that these latest measures will have an effect?

MELGAR: It seems that they will have a big impact. For years, the authorities have been trying to kill the red devils. I'm worried that they will now succeed.

SZOK: What would the end of the tradition mean for Panama? What do the red devils and their art represent?

MELGAR: They represent one of the country's most important artistic traditions. All of us grew up with this painting, which is something very special about our country. Thousands of things go on in a painted bus. People converse, exchange greetings, and insult each other. Public transportation is monotonous in other places. When they outlawed the music, this was already something.³ Panama will not be the same without its buses and the environment that they provide for the people. They also are important for our international image. Foreigners are fascinated by the red devils, and they always go home with many pictures and stories. Panama has become famous for its red devils.

SZOK: You recently traveled to England to decorate buses. Tell us a bit about that experience.

MELGAR: Yes, I was invited to participate in the 2006 Liverpool Biennial. My colleague Jesús Jaime traveled with me, and we decorated eight buses for the show.⁴ We were there for two months and had a phenomenal time, and they're still using those buses in the city. We're hoping to travel in the next months to Mexico and to do something very similar there.

SZOK: Lately, you've also begun to produce paintings for galleries. Do you see yourself moving more in this direction?

MELGAR: Yes, the Liverpool experience was inspiring for me. It was particularly gratifying to receive some recognition in Panama. Of course, it wasn't like a champion boxer or the soccer team arriving at the airport. But there was some press coverage of the event, and when I returned home, I was presented with the opportunity to offer an exhibition at the Diabolo Rosso gallery. The idea was to take the techniques and spirit of bus painting and transfer them into a gallery setting.

SZOK: How did you do this? How did you transfer bus art's techniques and spirit into a gallery?

MELGAR: I recreated the environment of the buses by projecting images onto treated wood surfaces. I also used both paintbrushes and the airbrush and chose themes, which are reflective of the style. In this case, I focused on Japanese society.

SZOK: Japanese society? How does Japan reflect Panama's popular art?

MELGAR: The idea of Japan was to show distance, to demonstrate how far popular art can extend itself. Popular art crosses borders. It constantly incorporates objects from other places and

can be appreciated in many faraway lands. Just think of all those tourists taking their pictures. The vivid colors of Japan are also similar to the bright tones we use on the red devils. The exhibition seemed to go over well. People were impacted by its crossover nature, and most of the pieces were quickly sold. I'm now thinking up some new ideas and hope to present them in New York. This time I'm going to use canvas materials, as they are more easily transportable. Again I'll try to retain the essence of popular art.

SZOK: Now that you are working in both galleries and on buses, what would you say are the differences between the venues? What is the difference between popular and gallery art?

MELGAR: People regard gallery art as something legitimate, while they tend to see the bus images as something secondary. They call them "street art" or "art of the barrio." This idea perhaps is changing. We took our popular art to the Old World and helped to show its artistic merit. This experience has contributed to a new perception, or at least I like to think so.

SZOK: I'm intrigued by the connections between popular art and commercialism. It seems that popular artists often incorporate aspects of commercial culture into their imagery.

MELGAR: Yes, this is certainly the case. In fact, we use many of the same things evident in advertising, but we also try to change these subjects. We make them more interesting and more appealing to the viewer. You can see actors or singers in magazines and on television, but it is more compelling to encounter them on the back of a red devil. This is an essential part of popular art.

SZOK: It's also notable how music and musical themes often appear on the buses. What is the connection between bus art and music?

MELGAR: I was a DJ before I became a painter, and now I work part-time at a local salsa station. I've always tried to combine the two fields and transfer my knowledge from one area to the other. I think that my musical interests are reflected on the buses.

SZOK: What kind of music do you like?

MELGAR: I like tropical music—salsa and merengue, as well as ballads.

SZOK: As the old venue for popular art seems to be closing, is there another space opening for this tradition? Are there other places that popular art might appear?

MELGAR: I don't see it occurring at this time, and of course, this is very painful. It would be nice if something were to happen and if a new market were to open for our art. In the meantime, I intend to keep defending the red devils and will organize a dinosaur park, if this is necessary. This would be a place where people could see the buses and learn something about our painting. We're also looking at possibilities in Chiriquí and in other parts of the Interior. The new

transportation network will affect Panama City, but there are no plans for the rest of the country. This might present us with some opportunities.

SZOK: Thank you for your time, Óscar. I wish you best of luck.

MELGAR: You're welcome. Thank you for your interest.

Photos

Photo 1 – “Mercenario Nave” bus by Óscar Melgar and Jesús Jaime.

Photo 2 – Bus with Shakira portrait by Óscar Melgar.

Photo 3 – Wizard detail by Óscar Melgar.

Photo 4 – Tupac emergency door portrait by Óscar Melgar, with surrounding details by artist César Córdoba.

Photo 5 – Japanese portrait from Diablo Rosso exhibition (Óscar Melgar).

Photo 6 – Bus owner Sergio Escobar and son Sergio Elías Escobar standing in front of emergency door portrait by Óscar Melgar.

Notes

¹My title comes from a 2001 article published in *El Nuevo Herald*. The article described an earlier government effort to regulate the red devils and public transportation. The campaign to pressure and eliminate the red devils can be traced back to, at least, the early 1990s. Franco Rojas, "Panamá manda al infierno a los 'diablos rojos,'" *El Nuevo Herald*, 6 May 2001, 3B.

²The safety record of the buses is abysmal. In 2003, the bus drivers represented nearly 13 percent of those involved in the capital's traffic accidents and 20 percent of those implicated in fatalities. The statistics were 13 and 16 percent in 2004. *Accidentes de tránsito: año 2003* (Panama: Dirección de Estadística y Censo, 2005), 59-63; *Accidentes de tránsito: año 2004* (Panama: Dirección de Estadística y Censo, 2007), 56-60; Leonardo Flores and José González Pinilla, "Nace el Transmóvil, se irán los 'diablos rojos,'" *La Prensa* (15 May 2008): 6A; "Diablos rojos deben desaparecer, Torrijos," 14 May 2008, <http://www.presidencia.gob.pa/noticia2.php?cod=9986> (20 May 2008).

³As early as May 1991, municipal officials prohibited stereos and other noisemakers in an effort to reduce sound pollution. My own sense is that such measures have been ineffective. The buses continue to use loud horns and sirens, and they often play music at boisterous levels, especially when beyond the earshot of the police. *Decreto No. 312*, Alcaldía de Panamá, 6 May 1991, *Gaceta Oficial* (15 May 1991): 2-3.

⁴On this project, Jesús Javier Jaime (1968-) worked as Óscar Melgar's assistant. The two have collaborated on many occasions, although Jaime also decorates buses independently.