



THE NEW GODS

Alejandro Garcia Contreras  
José Pedneault

CURATED BY SHANI K PARSONS

## TPOLOGY

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This publication is produced in conjunction  
with the exhibition

**THE NEW GODS**  
ALEJANDRO GARCIA CONTRERAS and JOSÉE PEDNEAULT

Curated by Shani K Parsons  
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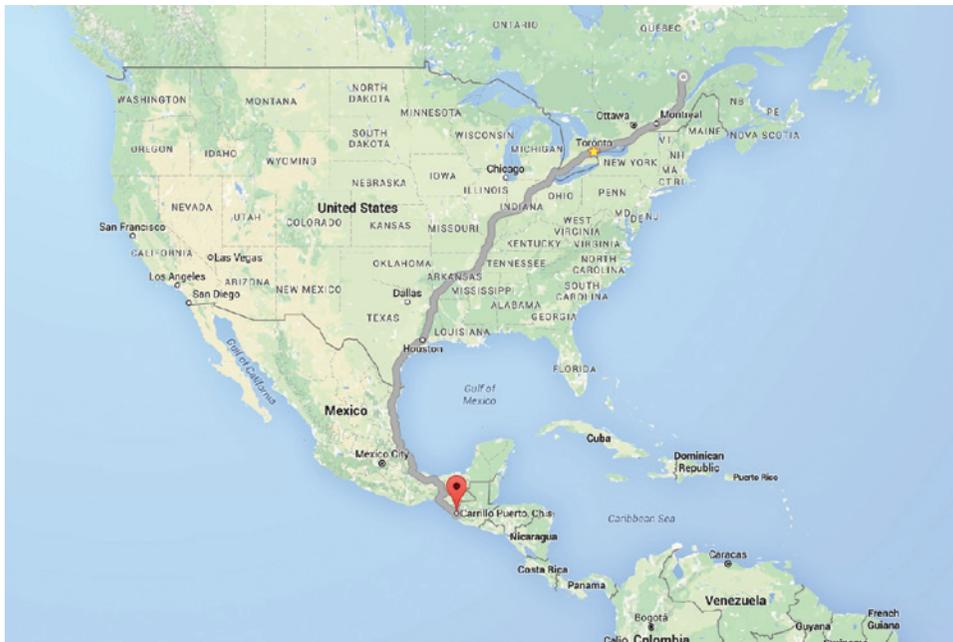
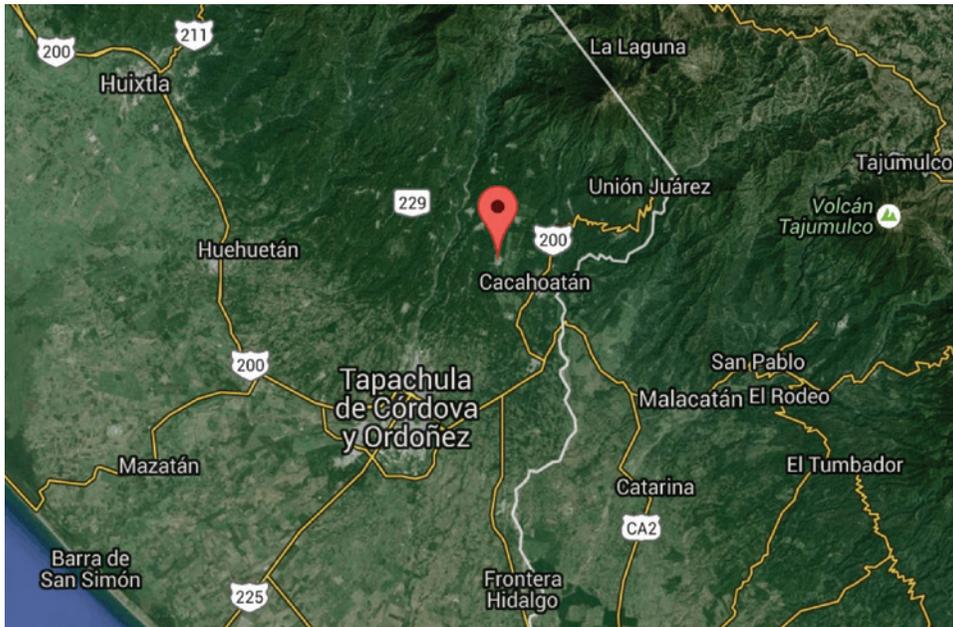
## THE NEW GODS | LOS NUEVOS DIOSES

Essay by Shani K Parsons

DEEP IN THE SOUTHERNMOST CORNER OF THE SOUTHERNMOST STATE OF MEXICO, Carrillo Puerto sits nestled in the highlands of Sierra Madre de Chiapas. Making humble homes within five square kilometres of gridded blocks surrounded by mountainous jungle terrain, farm workers and their families tend coffee, banana, and cacao throughout the year in relative isolation. No tourists tromp through this town; no craft tradition distinguishes it. Yet fantastical rites of spring have emerged unexpectedly from within its modest confines, seizing the imaginations of its inhabitants like a novel strain of tropical fever.

The *Via Crucis*, or Stations of the Cross, is the centuries-old tradition of reenacting the story of Christ's death on Good Friday. In standard Catholic practice, it centres on fourteen key images depicting the events leading up to the crucifixion and burial, arranged along a predetermined pathway. Stopping at each station in turn, pilgrims speak prayers and reflections in response to the sacred imagery. Elsewhere in Mexico it is a day of organized procession, penitence, and mourning, but in Carrillo Puerto it has evolved into an irreverent, chaotic, and carnivalesque celebration of the absurd. Drawing on an unholy mix of religious beliefs, local and popular culture, pagan traditions, and personal mythologies, participants don homemade costumes that are highly theatrical and transformative, often verging on pure abstraction. Adopting new voices, gaits, and gestures as well, the chimerical personalities they assume become an alternate pantheon of strange deities and demons, existing in opposition to the highly codified characters and narratives of the traditional Passion Play.





Tapachula, bustling capital of the fertile Soconusco coastal plain, sprawls in the shadow of the Sierra Madre mountains. It is in this region that Alejandro Garcia Contreras was born and raised, making occasional visits to the highlands with his family since early adolescence. Just 20 kilometres west of the Guatemalan border, the region is a world away from Mexico City. However, this gateway to Central America is no cultural backwater, having seen the rise and fall of the oldest and most complex civilizations in Mesoamerica, including the once-magnificent Maya (peak civilization AD 250–950), whose descendants still comprise the largest indigenous group in Chiapas. In modern and contemporary times, the area has continued to function as a commercial and cultural crossroads, with sizeable influxes of German and Chinese immigrants dating from the establishment of coffee plantations in the late 19th century, and mass migrations of indigenous refugees fleeing war and persecution in Guatemala during the 20th century. US involvement in Guatemala’s commercial and military conflicts would impact southern Mexico in another, more unexpected way as well, via a steady stream of American television programs making incursions over the airwaves. Indeed, throughout the 1980s and 90s, US media domination would arguably prove the most successful of American campaigns to advance its military-industrial-entertainment agenda in this region, embedded in the bellicose aesthetics of MTV, video games, and films such as *Rambo* and *Red Dawn*.<sup>1</sup>





Like Peter Paul Rubens' *Elevation of the Cross* (1610), the premier example of Counter-Reformation doctrine in visual form, or Joe Rosenthal's Pulitzer Prize-winning image of American-style patriotism from the end of WWII, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, Garcia Contreras' small sculptural tableau depicts a scene that reverberates throughout religious and military history: a determined group of men, erecting together an object of Deep Symbolic Meaning. However, just as those iconic images have provoked countless critiques and parodies that question the ideals they embody, from Rembrandt's radical insertion of his own image at the center of his *Raising of the Cross* (1633) to satirical representations of *Iwo Jima* in no less than six episodes of *The Simpsons*, Garcia Contreras engages a similar resistance in his own *Raising the Cross*, substituting the figure of Jesus with orange glass flames that appear to melt the smoke glass constituting the form of the cross.<sup>6</sup> His men, too, are transfigured, becoming a new cast of characters, hybrids upon hybrids: a fringed ghost with a skeleton's face, a masked devil in thief's garb, Captain America in a klansman's hood, a rapper-priest bearing an upside-down cross, and an inexplicable orange blob, whose likeness in miniature, hidden behind the ecstatic participants, emphatically turns its back on the proceedings.







And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL  
*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

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Coupled with a sense of the impossibility of her quest—for who can ever really know another place (or person, or thing?)—and the adaptive strategies she embraces in the face of such knowledge, Pedneault's acceptance of the unknown, and her openness to its revelations, its twists and turns, its blind corners, its dead ends, neither sacrifices depth of experience for breadth, nor compromises the artist's subjectivity in favour of a presumed objectivity or collective reality. Hers is a detachment which paradoxically deepens our curiosity about her engagement with her photographic subjects, and reaffirms within the work a sense of the deeply personal—of one person's experience of surprise and discovery of something unknown, however fleeting, in a world increasingly saturated with images of what we already know.

SHANI K PARSONS  
Toronto 2016



Art is the conscious making of numinous phenomena. Many objects are just objects—inert ... utilitarian. Many events are inconsequential, too banal to add anything to our experience of life. This is unfortunate, as one cannot grow except by having one's spirit greatly stirred; and the spirit cannot be greatly stirred by spiritless things. Much of our very life is dead. For early humans, this was not so. They made their own possessions, and shaped and decorated them with the aim of making them not merely useful, but powerful. They tried to infuse their weapons with the nature of the tiger, their cooking pots with the life of growing things; and they succeeded. Appearance, material, history, context, rarity—perhaps rarity most of all—combine to create, magically, the quality of soul. But we modern demiurges are prolific copyists; we give few things souls of their own. Locomotives, with their close resemblance to beasts, may be the great exception; but in nearly all else with which today's poor humans are filling the world, I see a quelling of the numinous, an ashening of the fire of life. We are making an inert world; we are building a cemetery. And on the tombs, to remind us of life, we lay wreaths of poetry and bouquets of painting. You expressed this very condition, when you said that art beautifies life. No longer integral, the numinous has become optional, a luxury—one of which you, my dear friend, are fond, however unconsciously. You adorn yourself with the same instincts as they who put frightening masks of clay and feathers on their heads, and you comport yourself in an uncommonly calculated way—as do I. We thus make numinous phenomena of ourselves. No mean trick—to make oneself a rarity, in this overpopulated age.

KJ BISHOP  
*The Etched City*



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*To see an image of Rembrandt's The Raising of the Cross, 1633, a work that exemplifies Dutch Protestant critique of Catholicism in the wake of the Counter-Reformation, see p 72.*
- <sup>7</sup> Octavio Paz (quoting Mexican poet Xavier Villaurrutia), *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (Grove Press, Inc, New York 1985).

#### ILLUSTRATIONS

Map Data, Carrillo Puerto, Mexico and location of Saguenay, Quebec in relation to Chiapas, page 20: Google, INEGI

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Quote page 29: Graham Greene, *The Comedians* (Bodley Head, London 1966).

Quote page 61: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (New World Library, Novato, CA 2008).

Quote page 64: KJ Bishop, *Etched City* (Bantam Books 2004).

*Note: Where the words "man", "mankind", and "he" occur in the quoted passage, the words "humans", "humanity" or "humankind", and "they" have been substituted.*

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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST



Josée Pedneault and Alejandro Garcia Contreras  
*The New Gods (blue devil)*, 2013  
Archival inkjet print  
40 x 32 in / 101.5 x 81.25 cm  
Edition of 5



Josée Pedneault and Alejandro Garcia Contreras  
*The New Gods (Christmas bows)*, 2013  
Archival inkjet print  
40 x 32 in / 101.5 x 81.25 cm  
Edition of 5



Josée Pedneault and Alejandro Garcia Contreras  
*The New Gods (green soldier)*, 2013  
Archival inkjet print  
40 x 32 in / 101.5 x 81.25 cm  
Edition of 5



Josée Pedneault and Alejandro Garcia Contreras  
*The New Gods (king on horse)*, 2013  
Archival inkjet print  
39 x 45.5 in / 99 x 115.5 cm  
Edition of 5



Josée Pedneault and Alejandro Garcia Contreras  
*The New Gods (newspaper man)*, 2013  
Archival inkjet print  
40 x 32 in / 101.5 x 81.25 cm  
Edition of 5



Josée Pedneault and Alejandro Garcia Contreras  
*The New Gods (rags)*, 2014  
Archival inkjet print  
40 x 32 in / 101.5 x 81.25 cm  
Edition of 5



Josée Pedneault and Alejandro Garcia Contreras  
*The New Gods (religious pair in blue)*, 2013  
Archival inkjet print  
40 x 32 in / 101.5 x 81.25 cm  
Edition of 5



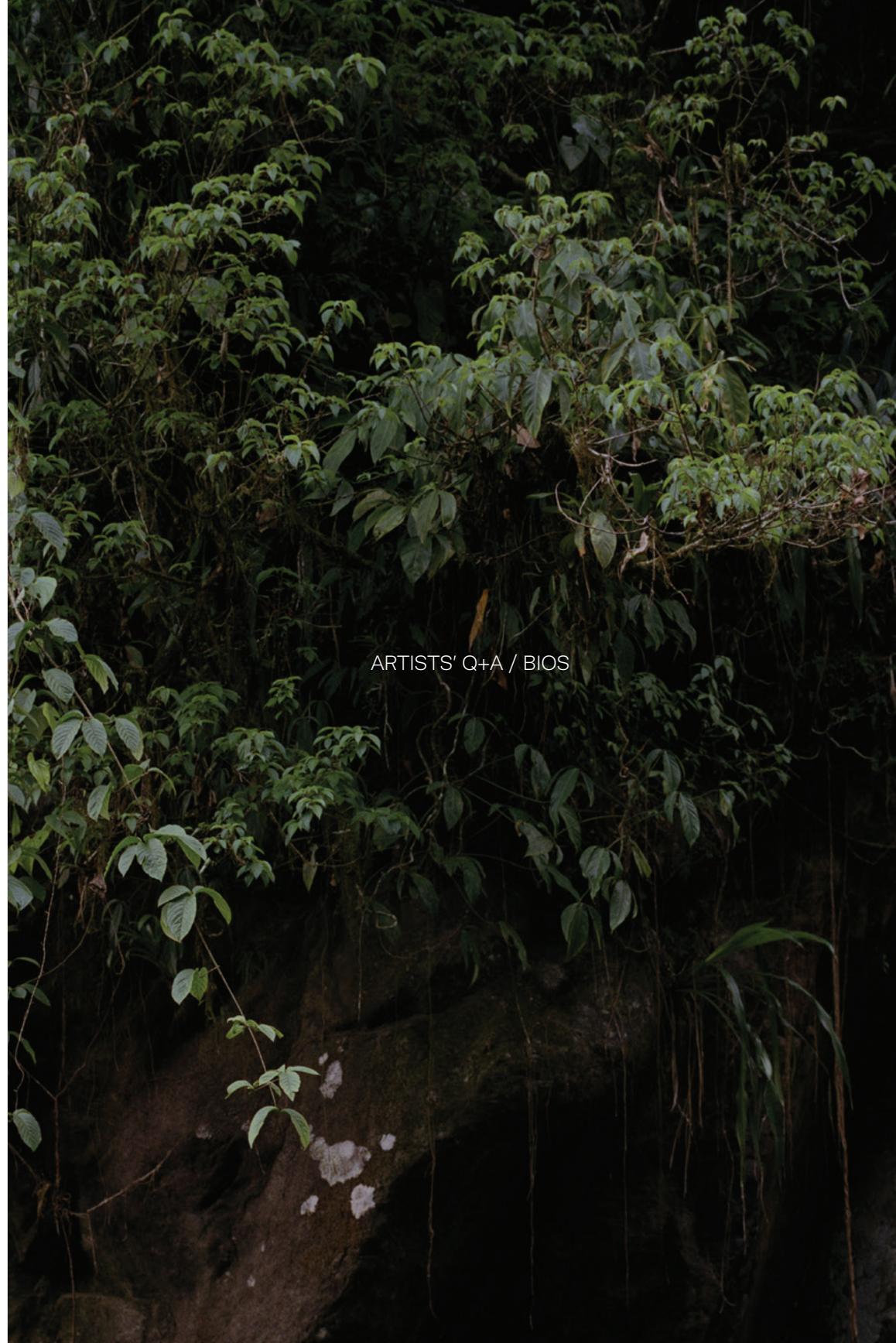
LIMITED EDITION PRINT

***The New Gods (Cardboard Man), 2014***

Archival digital print on Hahnemühle FineArt Baryta

9 x 6 inches, Edition of 20

Signed and numbered by the artists



ARTISTS' Q+A / BIOS

Q+A: ALEJANDRO GARCIA CONTRERAS

What is your background and how does it shape your interest in visual art?

I come from a family with no relation to the arts. But my mom always gave me watercolors and clay as toys from when I was very young. I became extremely interested in visual arts when I started reading comic books, and watching cartoons. Rock music has also had a big influence on me, especially Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, Freddy Mercury. I began reading classic literature like Rimbaud, Poe, Boudelaire, Marquis de Sade, William Blake, John Milton. I suppose all these influences contribute to a vivid imagination, which I draw upon for my painting, animation and sculpture.

Where does an artwork begin for you?

I have a desire to materialize or bring to life an idea, something indescribable and nonexistent. For me it's sort of an invocation, calling upon ideas, concepts, symbols. Working on it becomes a kind of ritual. I like to work with different materials, depending on the project. Often I work with ceramic, oil painting, stop motion animation, music, and writing — anything that helps me to understand exactly where I am. In fact my ideas are closely related to my personal life.

How has your practice changed over time?

I have become more obsessive about my practice, and have begun exploring new materials and mediums. I don't know if this is actually good or bad, but right now I like it because it keeps me interested and also forces me explore different approaches to a given idea.

What art/artists/movements do you most identify with and why?

Contemporary artists from Mexico that I identify with include Miguel Calderon, Teresa Margolles, Daniel Guzman, and Carlos Amorales. But I identify more with artists that engage concepts of divinity and spirituality—John Milton, William Blake, Daniel Johnston. Other contemporary artists that interest me are Shary Boyle, Allison Schulnik, Valérie Blass, Natalie Djurberg.

What memorable responses have you had to your work, and have they changed the way you think about making art?

A few years ago I was obsessively working with the concept of death. Videos, sculptures, drawings—all of it was a vehicle to explore that inevitable and incomprehensible moment. I dare say that I was trying to invoke Death. Then I fell in love. In that moment my perception of life and love changed, but still I kept following this *thanatos* impulse.

And then my best friend Axel Velazquez (curator and artist) died. We had been working together with another artist as an art collective called NETER and had many art projects going, and it was a very difficult and emotional situation. The following year my father was diagnosed with vocal cord cancer. After three months of radiotherapy he recovered, but having experienced death all around me during this time, I began to explore other emotions. I'm still processing it all, but it is these kinds of experiences that have made me change the way I think about making art.

What are you reading/watching/looking at/listening to these days?

Right now I'm reading *History of Magic* by Eliphas Levi, a book that explains the evolution and legacy of magical thinking in human culture. Jodorowsky's *Dune*, *Game of Thrones* and a *Star Wars* porn parody were the last things I watched. Bobby Beausoleil's *Lucifer Rising*, Fad Gadget, Douglas McCarthy, and Queen are what I've been listening these days and probably for the rest of my life.

Do you collect anything? What? Why?

Yes, I've been collecting comic books and action figures since I was a child. I've always liked the heroic figure. These were my avenues to art — comics were my first paintings and narratives, and action figures my first sculptures.

What are you working on right now?

I'm still working on *The New Gods*. I have a grant from the Mexican Art Council (FONCA) to keep making new sculptures, paintings and photographs for the rest of the year. I would also like to start working on a new short film/video animation. I have some ideas around John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. And I'm trying to complete a very old project — an album with my band, *Children's Drugstore*.

Name 1-3 contemporary artists whose you feel deserve more attention.

Kenneth Anger, Daniel Johnston, Genesis P. Orridge, William Blake

## Q+A: JOSÉE PEDNEAULT

What is your background and how does it shape your interest in visual art?

I grew up in a small town in the region of Saguenay Lac-St-Jean (Quebec), far from any large city. The feeling of isolation of the place — both geographic and cultural — nourished a curiosity for exploring the world and experiencing other ways of living and thinking. This early interest in travel transformed into central themes in my work: the journey, the quest, and its relation to time, to nature, and to the world.

Where does an artwork begin for you?

Ideas always come to me through personal experiences. Philosophical or existential reflections are transformed into visual forms, as extensions of what I am thinking about in a specific period of my life. In my process, I accumulate photographs in a personal archive. My work is very permeable and flexible: photographs get reused in different projects, changing their context and adding new layers of significations, which preserves them from a static reading.

How has your practice changed over time?

The development of my projects became slower over the years, requiring more research and time to come to a conclusion. The work also opened up in recent years to other mediums like drawing, painting and sculpture, which are used in conjunction with photographic images.

What art/artists/movements do you most identify with and why?

I identify to notions of romanticism, to works that explore the tension between fiction and reality, and to notions of poetic. I relate to artists Rinko Kawauchi, Francis Alÿs, Laurent Grasso, Pierre Huygue, and Sophie Calle.

On a day off, what are some of your favourite things to do?

I love to be surrounded by nature: parks, botanical gardens and national parks. Natural history and science museums, flea markets and large libraries are all very inspiring places.

What are you reading/watching/looking at/listening to these days?

I have just read three great books by Rebecca Solnit: *Field Guide to Getting Lost*, *The Faraway Nearby*, and *Wanderlust*. I have also just picked up a French publication called *Relief*, under the theme “Tropiques” exploring ideas of travel, paradise, exoticism. Lastly I am reading *Orientalism* by Edward W. Said, which I have been wanting to read for a while.

Do you collect anything? What? Why?

I bring back a lot of small souvenirs and memorabilia from travel. I also own a small art collection from exchanges with local artists friends or pieces I have bought over the years.

What are you working on right now?

Right now I am still working on the project Nævus, which is a quest for an unknown island in the shape of a mysterious birthmark that appeared on my back when I was 17. This is an ongoing project, so I am not sure it will ever end. I see each exhibition as a new beginning rather than a conclusion.

In January 2016, I started another project in which I fade colour paper under the sun for long periods of time, using the movement of the Earth around the Sun as a photographic instrument. Bringing us back to a pre-photographic era, this project meditates on our relation to the cosmos and to time.

Name 1-3 contemporary artists whose you feel deserve more attention.

Guillaume Adjutor Provost, a very original voice in Quebec's art scene. Vincent Lafrance's poetic photographs. Hou I-Ting from Taiwan, a very personal and unique art practice.



#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### CREDITS

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