

The Many Faces of Juan Pablo Echeverri

At Between Bridges, Berlin, a retrospective of the late artist's work serves as a memorial to his too-short life



BY ANDREW DURBIN IN EU REVIEWS, EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 07 JUN 23



You step off the plane, settle into your starchy hotel bed, check your dying phone – it's late, you're a little jetlagged – and, at last, open Grindr. It's the first order of business for some men who find themselves in a new city. Equally familiar, especially in those places where homosexuality is outlawed or frowned upon, is the endless scroll of stock profile images: plain outlines of the human figure that form, together, a grim grid of shadow lovers.

These blank profiles are the subject of Juan Pablo Echeverri's *futuroSEXtraños* (2016) – 60 inkjet prints of darkened figures, all modelled by the artist himself, in which the standard user image is interrupted by signs of irrepressible personality. Among the figures, you witness great big hair, someone wearing a beret, another loaded with large shoulder pads, still another sporting a spiked necklace – all elements that evince the rambunctious identities clamouring behind the veils imposed by family, state, sometimes even yourself. Like so many of Echeverri's works, the series is a testament to an imperishable queer sensibility, one that seeks even in darkness an opportunity to flaunt difference.

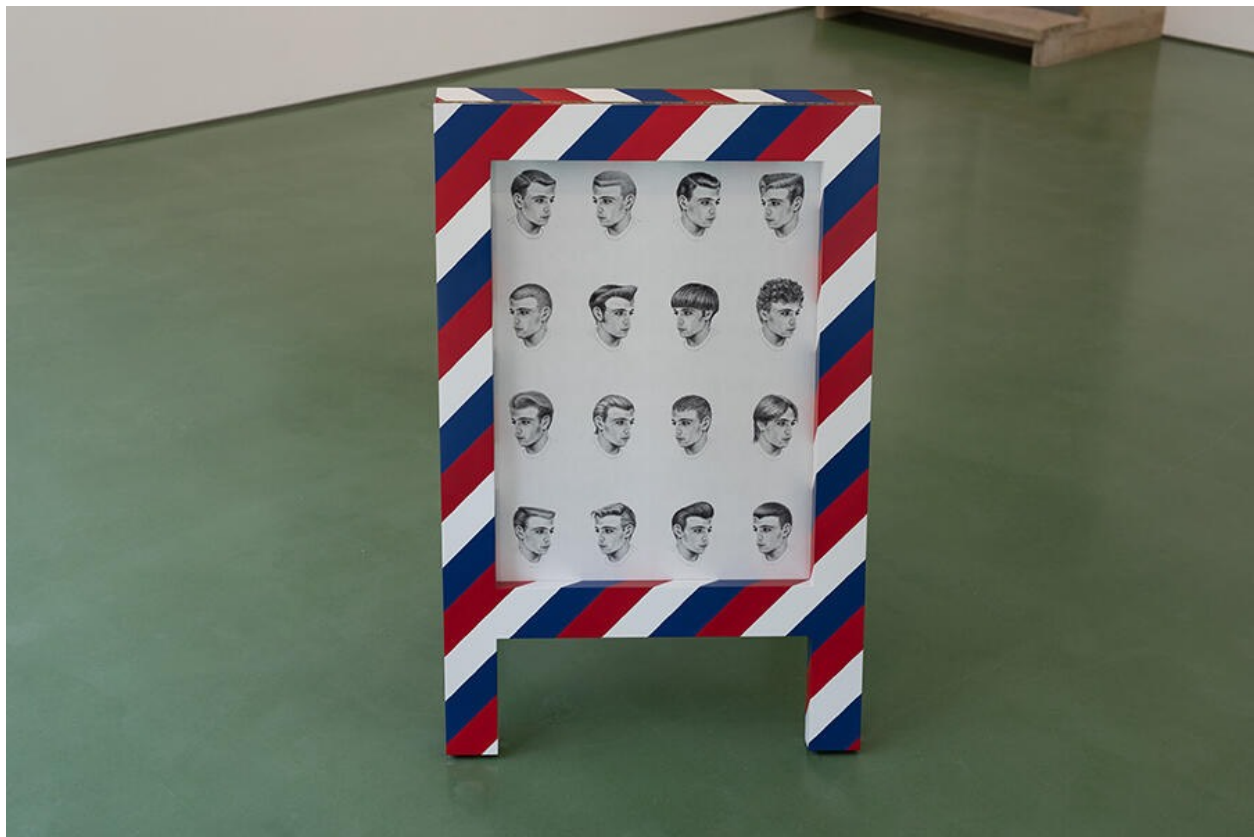


Juan Pablo Echeverri, *futuroSEXtraños*, 2016, installation view. Courtesy: the estate of Juan Pablo Echeverri



Juan Pablo Echeverri, 'Identidad Perdida', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the estate of Juan Pablo Echeverri

futuroSEXtraños is part of Echeverri's major exhibition at Berlin's Between Bridges, 'Identidad Perdida' (Lost Identity), one half of a two-part quasi-survey that continues at James Fuentes in New York. From conceptual photography to sculpture to film, the works at Between Bridges span nearly 25 years. Organized by 'some of the people who miss him', according to the exhibition's press release, the show is a great tribute to this Bogotá-born artist's range, and a trenchant memorial to his too-short life. (Echeverri died of malaria in 2022 aged 43.)



Juan Pablo Echeverri, *Masculady*, 2006, inkjet print mounted on painted MDF A-frame sandwich board, 70 × 50 cm. Courtesy: the estate of Juan Pablo Echeverri

Echeverri is perhaps best known for 'miss fotojapón' (Miss Photo Japan, 1998–2022), a series of works comprising 8,000 passport photographs, one for every day of every year from the project's inception to its sudden end. In each image – presented here in two large grids mounted on an MDF box frame – you glimpse the range of Echeverri's changing self-presentation during his travels and stints at home: his wildly divergent style, his varying haircuts (dyed, shaved, mohawk) and, of course, his aging face across two decades of self-documentation.



Juan Pablo Echeverri, 'miss fotojapón', 1998–2022, inkjet prints mounted on MDF box frame, 1 × 1 m. Courtesy: the estate of Juan Pablo Echeverri

Because the portraits are arranged by chance and feel rather than chronologically, the effect of scanning so many Echeverris can be bewildering. Like many a daily project, 'miss fotojapón' thrives on the little revolts against the rigidity of its essential idea, the occasional stand-in for the more general social standardization this canny artist so often resists. At times, Echeverri conceals his face behind a mask, a lowered beanie, the bushy hood of a parka: even the most enthusiastic subject of surveillance can grow weary of an impersonal camera. You feel for him.

The gallery's downstairs space screens looped selections from 'Around the World in 80 Gays' (2007–15), a string of music videos – starring Echeverri himself, of course – that the artist shot for the top charting songs in each country he visited. Once again, it's not the artist you see on screen, but a multitude of theatrical, stylized personalities that he confected. What I love about Echeverri's work is its exuberance, its embrace of imprecision and indecision. These two latter qualities open the work to the left-field possibility that the prism of the self might explode the governing norms of identity – something drag once promised before reality television stole its thunderous adventurism. Yet, here was an artist who seemed never to settle into any one idea of how to live or who to be – a lesson for anyone who has grown bored with the person in the mirror.



Juan Pablo Echeverri, *Gay Gone Wild*, 2013, from the series 'Around the World in 80 Gays', installation view. Courtesy: the estate of Juan Pablo Echeverri

Juan Pablo Echeverri's Identidad Perdida is on view at Between Bridges, Berlin, until 29 July.

Main image: Juan Pablo Echeverri, MUTILady, 2003 / 2023, offset print, 84 × 59 cm. Courtesy: the estate of Juan Pablo Echeverri