

Juan Pablo Echeverri's Subversive and Multifarious Self-Portraits

The Colombian artist deployed a practice of wit, charm, humor, and exaggeration in his photography, uncovering the “truths” beneath cultural conventions.



Juan Pablo Echeverri, *miss fotojapón* (detail), 1998–2002

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By Wolfgang Tillmans

For twenty-two years, every day, wherever he was in the world, Juan Pablo Echeverri took a self-portrait. A moment of action, followed by five minutes of waiting. His life was active, restless, multifarious—but the daily ritual of facing himself in a photo booth, this constant thread, was never skipped.

The genre of artists’ self-portraits has a rich and well-documented history—think of the eighty that Rembrandt made in his lifetime—and within the history of photography there is a whole lineage of artists who have interrogated the serial self-portrait at the core of their practice, embracing the transformative potential of a fluid understanding of identity. Artists like Claude Cahun, Cindy Sherman, and Jo Spence come to mind.

Self-portraits, paradoxically, have a peculiar quality of transcendence as they point beyond the self. They address and involve various aspects of picture-making, of control, of the psyche, and of portraiture as such, not only as an artistic activity but also as a human and social one. Self-portraits are as much a distillation of the now as they are a record of what will be passed tomorrow. They are always pictures against our disappearance, our vanishing. Each one is a performance and construction of the self. They answer to the maker’s and the sitter’s desire to play a role, to create and face one’s persona for this moment in time, allowing for it to be seen and witnessed in the contemporary and into posterity.



Juan Pablo Echeverri, *miss fotojapón* (detail), 1998–2002

I like artists who have an *even though* sensibility in their approach to making, a drive and dedication to make their work against the weight of art history. Echeverri could have thought that the photo-booth self-portrait has been well explored in the twentieth century, but instead he dug deep, and made it a territory all his own. Echeverri's distinct negotiation of the lens, the very act of looking back with an unflinching expression suggests being in control of the image of himself—of his *self*.

Begun in 1998, *miss fotojapón* was an ongoing process of self-affirmation that spanned over eight thousand days. During this time the project evolved from very much staged and thought-out photos—for which he would meticulously plan his outfits and appearance, also considering the pictures to fit in a larger grid of time (sometimes repeating the same outfit at a specific day of the month, for instance)—to more spontaneous photos that sought to capture the opposite, the improvised and uncontrolled, the indefinable quality of his being and living.

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Echeverri grew up in the 1990s in Bogotá in an era when civil war was raging in parts of Colombia and, although his hometown wasn't directly affected, a sense of personal safety was nevertheless a daily concern. Growing up as a young gay man in the conservatism of a Catholic society left little room for his identity and added pressure to develop further personal defenses. He did mention to me the terror of boarding the school bus and being picked on for being gay years before he knew for himself that he was.



Juan Pablo Echeverri, *futuroSEXtraños*, 2016

Instead of retreating, he deployed a practice of wit, charm, and humor—and exaggeration: a formidable artistic tool often used to uncover “truths” buried under cultural conventions and misconceptions. His own set of references was certainly formed by the Latin American popular culture, while also having a sharp personal take on the offerings and desires of US American, British, and Spanish pop culture. His in-depth understanding of communication in its visual and linguistic forms made him a seismograph of larger trends that would soon dominate culture in general and image consumption in particular. Superficiality, for him, was not a flaw but a quality: a human characteristic to be dissected and to harvest for joy and transcultural understanding.

Echeverri wanted to trace life, tracking contemporary ways of living across cultures in the modes du jour. A man of great and unfiltered empathy, he observed his fellow human beings, in his own country and abroad, with warmth and an acute sense of the absurd. He would portray stereotypes as well as individualists who would catch his attention at a local supermarket, a bus stop, or who were just passing by. Despite, or maybe even because of, the specificity of his approach, a strong sense of universalism was at the core of his practice.



Juan Pablo Echeverri, *MascuLady*, 2006. Inkjet print mounted on painted MDF A-frame sandwich board

Echeverri's work has to be understood in equal parts as the innumerable *miss fotojapón* (named after the Colombian photo-lab chain Foto Japón) passport-photo self-portraits, and the over thirty distinct series of larger-format photographs and videos produced of him as actor of various personas. These series were meticulously staged by himself and with the help of collaborators. Being an obsessive collector whose entire life was preproduction for future projects, he took pop-cultural samples wherever he traveled to and turned them into props for scenarios that took shape in his head long before they were realized in short, frantic periods of shooting.

These series take a magnifying glass to highly generic as well as specific angles of human appearance, sometimes even drifting into the fantastical and posthuman. In this way, hair came to play a central role. In 2006 Echeverri created *MascuLady*, a replica barbershop street sign fusing traditional Latin hairstyles with what he observed as a new generation of metropolitan male vanity. The *MUTILady* (2003) photographs—the title playing with the word *mutilate* in Spanish (also meaning bad haircut)—show Echeverri in nine stages of transformation from a full-length rock-star mane to a shaved head, while his upper body is painted with a glance of the muscles located just beneath his skin.



Juan Pablo Echeverri, *MUTILady*, 2003

Visits and residencies in Mexico offered inspiration for the series *Mucho Macho* and *Mariquis* (both 2008), as well as the astonishing *Identidad Payasa* (2017) double portraits. The sixty-piece *futuroSEXtraños* (2016) series is a melancholic meditation on the anonymizing black-and-white silhouette displayed in the profiles of social-media dating apps of those who don't want to or can't reveal their real faces, for any variety of reasons. The honeycomb-shaped *PRES.O.S.*, made a year later, takes a sharp look at thirty-seven identities Echeverri culled from his memory of seeing people in public, lost in interaction with their mobile phones; the title is yet again a play on words (here, the Spanish word for *prisoners*).

The photographic languages used by Echeverri—and there were many—often employed an anti-aesthetic approach that questioned established values of taste, going beyond even the common visual repertoire of campness. He never fully revealed his personal position within the visual firework he unleashed, between parody and the social documentarian, the self-analytical and the hilarious. Not everything was readily digestible, and his works could easily throw you in a “Does he really mean this?” way. The subversive quality of this, however, was meant not to blow everything up, but to bring us together.



Juan Pablo Echeverri, *PRES.O.S.*, 2017

In a recent conversation about Echeverri's video works, his close friend, the artist Sofia Reyes, described him as "invasive"—a characteristic that he took with him to every city he visited for his video project *Around the World in 80 Gays*. Echeverri was proudly a citizen from the Global South, and his suitcase would burst open with the props he carried with him. In each place he would inject himself into the larger community, unafraid of any looming cultural misinterpretations. It is unusual for "invasive" to characterize a positive trait. One might add "infectious"—positive throughout, not least due to Echeverri's incredible skill with both the English and Spanish languages.

Too subversive to indulge in the politeness of puns, he launched assaults at good taste and language as a whole. He would disarmingly throw you off guard with a cascade of word plays, rhymes, inflections, and cross-language mistranslations, always delivered with a twinkle in his eye that gestured the faux unawareness of the wildly funny insanity he had just created. Again, exaggeration served as a powerful tool for him to demonstrate how shaky some of our certainties can be.



Juan Pablo Echeverri, *IDENTIDAD PAYASA: Acuarela*, 2017
All works courtesy the Estate of Juan Pablo Echeverri

His work *Identidad Payasa* with street clowns in Mexico, who he in turn invited to transform him into copies of themselves, perhaps cuts closest to the vulnerability, resilience, and joy that drove all his life. So I spare myself from writing a last heartfelt sentence about missing him badly, as he surely would have jumped in to complete the sentence in a lovingly twisted disruption.

This piece is adapted from *Juan Pablo Echeverri*, published by James Fuentes Press in 2023.

Juan Pablo Echeverri: Identidad Perdida is on view at Between Bridges, Berlin, through July 29, 2023. A concurrent exhibition is on view at James Fuentes Gallery, New York, from June 7 through July 28, 2023.

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