



ARTIST

Ernesto Pujol

TITLE

Hageography, Shrouded Nun

DATE

1999

DIMENSIONS

14 in H x 9 in W

MEDIUM

Chromogenic Color Prints

IMAGE NOTES

Artist Proof for LW Collection; First panel of a dyptich. Second Panel not in LW Collection

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1999.021

CURRENT LOCATION

1620-9C

ERNESTO PUJOL

BORN

1957

BIRTHPLACE

Havana, Cuba

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Cuban-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1999

Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2008

Ernesto Pujol: Walk #1 Lecturer, 1999

Curator, 1999

In Menschel Gallery - Desire: Contemporary Photography from the Visual AIDS Archive Project Master Print Edition, 2019

Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2018

Be Strong and Do Not Betray Your Soul

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

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BIOGRAPHY

In the early 1990s, self-taught photographer Ernesto Pujol began to experiment with the concept of a contemplative performativity through performance photography. Pujol created painterly self-portraits in the tradition of Counterreformation European master painting from Italy and Spain. His images explored the skin of biblical faith on the Western body, shrouding and consuming it into a genderless state. By the late 1990s, Pujol approached his colleague Jeffrey Hoone, who encouraged him to print his images in large-scale format and awarded him a residency at Light Work, where he met Mary Lee Hodgins who also supported his efforts. Over the next 20 years, Pujol evolved into a site-specific performance artist with a socially engaged practice, choreographing groups of citizens to perform mindful, durational portraits of their place in the world, employing the same formal elements that date back to Pujol's early experiments at Light Work.

circa 2018

ESSAYS

CONSIDER the lively examples set us by the saints, who possessed the light of true perfection and religion, and you will see how little, how nearly nothing, we do. What, alas, is our life, compared with theirs? The saints and friends of Christ served the Lord in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in work and fatigue, in vigils and fasts, in prayers and holy meditations, in persecutions and many afflictions. How many and severe were the trials they suffered—the Apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins, and all the rest who willed to follow in the footsteps of Christ! They hated their lives on earth that they might have life in eternity. From 'The Imitation of Christ', Thomas Kempis (1425?) Within the Catholic church The Imitation of Christ is a well-known devotional text ascribed to the Augustinian monk Thomas Kempis. The book condemns pride, earthly pleasures, and intellectual pursuits and extols the virtues of humility, sacrifice, and following the example of the life of Jesus Christ. In describing his latest series of work entitled Hagiography, Ernesto Pujol refers to his own upbringing in a devoutly Catholic family, and recalls his grandmother who kept several copies of the Kempis text. As a child Pujol was educated by European missionaries at a private Roman Catholic school. In 1980, a year after finishing college, he entered a monastery and spent the next four years as a cloistered monk devoted to prayer and the study of mystical writings, in particular that of St. John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila—founder of the Discalced Carmelite order to which Pujol belonged. After receiving a dispensation from his vows Pujol left the monastery and moved to New York City where he devoted his efforts to the growth of his career as an artist and to AIDS activism. Hagiography is defined as the study of the biographies of saints. In this series Pujol presents a group of idealized representations of saints and nuns as large 3 x 5' digitally printed self-portraits. Pujol credits the inspiration for this series to a group of photographs that were taken in the 1890s by Sister Genevieve of the Holy Face of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, a French Carmelite nun who died at the age of 24 in 1897, and was canonized in 1926. The next phase of this project will include a series of male saints. At first glance one might mistakenly perceive this work as a parody of the Catholic religion, but they would miss the subtlety and complexity of Pujol's intention. From a 1999 interview with Octavio Zaya regarding this series Pujol states, 'These photographs subvert gender and religious propriety, but they are also careful visual essays in which I am consciously trying to preserve a certain sense of dignity, like the captain in a sinking ship. And the church is a very big ship; and the post Cold War global capitalism is a very big sea.' He goes on to say, 'I am not interested in the kitsch of religion. If you observe these photos carefully, they are not altarpieces. There is only costume covering the human body with discipline.' Pujol's objective is not to ridicule the church, but instead to denote the decorum associated with piety. Through a well-mediated body language these portraits become part performance and part tribute as the artist looks back to his own memories of Catholic school and his experience as a monk. Arguably the Catholic church is unique in its veneration of saints—those individuals whose acts of devotion, sacrifice, and extreme tests of faith set the standard to which other Catholics aspired. For some Catholics repressed memories of parochial school, catechism, the smell of burning incense, Latin mass, or a tattered copy of The Imitation of Christ might remind us of our Catholic obligation to emulate the examples of the saints. In the series Hagiography, Pujol treats these elements of a Catholic experience with a modicum of humor balanced with nostalgia and reverence. Gary Hesse (c) 2000 Ernesto Pujol rarely limits his expression to one medium. His installations and performances, and even his paintings and sculpture, often come together to mark a moment, create a mood, or respond to an injustice and then recede from view. While much of his work is grounded in investigations of politics, gender, and injustice, it is continually informed and propelled by memory and spirituality. By turning to photography, Pujol has found a visual language to convey the physicality of personal experience in a way that persists beyond the moment. The setting for Walk #1 is Magnolia Cemetery in Charleston, SC. Initially Pujol was invited by curator Mary Jane Jacob to develop a site-specific piece in response to the Low Country of South Carolina, in conjunction with the annual Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston. Pujol began the project just as the war in Iraq was escalating, and as he walked through the cemetery, which is filled with the graves of soldiers killed in the Civil War, the project took on a new layer of meaning. Pujol realized that he needed to convey the visceral experience of walking among the dead, of having the cathartic experience of being surrounded by the

remains of soldiers and memories of war. Photographs of just the graceful colonnades, heroic monuments, and weathered relics of wrought iron and granite would provide a record but would not create awareness or start the dialogue he desired. When working on a new project Pujol often brings along several props and costumes that hold special meaning and provide inspiration. For this project a clerical robe became that inspiration. After finishing college in 1980 Pujol spent four years as a cloistered monk. This experience has informed his art, and several of his previous projects have explored the intersection of spiritual beliefs and secular practice. Because he views certain religious vestments as costumes that cover the human body with dignity, his selection of the robe brings a deeply felt decorum of piety to the project. Wearing the full-length robe, Pujol photographed himself walking through the cemetery as he assumed the role of spiritual guide through the vestiges of the dead. Without emotion, outward gestures, or physical expression, the character Pujol created grounded each of the photographs with the presence of eternal memory: faceless, nameless, and perpetual. In much the same way that Cindy Sherman, Carrie Mae Weems, and Lorna Simpon use the body in their photographs to represent, break down, and infiltrate power, authority, and perceptions, Pujol created a messenger as a guide to our fallibility. Although he is taking us on a conceptual journey through our collective memory, his images are as evocative as the urgency with which he compels us to mourn. Each composition is crisp and considered. The slight sepia toning and white cloudless skies recall Matthew Brady's Civil War battlefields as locations and memories we cannot escape. Each image also has a deep cinematic quality that underscores the narrative power of the robed figure as a character of substance and righteousness. Pujol extends the narrative thrust of the project by placing twelve glass plates throughout the installation, each containing a single word, such as war, peace, heroes, arms, and truth. He selected the words from Civil War monuments and the writings of Walt Whitman, an American author known as a proponent of contemplative and restorative walks. Pujol considers Walk #1 to be like the preserved fragments of a long poem. Those fragments embrace many traditions and borrow from many different art forms and social movements. Using the medium of photography, Pujol has brought these traditions and ideas together in a performance of contemplation. The work bears witness to sorrow and loss through images that have a graceful utility beyond their power to record. Jeffrey Hoone Executive Director Light Work No matter how often an artist opens up to share the creative process, it is always a challenge. No amount of practice can take away the struggle of describing the intangible. I began to develop the series Walk as a response to the Low Country of South Carolina. The series was primarily an embodied answer to the land—as a performer, I process landscape not just through the mind, but also through the body. Then came the war in the Middle East, and a second layer of meaning was added as I mourned the dead. When public art curator Mary Jane Jacob suggested that I visit Magnolia Cemetery in Charleston during the summer of 2005, I did not rush to the place. I had never been drawn to cemeteries—quite the contrary. However, something unexpected happened. When I first set foot in that city of the dead, I suddenly realized that it was the familiar environment I had dreamed about for years. I had experienced recurring dreams of marble arches and colonnades surrounded by gated gardens and water. I immediately began to photograph the site; my first approach was strictly documentary. Nevertheless, just as quickly I knew that I needed to walk through the place in a performative way. I had packed a historical costume for the trip (just in case), having learned over the years to trust my intuition. I walked barefoot through Magnolia Cemetery during two July mornings in 110-degree heat. I was lucky not to dehydrate or be eaten alive by fire ants. It was just meant to be. After both mornings, I returned to my old southern hotel and quietly examined the first fresh digital images in solitude, deleting many of them. In the end, I only chose a small fraction from the hundreds I had made. The series evolved before my eyes, telling me where to go, what to say—delineating its parameters. This first version of the Walk series (titled Walk #1) is installed as the preserved fragments of a long poem. The pictures in Walk #1 are organized clockwise, with large bookend images marking the entrance and exit of The Walker, as I call him. The series is not about my self-portrait, but about a collective need to mourn at this time in history. In my work I pursue a new type of conceptual art. Evolving since the 1960s, the movement has moved beyond its initial yet increasingly dated origins in Modernism, and its minimal—even Puritan—esthetic. Contemporary conceptual practice claims a much wider range of influences, including late-seventies feminist art, popular regional elements, and compositional devices linked to the Internet. This global conceptualism chooses to be less of an art world insider than its predecessor, and seeks to be more generous with audiences. This first walk sought a familiar historical metaphor for the beginning of a difficult national conversation. Over the next few years, I plan to walk through more sites relevant to current global developments. These landscapes, too, will make their demands, and I will listen. Ernesto Pujol Ernesto Pujol is a New York-based conceptual artist and interdisciplinary curator. Pujol did undergraduate work in humanities and studio art at the University of Puerto Rico, San Juan, and in Spanish art history at the Universidad Complutense, Madrid. Pujol later pursued graduate work in education at the Universidad Interamericana, San Juan, followed by studies in art therapy at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, and in media theory at Hunter College, New York City. He also received an MFA in studio art from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. During the early 1990s, Pujol became known for site-specific ephemeral installation projects that addressed individual and collective memory, and, more recently, for work that references pressing ecological issues, war, and peace. In 1997, Pujol represented the United States in the Second Johannesburg Biennial, South Africa; the Second Saaremaa Biennial, Estonia; and the Sixth Havana Biennial, Cuba. Pujol serves as the Senior Interdisciplinary Curatorial Consultant for the Land Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing the island's natural resources. In addition, he recently inaugurated the new IN Memorial Gestures: Mourning and Yearning at the Rotunda of the Grand Army of the Republic. Many organizations have honored Pujol with fellowships, including the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Cintas Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts, Art Matters, and the Joan Mitchell Foundation. He has served with the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Academy for Educational Development, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Pujol was profiled in Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art, edited by Mary Jane Jacob and Jacquelynn Baas. He has taught at Cooper Union in New York City and Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and has lectured at New York University and The Maine College of Art, among others. Pujol participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in 1999. He will be resident faculty at Skowhegan, ME, during the summer of 2009. More information about Pujol and his work is available at www.ernestopujol.org. Ernesto Pujol would like to thank the following for making the original Walk #1 project possible: René Paul Barilleaux, Chief Curator/Curator of Art after 1945, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX; City Frame and Greenberg Editions, NY; Robert Hines, R2 Glass Studios, Charleston, SC; Mary Jane Jacob, Curator, Chicago, IL; Spoleto Festival USA; Nicolás Consuegra, Tim Hedgepeth, Jim Laros, Mónica Paez, and Joseph Wood. The artist also thanks Art Matters and the New York Foundation for the Arts for their current support.