

In the Studio with Raimond Chaves and Gilda Mantilla

Posted on [May 2, 2016](#) by [Blanton Museum](#)

In February of this year, I visited Lima, Peru to interview artists featured in the Blanton's exhibition [Fixing Shadows: Contemporary Peruvian Photography, 1968-2015](#). I met with ten artists in six days, and every one of them was extremely gracious and generous with me despite my obvious body odor. I guess we all had it. There was no escaping the humidity at the height of this El Niño summer in Peru. Taxi drivers, baristas, archivists, and artists alike... everyone languidly lamented the weather. But we carried on due to all of the [amazing food](#).



— A view overlooking Barranco, Lima. Photo by Robin Williams.

The narrative below stems from my long and wide-ranging conversation with artists [Raimond Chaves](#) and [Gilda Mantilla](#) in their studio in Chorrillos, one of Lima's coastal neighborhoods. Chaves and Mantilla have worked collaboratively since 2001, while also maintaining solo artistic practices. In 2015, they represented The Republic of Peru in the country's first-ever national pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale with the installation [Misplaced Ruins](#) (2015).

In the excerpt below the artists discuss *Isla* (2009), their work featured in *Fixing Shadows*. *Isla* is a QuickTime animation projected on a screen made from recycled cardboard. The video presents a sequence of still photographs showing views of an island off the coast of Lima as the city's ever-present fog hovers between sky and sea, surrounding the island. Here the artists describe the ideas behind this project and how it fits into their larger artistic practice. For the sake of space and clarity, I have edited the conversation into a narrative that combines both artists' voices.



— Gilda Mantilla (left) and Raimond Chaves (right). Photo by Robin Williams.

Raimond Chaves and Gilda Mantilla
Chorrillos, Lima
February 11, 2016

Isla, the video, is part of a project called [Observaciones sobre la ciudad de polvo \[Observations on the City of Dust\]](#), which we conceived of as an installation and developed between 2008 and 2009. Before then we had been traveling around Latin America for a long period for our project [Dibujando América \[Drawing America\]](#). And after that we wanted to focus on a context closer to us, here in Lima—to close the circle by doing something about this place.

In Lima we have very peculiar weather conditions. We are located in a tropical position—on the same latitude as tropical areas of Brazil, for example—but we have desert coasts because of the currents in the Pacific Ocean and because of the Andes, which divide the continent and work as a barrier against evaporation. So here in Lima, it never rains, but we do have between 60 and 90 percent humidity. The sky

is almost always grey, and in any other part of the world, this is the sky when it is about to rain. But here it just hangs there.

We took that as a starting point—the weather here and the conditions that make it possible—and we wanted to extend our investigations to the social and historical climates. We were thinking about a fatality related to weather. If it rains, it rains—you can't do anything—and if it's sunny, it's the same. So you can make a link with other fatalities that are common here. Fatalities related to politics, for example. We carry the weight of bad governments and politicians like the weather—on the back. It's about the naturalization social processes—about a sense that they are natural and you can't do anything about them.



- Gilda Mantilla Raimond Chaves, *Isla [Island]*, 2009, QuickTime animation projected on recycled cardboard, 5:49 min loop, silent, dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artists and ProjecteSD, Barcelona

We started by doing research on the weather. We went to the weather institute and got scientific information about how the weather works here. Then one day while looking around in the center of Lima, we saw a guy pushing a trolley with this cardboard. We followed him and arrived at the place where they process and sell it.

They explained to us that this type of cardboard is recycled. If you look closely, you can see bits of letters that come from newspapers and silver metallic paper from magazines. This cardboard they use, for example, in the soles of cheap shoes, on the bottoms of cheap bags, inside folders for school children... But it's a material that you never see because it's always hidden beneath another material that looks nicer. So we decided to work with this cardboard and to make a kind of weather station—not like the real ones, but a metaphorical or poetic one.

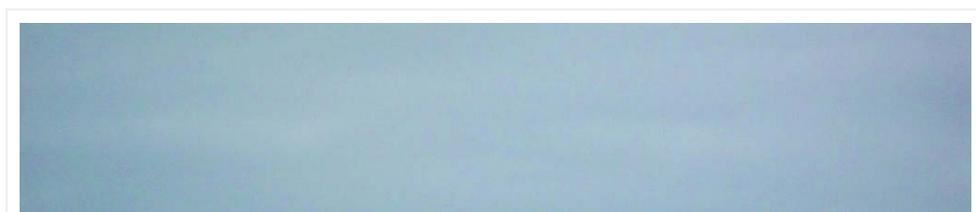
We chose to project the video on the cardboard, which we were using for the other pieces in the installation. The cardboard perfectly represents this dryness of the city without rain, and because it is recycled, it is made from something like the pulp of Lima. But the other thing is the color, what we call "[panza de burro](#)," which means "donkey's belly." It's the name of the color of our skies—like the belly of a donkey, a very light grey.

The video shows photographs that we took from the boardwalk here in Chorrillos. There are two islands in front of the port, but because of the weather conditions during most of the year, we don't see them. And people in Lima, most of us forget that we have that obstacle in our vision. The idea is that we have a clear horizon, but that's because of the fog—the horizon line isn't even visible most of the time. We took photos of where the horizon should be, but what we usually saw was a kind of screen... like shades of grey. But then, because we were working over a period of nine months, toward the end, summer arrived, and the weather changed. So the video also includes pictures of the island in summer, when the scene is almost California-style with bright skies (although there is still a mist... there is always a mist).

For us, the fact that the island disappears from view for most of the year and then reappears is a kind of metaphor. There are things that, here, historically, people don't want to face. So the questions for this project were: what is hidden behind the fog? What is the obstacle of our vision in more social and political terms? What would happen if we finally had open skies?

One of the islands, El Frontón, was important in two moments in history. One was during a [war](#) with Chile and Bolivia at the end of the 19th century. It was a war about [bird shit](#). There was such an amount of bird shit on those coasts that, in the 19th century, European companies made deals with the governments here to make fertilizers. In the end there was a war over this resource...

Then, in the 1980s, Peru built a prison on the island, and political prisoners from [Sendero Luminoso](#) and [Túpac Amaru](#) were sent there. There was a [prisoner mutiny](#) there during the first term of Alan García, and the government made a brutal repression, killing almost all of the prisoners, around 180 people. The government then destroyed the prison. Since then, it has been abandoned, and there is still no clear justice in the case. Of course the prisoners had guns, but not enough to make them a real threat. The government lied about it to the press, but what happened is that they took advantage of the situation and just finished the whole problem.





- Gilda Mantilla and Raimond Chaves, *Isla [Island]*, 2009, QuickTime animation projected on recycled cardboard, 5:49 min loop, silent, dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artists and ProjecteSD, Barcelona

For us it is important to remember this event because we have been experiencing a long period of peace. What you see with younger people now is that the past happened, but nobody wants to remember. In fact, Alan García is a candidate again, and he is appealing to younger people who cannot relate to that history because they were not born yet.

During the period when we were developing the installation, there was this idea in the air that we are doing ok—the economy is better and maybe there is even a Peruvian boom in art, and maybe everything is ok. But for us it was very important not to collaborate in this idea that everything is ok and that we don't want to know anymore about structural violence. People refer to terrorists as monsters, for example, because they prefer not to really look at them as related to deeper, more complex social and historical problems. The project is about these kinds of politics.

Visit [Fixing Shadows: Contemporary Peruvian Photography, 1968-2015](#) to learn more and see *Isla* in person, on view through July 3.

Robin K. Williams is a PhD candidate in Art History at UT Austin and the Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Latin American Art at the Blanton Museum of Art. Her research in support of Fixing Shadows was made possible through the generous support of the Mellon Foundation.

These icons link to social bookmarking sites where readers can share and discover new web pages.

- 
- 
- 
- 

This entry was posted in [Uncategorized](#) and tagged [Blanton Museum](#), [Blanton Museum of Art](#), [Fixing Shadows](#), [Fixing Shadows: Contemporary Peruvian Photography](#), [Isla](#), [Lima](#), [Peru](#), [Robin Williams](#), [Video art](#) by [Blanton Museum](#).

Bookmark the [permalink \[http://blog.blantonmuseum.org/2016/05/in-the-studio-with-raimond-chaves-and-gilda-mantilla.html\]](http://blog.blantonmuseum.org/2016/05/in-the-studio-with-raimond-chaves-and-gilda-mantilla.html) .



About Blanton Museum

Alie Cline is the Digital Content Strategist at the Blanton and holds BAs in Art History and English from the University of Texas at Austin. You can find her online as the voice behind all the Blanton's social media profiles, or on Twitter at @aliecline.

[View all posts by Blanton Museum →](#)