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Interview With Luis Jacob

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Luis Jacob, *Yes, Album*.



Luis Jacob, *Album X*, 2010.

Toronto-based artist Luis Jacob has emerged in the last decade as one of the most influential artists in Canada. Jacob's work takes as its subject the semantics of existence, perspective and social interaction. Inspired by a complex personal history and often deriving from research, his work encompasses photography, sculpture, video, installations and performance. Jacob is used to bringing together improbable referents, notably in his Albums, which are collections, of various images cut from published sources and assembled in plastic-laminate sheets. Imbued with a strong sense of "visual rhyming," the Albums use "existing cultural elements to expressively create new meaningful statements."

Timothée Chaillou: *In your work, what happens when two pictures are joined or juxtaposed?*

Luis Jacob: The "Albums" (2000-ongoing) consist of hundreds of images that have been excised from books and magazines, and assembled in plastic-laminate sheets to form narrative "image banks."

The experience of reading an Album entails perceiving relationships between images that criss-cross various sheets in many directions. Each viewer creates narrative links between individual images by means of visual rhymes—when something in one image rhymes with something else in a different image—producing what Ruth Noack and Roger

Buerger call a "migration of forms." The visual forms (colours, shapes, iconography) in one image begin to rhyme with those in adjacent images. This rhyming creates narrative sequences in the Album, as it seems to the viewer that a given form is "migrating"—appearing, reappearing and transforming—from image to image across several sheets. There is also a kind of "migration" that occurs at a higher level: in the interplay and correspondence between the forms of the artwork and the forms of the viewer's life-experience.

T.C.: *Do you recycle, appropriate or steal the images?*

L.J.: When I make an Album, I am recycling images that already exist, although this makes it sound like there is an environmental concern in what I am doing, which, to be honest, is not something I think about with these works. The word "appropriation" relates my work to artistic strategies of the 1980s, which indeed is when I first became interested in contemporary art. Stealing is a legal question, and a lawyer would be better prepared to answer this than I am.

I believe that my use of already existing images in the Albums is "linguistic." Like any language user I am using existing cultural elements that I did not invent, in order to create genuinely new, meaningful expressions.

T.C.: *Do you feel connected to the collage tradition?*

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LJ.: Certainly the collage tradition is extremely important, because it provides us with expressive forms that now we take for granted. Collage is everywhere: in music, in television editing techniques, on the Web. When it comes to the use of collage in the visual arts, I feel most connected to the work of Thomas Hirschhorn, and to that of the Canadian artist-collectives General Idea (Toronto) and Image Bank (Vancouver). From an historical perspective, I find Malevich's collage works very inspiring. In Italy, the speculative architecture groups Superstudio and Archizoom have produced amazing collage and montage works; and the architectural practice of a Dutch firm like MVRDV explores the juxtaposition of 'incompatible' vernacular forms collaged together within the same building. All these examples definitely fascinate me.

T.C.: *Who owns the images you use?*

LJ.: In the Albums, every single "image" is actually two things at once—an image protected by copyright, which is vested in the original creator—and an artifact physically cut out of a book or magazine that belongs to me.

T.C.: *What are Albums?*

LJ.: The Albums all have the same form: each one is a collection of various images cut from published sources and assembled in plastic-laminate sheets to compose an extended narrative.

Each Album has its own narrative, or more precisely, its own set of narratives. Over the past twelve years, I have produced ten different Albums, so it is difficult to make a brief summary. I can say, however, that recently I have been focusing on the nature of "the picture," and this has been reflected more consciously in the Albums themselves. *Album X* (2010) is the one that most explicitly poses questions about the nature of the picture, the idea of "pictures of nothing" (the monochrome tradition), the conditions of spectatorship and the subjectivity of aesthetic experience. There is an extended sequence in *Album X* that is about the very process of making an Album. This process is depicted as being linked in some way to Theatre: organizing images into an "image bank" is similar to arranging actors and props on a theatrical stage, and creating dynamic relationships between them.

T.C.: *Elad Lassry says there is something ironic about appropriating contemporary images. Is this a concern in your work?*

LJ.: I am not thinking in terms of irony.

T.C.: *Do you try to treat all pictures in an equal and democratic way?*

LJ.: Democracy, in my opinion, is a concept that refers to social and political forms—formations between people—so I find it difficult to apply it to pictures *per se*. On the one hand, I do treat the pictures within the Album in such a way that none of them is experienced as being central, and in that sense no one "dominates" the others. On the other hand, when I observe viewers looking at an Album, I see how particular images "jump out" for different viewers, catching their attention over and above other images, and refocusing their engagement with the work as a whole. So while the images create an all-over assemblage at the time of creation, at the moment of reception they create different configurations of intensity. This is where the "relational" or social aspect of the Albums arises.

T.C.: *What is left from the original context of the images you use? From the ensemble they belong to?*

LJ.: Because the image is also an "artefact," it bears a physical connection to its original context: this context is carried by that image as a trace. Sometimes the paper on which the image is printed has turned yellow with time; sometimes the paper is glossy in a uniquely contemporary way. These traces, which sociologists like Bruno Latour investigate, are perceptible to viewers, and in that way we can become attuned to the fact that these images are the physical carriers of traces from different "worlds" rather than disembodied, free-floating images. There are instances in the Albums where two images are placed together to create a shocking, brutal juxtaposition. If we think in terms of humour, the juxtaposed images create a cruel joke in which it becomes difficult to imagine how the "same" world can accommodate such incongru-

ous, incompatible realities. Images from different worlds are gathered together in the Album to create a new context. Viewers elaborate new narratives through the interplay between these old contexts and the new contextual "world" that is the Album itself. This is possible due to the artifactual quality of the images contained in the Album.

T.C.: *Do you refer to (or describe) the actual (or past) circulation of images?*

LJ.: I do not "footnote" the source of each image, but I rely on the collective image-literacy that we possess as viewers to be able (or not be able) to reconstruct how the images circulated from their original contexts to the new context in the artwork we find in the art gallery.

I am endeavouring to publish all the Albums as book-works—so far, the first, third, fourth and seventh Albums exist as artist-books, and *Album IX* (2011) was published this Spring as an insert in the Belgian art journal *A Prior*—so that they can circulate outside of art galleries, in ways I cannot predict.

T.C.: *When using a picture, it is first to point it out, then to index it. All this is close to the forefinger pointing out the sky, showing a transcendent. Are you close to this?*

LJ.: I agree with your idea that the act of selecting an image, cutting it out, recontextualizing it in the Album, and finally offering it for viewing as a work of art can be understood as an indexical act, a form of "pointing with one's finger." Simply put, encountering an Album in the gallery is experienced as responding to a gesture that says, "Here, look at this." This act of pointing relates the Albums to Theatre—which I understand as "pointing to something from inside a frame."

T.C.: *In regard to your work, what do you think about this: "Whatever the sense: things don't count, it's the place which does." (Roland Barthes) "Things are not important, but their relationship is." (Georges Braque)*

LJ.: I agree completely. But I would be careful not to get carried away with these thoughts, and conclude: "There exist no things at all, only relationships." I do concur with the idea that it's the relationship between things that first "gives" us those things as meaningful entities (that is, as "things"). Put differently, what we first encounter in everyday experience is a meaningful *whole* in terms of which we engage with particular *things*. To read an Album is to have the experience of diving into the vertigo of criss-crossing relationships that simultaneously produce meaningful entities, and this in turn is the product of these entities in their particular assemblage. The Albums invite us to welcome the experience of such vertigo.

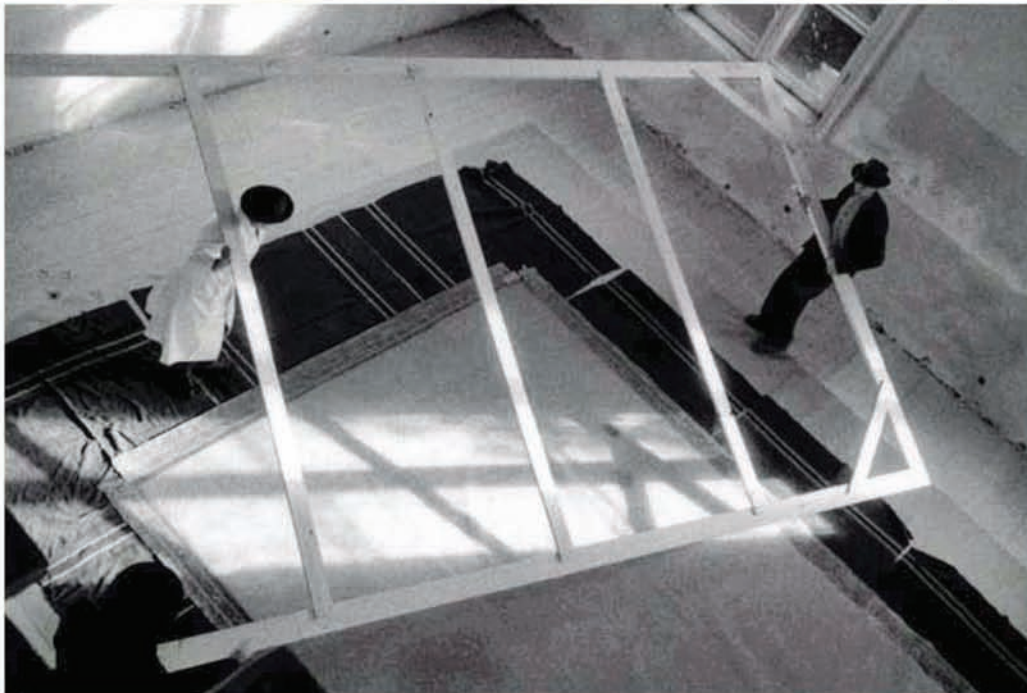
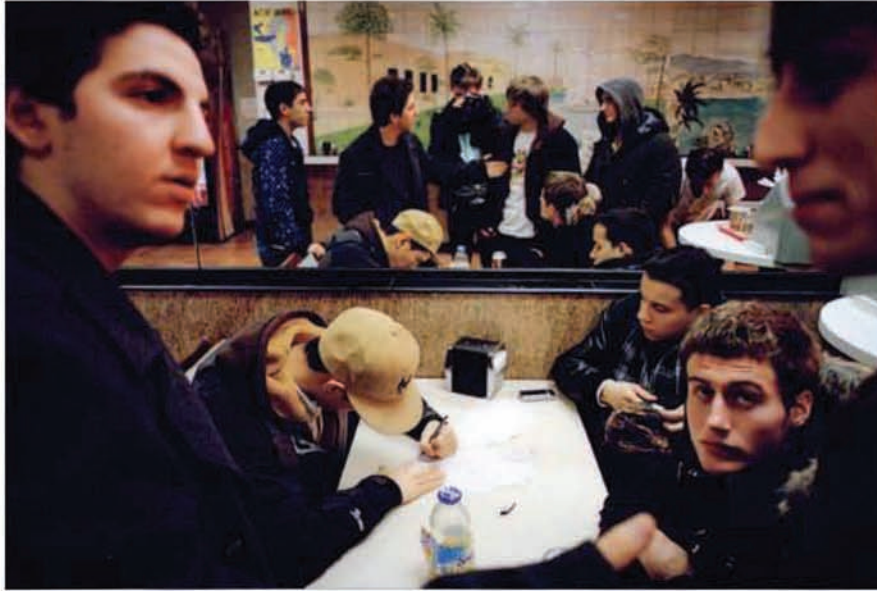
I found a quote from Braque in the exhibition catalogue for *Art and Utopia: Restricted Action* (MACBA, 2004), which originally he had published in *Les peintres vous parlent* (1964). He wrote:

"The point of departure is nothingness, a harmony in which words go further, have a meaning. When one arrives in this intellectual nothingness, this 'Hollow Musical Nothingness' as Mallarmé wrote, then one is in Painting."

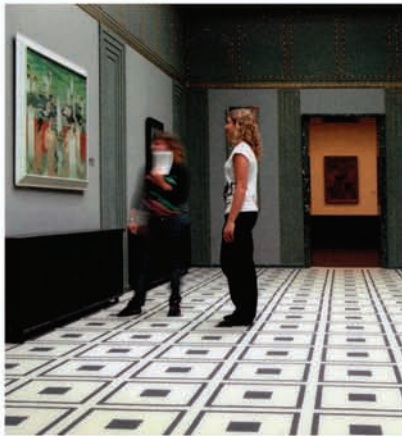
This statement was illustrated in the catalogue with one of Braque's cubist depictions of a mandolin in which the black sound hole was placed prominently in the centre of the composition, appearing as a fractured void. To my eyes this is a beautiful image for the notion that the things we encounter in the world are "possessed" by a hole. Things belong essentially to relationships that, by definition, are invisible and cannot be seen or touched. Things are possessed by holes—this insight is what interests me in the pictorial tradition of the monochrome.

T.C.: *Are your collages "metaphors of fraternity" (Jean-Luc Godard), metaphors of dependence or a love encounter?*

LJ.: Good question! The process of making an Album requires that I look at many, many more images than the hundreds that are included in the finished work. I might rummage through thousands of images in this process, which for me entails the experience of vertigo I mentioned earlier. For months while making an Album, I "swim" in images. Most images pass me by without making any connection; others, by contrast, immediately stand out as significant, asking to be excised, though I cannot predict their usefulness until much later, when I assemble the images



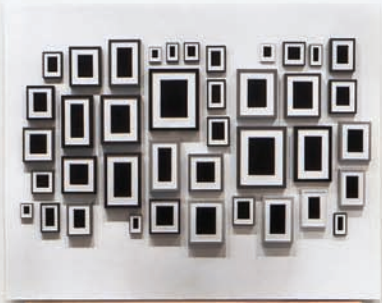
Luis Jacob, *Album X*, 2010.



Luis Jacob, *Album X*, 2010.







into an Album. And other images do not immediately jump out at me from the stream of images, but somehow remain lodged in my mind—so that later, I recognize that those images do serve a purpose by creating a context of meaning in which *other* images begin to stand out as useful for the Album. At that point, I must go back through all the books and magazines in my boxes, and find those images that had become lodged in my mind but that I had not cut out. It is frustrating to look for those images, and sometimes I simply cannot recall where I saw them. But when I do find them, and when finally I pair them up with their “fraternal siblings,” it is as if long-separated siblings have been reunited. Although I know that different people created these images for entirely different purposes, to circulate in quite different social fields and image-worlds, there is a strange sense that there was a “secret purpose” for which these images have been made. Finally being brought together in the Album, I feel as if the images have awoken from a deep sleep—a long period of separation, of waiting for one another.

T.C.: *Are your collages assonant or dissonant, similar or antinomian associations?*

L.J.: Earlier I spoke about the visual rhyming that takes place between images in an Album. Consonances are created between images that appear next to one another in the Album, as well as between images that appear far apart, several sheets away at different moments of the narrative. But I must be more precise and say that while the rhyming occurs between things that are similar and look alike, it also takes place between images that are dissimilar, that are unlike, and might even be in contradiction. Dissonances are created in certain places where strange, even cruel juxtapositions are made between adjacent images, and between images placed far apart.

There is another way in which this rhyming occurs—at the level of the narrative. A rhyme might take the form of A:B—“A rhymes with B.” After a sequence “A:B... A:B... A:B,” the rhyme transforms into B:C—“B now rhymes with C.” So a sequence of “B:C... B:C.. B:C” will follow, transforming eventually into C:D—“and now C rhymes with D.” But if we look back, we see that, in this process of semiotic sliding, the “D” image now before my eyes has been shown to rhyme in some way with the “A” image I saw earlier. This new rhyme—that emerges at the level of narrative, not at the level of simple juxtaposition—creates new consonances and dissonances, as I recognize that the two images D and A begin to “rhyme” in my mind even though they do not look alike at all.

T.C.: *Are your collages a praise to diversity, to fragmentation or to contagion?*

L.J.: Yes, a simpler way to say what I have just described is to point out that the images in an Album infect one another—their association is structured by contagion.

T.C.: *What do you think of what Keith Tyson said: “The world with which I am confronted is a dynamic complex, mutant, speeded up; and if I am “honest” then my art must reflect it, and try to resist the modernist inheritance that still predominates, that searches for a form or a significant and reproducible style.”*

L.J.: I do feel close to this statement. I first learned about this “stylistic heterogeneity” from the example of Gerhard Richter. Lately I have been intrigued by the work of Toronto artist Michael Snow, who as an artist, I see as being a Modernist in his “flesh and blood,” but whose work appears to me as distinctly Post-Modernist in its embrace of forms that are “dynamic complex, mutant, speeded up.”

T.C.: *Do you think collage is a dirty medium, infected as it is by waste when using residues, leftovers, rests of images?*

L.J.: Kurt Schwitters worked with residues and leftovers in his collage work. More recently, Vancouver artist Roy Arden has been pursuing this “dirty” aspect of the leftover in his photography and his collage work. This is an undeniable aspect of all collage works, but it’s worth being cautious about the risk of fetishizing things because they are fragmentary or dirty, because they have acquired the patina of old age, or because they signal a kind of “failure.”

T.C.: *Is collage “thinking with your hands?” (Denis de Rougemont)*

L.J.: It might be for some artists, but not for me.

T.C.: *Does collage talk about fragility?*

L.J.: The Albums are encyclopedic, even epic in their narrative; but they are modest and meek in their physical qualities. These commonplace images are preserved in plastic laminate sheets, like the ones used to produce cheap identification cards. And the sheets are not framed behind glass, but are placed on the wall using simple pushpins. In this way, the Album relates both to the idea of a collector’s scrapbook, and to the notion of a public bulletin board, endowing the work with a sense of both individual personality and publicness, fixity and ephemerality.

T.C.: *For Martha Rosler, collage talks more about space than time. What do you think?*

L.J.: If I understand correctly what she is saying, I would have to disagree. When I addressed your question about the dissonant/consonant relations between images in the Album, I said that these relationships emerge both spatially—between images that are near to one another, as well as distant from one another—and temporally—at the level of narrative, when we perceive a semiotic sliding between images, and the “sound” of each image is affected by our act of reading. In the Albums both levels of relationship—the temporal and the spatial—are equally essential to me.

T.C.: *What is the importance of the materiality of the images you’re using compared to their informative content?*

L.J.: I talked earlier about the “artifact” quality of the pictures, which relates to their materiality, as opposed to their image-content. This materiality is an important aspect of reading an Album, which is not simply an optical experience.

T.C.: *What do you think of that: “In their everyday circulation, images ‘disappear into their use.’ In obsolescence (the death of the commodity), they appear. The collection gives visibility to the image; it is a kind of after-life of the commodity-image.” (John Stezaker)*

L.J.: I agree that the collection allows the images to detach from the contexts to which they were originally bound. This self-detaching gives us the possibility of seeing the images “with fresh eyes,” in their strangeness, and this results in a new lease on life for the images. Within the Album, images are placed in relationships that cause them to burst, to undergo a dehiscence, releasing new possibilities for meaning. This bursting is possible because of the obsolescence of images—that is, the passing-away of their original context of significance.

But I am aware that this can also happen while this original context remains active and intact. In the case of Queer mis-reading, for instance, mainstream imagery is interpreted “incorrectly” in terms of the capacity of such imagery to participate in narratives that it was presumably never intended to do. Queer literacy releases new possibilities for meaning that are inherent in images, even when the everyday context of their circulation is still active and even socially dominant—that is, prior to that context’s becoming obsolete because of the passing of time or the transformation of social norms.

T.C.: *Are your collages synecdoches?*

L.J.: In general, the images in an Album relate to one another by means of metonymy—the rhyming or interplay between forms shared by different images. However, in particular sections of the Album, the images relate to one another in ways that construct a synecdoche. At times, the entirety of the Album, or the broader activity of assembling them in the studio or experiencing them in the gallery, is represented “in microcosm” within a particular section of the narrative. This is the case, for instance, in the extended section in *Album X* that thematizes the very processes of making and viewing an Album. This process of constructing a synecdoche creates a vertiginous “hall of mirrors” where the viewer in the gallery may find herself or himself pre-figured in miniature inside the Album, and, more significantly, where the artist’s role and the viewer’s role begin to trade places within shifting, theatrical frames of reference. Through synecdoche, each Album presents itself as “a model,” as a picture of the world.

Interview by Timothée Chaillou

Timothée Chaillou lives in Paris. He is an art critic, and an art and cinema historian.