

yoshua okon discusses **Crabby**
with erica burton

Erica Burton: Why did you want to make this work, and in particular in this wildlife documentary style film set in a tree trunk? Who were the ladies you hired to act, and was the site where the film was shot important?

Yoshua Okon: I have been going to Zicatela, a small town in the Pacific coast of Mexico in the state of Oaxaca, for the past 17 years. Years ago I met Tomasa, one of the two ladies in the video, and we became good friends. As we planned this video she invited a friend of hers. Both women were born and have lived in the region all their lives and, unlike other areas of Mexico, this region was not colonized until relatively recently, allowing for people native to the area to maintain and develop their culture to a higher degree than other regions in Mexico, also allowing a much lower degree of exploitation of nature. In other words, the relation that has been established between indigenous and modern cultures has a very different dynamic here than in most other parts of North America. It is this different dynamic which especially interested me. Tomasa grew up in a very isolated town near Zicatela, and recently, the latter has become a popular small resort attracting people from all over the world. I decided to collaborate with Tomasa in making this piece in which the goal was to question the *National Geographic* type documentaries and their supposed universal objectivity. I told her my ideas and then together we came up with a story (the crab hunt saga). I worked with Tomasa not as a passive subject to be observed, but instead as an active collaborator in the process of creating the video. Finally, I came up with the idea of placing the video inside the tree trunk as I was thinking about the exhibition context. I think the context is essential to the way this particular work and its irony are perceived. I really liked the idea of re-contextualizing a *National Geographic* style documentary by turning it into an object in order to affect the way we relate to it. I think that we are so used to watching documentaries in film or television that if I would've had the video playing in a monitor or as a projection, a lot of its subtleties would have been missed, and it would have carried a more conventional meaning.

EB: My impression of the work is that it is essentially about turning nature and its voyeuristic documentation by humans on its head. Humans become the observed and the documented, playing with our ideas of identity as a species. We are a developed and sophisticated species of animal, but animals we are and ultimately everything comes down to survival, and in particular survival of the fittest.

YO: I think that pretty much you are putting your finger on the main aspect of the piece. More than being a documentary about nature (into which "non-Western" peoples are often inserted) it is a documentary about how we perceive nature and relate to it. The piece works as a mirror: reflecting what the spectators themselves have come to perceive as "The Truth", revealing that perhaps these truths are only illusions we have forgotten, and which reflect our fear of uncertainty.

I'm very interested in the structure of the supposed universal/objective perspective taken on by the wildlife and ethnographic documentary genre. It has a point of view which is structured as a supposedly scientific and objective method of observing the other as the non-I, specifically observing the other as the un-civilized, the savage, the bestial. I also wanted to point at the hidden spectacular and sensationalist aspect of these kinds of documentaries. I think that the narration has a dual function by slowly shifting from a sober scientific tone to an upbeat popular culture "wrestling-commentator-like" tone. I'm very interested in the way we have historically perceived and related to the natural world, and the issues of otherness and alienation both between humans and nature, and amongst humans themselves.

EB: In which direction are you hoping to develop your work next?

YO: In a way *Crabby* was the starting point for a new series of works that I'm currently producing. These works are titled *Lago Bolsena* and consist of several tree trunks of various sizes with LCD monitors and speakers mounted in them. In the screens I show videos in which I collaborated with a whole block of a neighborhood in Mexico City (a total of 60 people). All the neighbours performed for the camera pretending that they were a tribe of savages, and that I was shooting a documentary on them.

EB: Could you tell me a little more about La Panderia, the alternative artist run space in Mexico City which you co-founded?

YO: La Panaderia was a non-profit artist-run space which had several functions. A bunch of local artists felt that there was a lack of spaces to exhibit experimental work, as well as a lack of exchange with the outside world. That is why the space simultaneously served as a meeting place for people interested in art and culture, a bridge with the international art scene (we had a residency for international artists and curators and because of the space many local artists had the opportunity to exhibit abroad), and a place where both local and international artists could exhibit works outside market and institutional limitations. The space was developed very organically and it had a life-span; it got to a point where either it changed in nature and became more institutionalised, or it closed.