

Gauging the loss of material weight

In *Es difícil eludir la armadura fundamental*, photographer Christian Bordes records more than physical transformation

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Pablo Ramírez stares back at the camera with a steady gaze. There is something in his eyes that captures my attention. Of course it's hard to miss the fact that in some of the photographs, he is 50 kilograms heavier than in others, but it's the look in his eyes that keeps me riveted. I wouldn't say it's a sad look, but I would say that he looks mysterious in some of the images, and even sultry in others. There is an intimacy to the photographs – an intimacy that is unexpected in portraits of a fully clothed man dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt – and an intimacy that reminds you that we are only ever privy to what others really want to show us.

In *Es difícil eludir la armadura fundamental* (It is difficult to avoid the fundamental armour) Christian Bordes photographs the 50-kilogram weight loss of Ramírez over a period of one year. With the same shaved head and dressed in similar clothing, the fundamentals of the photographs don't change over the year, except for the most fundamental thing – his body. But as difficult as it is to ignore the extreme weight loss in the images, it doesn't necessarily take centre stage as the theme in this exhibition.

Bordes and Ramírez met in fashion school at the University of Buenos Aires. Since then, their lives have taken very different paths. While Bordes went on to do graphic design and photography before moving to London to pursue his dream of becoming a magazine editor, Ramírez became an internationally renowned clothing designer. But the two have remained friends over the years. During a chat back in 2008, Ramírez asked Bordes to do some portraits of him, but also admitted to being shy about being in front of the camera.

This shyness, Bordes thinks, was linked to his weight at the time. Ramírez has a past when it comes to weight struggles, having once lost a lot of weight, and then gained it back. While sharing with Bordes his new plan to lose weight the two came up with the project that eventually became the exhibition.

Between 2008 and 2009, Bordes took over 600 photographs of Ramírez, documenting his dramatic weight loss. Every Saturday, the two would meet at Ramírez's clothing boutique in San Telmo after closing, and Bordes would set up a makeshift studio.

"No one knew what we were doing – not even his (Ramírez's) partner knew what we were doing," explains Bordes. And by the sound of it, Bordes and Ramírez weren't entirely sure what they were doing at first. But they were both sure what they didn't want their project to be about: they didn't want the exhibition to become some sort of propaganda for weight loss or health. And they didn't want it



It's not before and after, or yes, but in reverse: Pablo Ramírez in two different phases of his life.

to be about fashion. For a high-profile designer like Ramírez, I can imagine that it would be hard to separate this project from the world he works in, where the average size is 0.

Sharing a Coke (diet, of course) with Bordes at Angel Guido Art Project, where the exhibition is being held until September 20, he explained that after he and Ramírez started the project another surge of stories about models being too skinny erupted in the international media. They didn't want their project to be about that hype. I couldn't help adding that when I first heard about the exhibition, I thought it ideal for Argentina, where eating disorders run rampant, and where being skinny and dieting seem to serve as the subject for a disproportionate amount of conversations – at least among females. Bordes agreed.

In the last few photographs taken, Ramírez appears almost emaciated. His face has a drawn look and he is almost unrecognizable from the first pictures, except for his eyes. Bordes told me that even Ramírez was shocked when he stood first saw the photographs up in the exhibition. Bordes added that since those last skinny pictures, Ramírez has put on some weight, but that it is muscle, and he is feeling better than ever.

What became clear to both Bordes and Ramírez over the year, and which is evident when viewing the nine large-scale digital photographs at the gallery, is that the process of photographing Ramírez's weight loss revealed so much more than the physical changes to his body. Upstairs at

Angel Guido Art Project, in the images of Ramírez taken early on in the process, Ramírez appears to give a steely glare. The photo feels, for lack of a better word, heavy. But I wouldn't link that to the size of his body, nor to his pose. Instead, it looks like he feels extremely uncomfortable in front of the camera. In photos taken at the end, a lighter Ramírez looks so much more at ease in front of the camera. You can see it in his eyes, and you can see it in how he holds his body.

The exhibition is laid out over two floors, consisting not only of the nine photographs but also a self portrait and a portrait of Bordes, both drawn by Ramírez, as well as a film that includes various excerpts of Ramírez striding out on the catwalk after fashion shows. In the film, the transformation both of body and personality is startling. In one of the shows, a heavier Ramírez appears somewhat uncomfortable in his own skin, and in a hurry to get off the catwalk. But in the 2010 New York Fashion Week, the newly slim Ramírez dressed all in black and in a skirt à la Marc Jakobs, struts his stuff like he could be one of the models.

"It's a mental state," says Bordes.

And perhaps that is what curator Mindy Lahitte means in her catalogue text for the show when she writes that one of the big questions with regards to the relationship between the self and the body is "if we can arrive at a moment when the human spirit can feel comfortable in the flesh".

Digging beneath the surface of things is something that Bordes



Pablo Ramírez and photographer Christian Bordes.

finds great satisfaction in. Now an artist, as well as a commercial photographer, he seeks out projects that explore the notion of intimacy.

"We live in a world without limits," says Bordes, referring to the onslaught of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, where the most private of pictures can be exposed to just about anyone who wants to see them. "There is no clear limit for where intimacy starts." To spend this time photographing a friend, sharing his confidence, and listening to him talk about the radical changes taking place in his body was a very intimate experience for Bordes. You can sense this intimacy between artist and muse in the photographs.

Perhaps that is why Lahitte writes that the value in these images is that "the photograph can present itself as a tool for measurement, for printing informa-

tion about weight, size and date, but more than anything, it has the capacity to convert itself into the language and temperament of two people who chose to be friends."

As Bordes would say, the exhibit is ultimately about intimacy. I think that is why, in the final photographs, Ramírez looks lighter in every sense of the word. Over the year, he has shared an experience with a camera, but most of all, with another person.

WHERE & WHEN

Es difícil eludir la armadura fundamental runs through September 20 at Angel Guido Art Project, (Suipacha 1217). On the Web: www.angelguidoartproject.com Gallery hours are Monday through Friday from 12 to 8pm. Read more about the exhibition or see the film talked about in the article at www.esdificileludir.com.ar

COURTESY CHRISTIAN BORDES

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