

FEDERICO URIBE

Watch the Parade

SKIRA



Carnival of the Animals

Meanings in Uribe's Menagerie

Susan Hodara



ometimes, when constructing a representation of an animal, Federico Uribe gets down on the floor

of his studio and channels the essence of the beast. He crouches like a tiger, slithers like a snake, charges like a bull.

"I mimic their movements before I make them," he said by telephone from his studio in Miami. "I try to get the sense of how it would feel to be in a particular position in their body."

Illustrating an animal is one thing. Trying to portray yourself as an animal is a different thing. I try to paint myself as any animal.

Federico Uribe

Pig, 2016

Metallic measuring tapes, 14 x 60 x 36 inches (35.56 x 152.4 x 91.44 cm)

As much as Uribe is attempting to inhabit the animal and decode its mysterious internal posture, his resulting sculptures are ultimately depictions of himself. He describes them as self-portraits. "I believe that I portray myself as animals in different moods," he said. "When I feel angry, I make an angry animal. When I feel good, I make a feel-good animal."

In several interviews conducted during the fall of 2016, Uribe discussed his identification with the many creatures that he sculpts. His reliance on them as a means of self-expression provides a filter through which to understand the menagerie he has created. Yet Uribe's self-expression goes beyond the reflection of his moods. His sculptures hold layers of meaning in their use of materials, in their gestures and poses, and in the introspection and social critique they communicate.

SCULPTING THE CREATURES—"GIVING THEM THE ECHO OF LIFE"

Be they furred or feathered, winged or scaled, part of the thrill of experiencing Uribe's animals is to discover what he used to build them. In the mid-1990s, Uribe, a native Colombian who was trained as a painter, began assembling his imagery from all sorts of found items: plastic forks, gardening tools, leather gloves, cleaning brushes, nail clippers, safety pins, wire hangers, corks, pennies, and more. A graceful school of fish turns out to be, on closer observation, an arrangement of wooden paintbrush handles. A swarm of bees is made from pencil erasers and acrylic fingernails; a herd of zebras from bicycle tires; a rearing horse, its mane flying, from electrical cables.

Uribe's creatures—often life-size or larger—elicit a progressively heightened interaction. From a distance viewers can identify and admire the animal; as they approach they may examine the unique agents used to sculpt it, and then ponder, perhaps long after they've left the gallery: How did he come up with that? Why did he do it? What does it mean?

Uribe has likened his choices of mediums to the childhood game of finding formations in clouds, but for him the process is a persistent makeover of mundane objects into potent imagery. His selections of materials go beyond producing visual likenesses. Unlike Marcel Duchamp, who disavowed the function of the objects he appropriated, Uribe embraces the past lives of the items he transforms. A plump pig made with interwoven yellow tape measures, for example, reflects the constant measuring the pig undergoes to assess its worth. "The pig is bred for food," Uribe said. "How good the pig is depends on how big the pig is."

In his 2006 body of work sardonically titled *Human Nature*, Uribe fashioned jungle animals from 1,700 pairs of disassembled Puma® shoes, along with 35,000 shoelaces. That choice holds a critical mirror to the slaughter of animals to manufacture leather shoes. "People kill animals to make shoes," he said. "I disassembled shoes to make animals. I cannot give them life," Uribe wrote in the 2010 book *Now Contemporary Art*, "but I may give them the echo of life, which is as much as art can do."

A different rationale led to another series, *Pencilism*. In it, each piece is made entirely from colored pencils. Some are sculptures; others resemble paintings, conjuring Vincent van Gogh's feverish marks or the countless individual brushstrokes that resolve into Impressionist compositions. Here, the brushstrokes are pencils, tens of thousands of them, slivered, sliced, bisected, and arrayed into fields of color that contain seemingly infinite levels of detail and depths of emotion.

Consider *Elephant*, a large "canvas" from 2004. The elephant's hide shimmers with subtle hues of grays, blues, and purples. The beast fills the frame, standing sublimely in a golden field against a turquoise sky. It peers at the viewer,



Elephant, 2016
Bullet shells, 102 x 90 x 7 inches (259.08 x 228.6 x 17.78 cm)
Pencilism series

a shard of a white pencil in the center of its eye suggesting a glint of light. In a statement about Pencillism, Uribe wrote: "With each drawing, the pencil gets smaller. I want it all: the pencils and the drawings. I want all the pencils with all their images."

In a more caustic move, Uribe turned to bullet casings. They cover the animals in his series, *We Remain at Peace (Quedamos en paz)*, juxtaposing the vitality of the creatures with the violent and lethal nature of the medium. A leaping rabbit almost glistens, but its metallic sheen is a dulled gray and gold. The regal head of a lioness, similarly shiny but dull, is marred by a large hole. A sleek leopard holds an expression that seems pleading.

Not all of the cartridges are silver and gold. The bullet casings forming the tail and edging the wings of a flying duck resemble long red fingernails. The deep blue body of a wild turkey stands in bold contrast to its dangling red wattle.

This series of animals carries symbolic interpretations. Uribe said his early bullet shell sculptures were a comment on the deadly sport of hunting. His message shifted in response to failed attempts at peace in the decades-long civil war in Colombia. "My works made out of bullets have a connotation of what the war has left behind," he said. "I am trying to say that everybody who died in



Wild Turkey, 2015

Bullet shells and cartridges, 36 x 36 x 30 inches (91.44 x 91.44 x 76.2 cm)

We Remain at Peace series



Falcon, 2016
Bullet shells, 25.5 x 31.5 x 22 inches (64.77 x 80 x 55.88 cm)
We Remain at Peace series

this unfair war was innocent. I am putting all these bullets on my animals to try to bring them back to life somehow."

Clearly, the three squirrels clutched in the mouth of the fox in Uribe's wall sculpture *Greed* (2016,) are doomed. Covered in gold casings, they writhe, helpless between the fox's teeth. The fox is red and white, made from shotgun shells, his head and shoulders emerging from the wall, his bite resolute. But this fox isn't sly; he is blinded by greed. "He thinks he's going to get a good meal," Uribe said. "But when you are greedy, you are endangering yourself."

A more empathetic portrait is a red-tailed hawk perched on a branch, *Falcon* (2016). This wall sculpture is also made entirely of shotgun shells: white, gray, and shades of brown for the wings and tail, black with flecks of gold for the body. The creature is on high alert, his wings outstretched as if this is but a brief respite. "He is a hunting animal that is being hunted," Uribe said. "He is scared."

Whatever elements Uribe uses, crafting his creations involves endless screwing or nailing to secure the materials in place. And the process of screwing or nailing is crucial for Uribe. "I'm nailing, nailing, nailing — piercing my objects



Greed, 2016

From Federico Uribe: *TransformArt*, Montgomery MFA, October 8th, 2016 – January 8th, 2017

Bullet shells and cartridges, 48 x 24 x 30 inches (121.92 x 60.96 x 76.2 cm)

We Remain at Peace series

thousands and thousands of times," he said. "And through these aggressive actions, I release my anger."

The screws and nails and other implements he uses remain visible in the completed sculpture. "I leave them as testimony of these objects that essentially hurt the material I am using." Contemplating the value he places on his methods, Uribe said he believes "artists portray themselves more in the ways they choose to work than in the things they choose to make."

ANIMAL SPIRITS — AND SELF-PORTRAITS

Choosing to make creatures, Uribe avails himself of the entire animal kingdom for inspiration. One of his largest series of work is *Animal Farm*, from 2008 and 2009, a sprawling installation populated by domesticated farm animals.

Uribe's *Animal Farm* is a far cry from George Orwell's dystopian novella of the same name. Here Uribe revived fond memories of his grandfather's farm in Colombia, an oasis of solace in what was otherwise an alienated and unhappy childhood. The peace and wonder he must have felt there as a boy permeates his works.

A bull fabricated from the soles of shoes exudes majesty. *Ram* (2008), with coat of mops and spiraling horns of shoelaces gazes serenely into the distance. A small white hen made with colored pencils lays golf-ball eggs, while a dog fashioned with wooden pencils and plastic cable ties seems barely able to contain its eagerness to play.

A dash of irreverence is evident in *Intellectual* (2008), a donkey molded with sections of open books, the middles of countless stories visible on its surface. Missing, however, is the donkey's head, severed at the neck—a dig at the inadequacy of academia and the limitations of the theoretical mind.

As for the gentle horse constructed from wood shavings, one of its legs is a wooden crutch. The sculpture memorializes a beloved horse that Uribe's grandfather gave him when he was five. "It was lame, but I never noticed," Uribe said. "I loved it."

To convey his more aggressive emotions, Uribe turned from the farm to the jungle. In his series *Human Nature*, the animals are untamed, predatory, fierce. "A cheetah roars, a crocodile snaps, a snow leopard pounces.

Uribe is entranced by animals in the wild; he studies them in televised documentaries. "I watch their behavior," he said. "I am obsessed by their power and their beauty, by their cleverness, and their energy. I like the idea of these entities that have their own intelligence and their own lives."

Stretching Dog, 2014
Colored pencils with plastic fasteners
25 x 36 x 12 inches (63.5 x 91.44 x 30.48 cm)
Doggie Style series



His *Tiger Jumping Out of the Grass* (2006), is stealthy, yet determined, secure in its feline carriage as it emerges from a grassy jungle. The creature is pure animal: foreign, furtive, frightening. It is also Uribe.

By the time Uribe captures his animals as sculptures, he has pierced their otherness. "I relate to them completely," he said. "They are self-portraits."

HUMAN AND ANIMAL — TUSSLING IN THE WILDERNESS, TELLING THE STORY

Many of Uribe's portraits are of animals on their own or inhabiting a fantastical collective environment. Sometimes, though, humans and animals come together, and the interactions may be fraught. *Saint George and the Dragon* (2009) (*San Jorge y el dragon*), is an elaborate painting made of pencils that depicts the story from Jacobus de Voragine's 13th-century *Golden Legend*. In the myth, Saint George liberates the residents of a town and saves their princess by slaying the dragon that was terrorizing and devouring them. It's a morality tale: man conquering evil as metaphor for the power of love and Christianity. In Uribe's telling, however, the winged dragon has gained the power. Saint George is on his back on the ground, legs flailing, as the dragon, teeth bared, claws his chest and thigh. The two tussle alone in the wilderness save for a lone black horse nibbling grass in the distance.

With this work, Uribe challenges the myth, prodding viewers to rethink their assumptions and question the stories they are told. "I don't believe that San Jorge had a fight with a dragon, but if he did, I doubt he would have won," Uribe said. "The dragon would have won, and San Jorge would have died in the fight."

Like San Jorge, man wrestles with beast in the unsettling sculpture *Gladiator* (2010). Or are they wrestling? The man's crimson pants are unzipped, his belt unbuckled; he holds a spotted leopard upside down against him, the animal's head

between his legs, its paws gripping his thighs, its tail curled round his neck and inserted into his mouth.

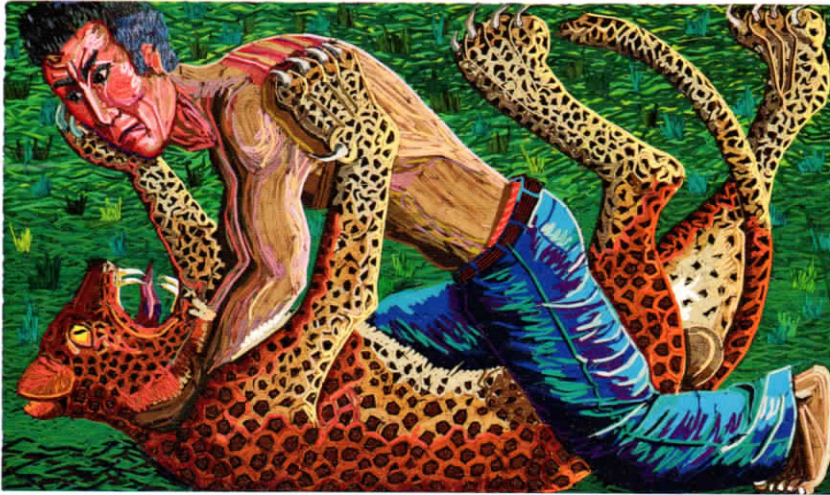
Gladiator, from 2010, was made from pieces of books. "When I work with books," Uribe said, "I am telling a story through them, just by their existence in the work."

So what story does *Gladiator* tell? It is sexual, a mutual embrace blending violence, lust, and love. Uribe explained that the work addresses the erotic connotations of anger. "It's a psychological fight that I have with myself," he said. "I don't always like it, but there it is: this feeling of aggression."

Uribe approached this subject in an earlier work, also titled *Gladiator*, made in 2008 with shoelaces and pins. Here, man and leopard also embrace, this time horizontally, the man on top, his hands in a chokehold around the



Saint George and the Dragon, 2009
Color pencils, 72 x 84 x 5 inches (182.88 x 213.36 x 12.7 cm)
Pencilism series



Gladiator, 2008
Shoelaces and pins, 60 x 84 x 4 inches (152.4 x 213.36 x 10.16 cm)
Painting on a Shoestring series

animal's neck. He is shirtless; his face is flushed, dismayed. The leopard's paw draws blood as it scratches the man's back, but now it is the beast whose legs are flailing. In this piece battle is fought. In the later *Gladiator*, there is acceptance. Uribe has come to terms with the

aggression he wishes he could deny, but has finally acknowledged.



Gladiator, 2010
Books, 70 x 34 x 34 inches (177.8 x 86.36 x 86.36 cm)
In the Beginning There Was the Word series

A more light-hearted attitude resulted in Uribe's *Butterflies in My Stomach* (2016), a Pencillist painting from the *Built-in Colors (Color Construido)* series which he began in 2014. Here a man pulls open his shirt to reveal a swarm of butterflies, drawn in a rainbow of pastels, fluttering on the flesh of his belly. Uribe's use of butterflies is the simple representation of language. "I do a lot of work that is about listening literally," he said. "When people say things like, 'I'm all ears,' I picture them with ears all over them. I hear people literally. I can't stop it. So when someone says, 'I have butterflies in my stomach,' I make a painting that is literally that."

Uribe's animals are layered. Their craftsmanship is intricate; their materials shock and amuse. Look closely beyond the whimsy and wit, beyond the detailed craftsmanship to the stories being told. Consider the choices made and honor the artist at work in his studio: man against animal, man penetrating animal, man becoming animal, animal as man.



Butterflies in My Stomach, 2016
Color pencils and pencil drawing
50 x 70 x 5 inches (127 x 177.8 x 12.7 cm)
Built-in Colors series. Private Collection, Bogotá, Colombia