

THE BODY AS AN ARCHIVE

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VISUAL AIDS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript: A Closer Look With Milton Garcia Ninja

Recorded: May 22, 2022, New York City

[00:00:23.770] - Milton

We met through those avenues, and we met through the Hetrick-Martin Institute, places like that that are still in existence, that foster a community of GLBT youth before they start developing and becoming adults. Whenever we would meet, we would meet every Tuesday and Thursday from 3:30 after I got out of school with my big, large portfolio, black portfolio, and go to Central Park in the Ramble section, where it's a cruising section there in the park, and meet right in the bench, right on the corner of two opposing directions. And that area is still there to this day because you're in Central Park, but it's closer to Belvedere Castle when you walk up a hill. So my friends and I used to nickname that specific bench in that intersection Pussypot Lane and Suck My Dick Boulevard.

[00:01:24.010] - Constantine

I love that.

[00:01:24.960] - Milton

So when we would hang out in the summertime at night, there was this guy. We didn't know if he was gay, straight bi, we didn't know, but he was a streaker, and he would run in the nude on a day like today, very humid evening, and he was completely nude and would jog and run as if a runner in the nude. And you saw the business wagging back and forth, and my friends, some of them that were smoking weed, marijuana or whatever, would be high, and they would act like they were his partner and say, hey, wait for me, I'll be right in, stuff like that. So that name stuck with me.

[00:02:13.420] - Milton

And it's not until I created that piece that I remember that I was looking at an image of all of us sitting together at that bench, and two or three members of the House of Extravaganza that were in that picture had passed away. And the first person that passed away was Louis Boo Boo Extravaganza, who, if you see the movie Paris Is Burning really closely, was when he was walking Realness. And he was the guy that had the black and white tracksuit and the black hat that was curved to the back and ski glasses that were in black. And he was walking, and he was posing and acting rather masculine. And he was the first person that ever saw me practice in that area when I was practicing my movements and voguing before I walked my first ball.

[00:03:06.130] - Milton

And I was starstruck when I saw Louis Extravaganza because he looked so gorgeous and he didn't look like he was a gay man. He was just this handsome, Latino, dark-skinned gay man that I didn't know if he was cruising me or if that he was admiring my movements. And I just put on my music and just put my portfolio down and started practicing on my own. And I didn't care who was walking around, whether they were cruising or whatever. I didn't care because I was in the moment just waiting for my friends to arrive after school.

[00:03:43.800] - Milton

And he noticed me and we sat down and we talked. And he was the first person in the ballroom scene to die of AIDS. And when I found that out, I was devastated. And it was just like, it hurts a little bit more if I knew that person in my journey, in my ballroom career. So he was the first and the most recent was Hector Extravaganza.

[00:04:11.070] - Milton

So when he died, it feels like a stab in the back because nobody knew that he was having issues with crystal meth use and stuff like that. So now that's becoming a topic that we are learning to come out of the closet about and discuss as a community and things of that nature. So it's been hard. So when I create these dedicatorial pieces, I call them dedicatorial pieces in which it's the image of the person that died and myself as an angel or something. And I write something like a love letter or something that I wanted to say to them that they were alive to give me consolation.

[00:04:56.630] - Milton

But not only consolation for myself, but also consolation from members of the house that he or she was in. And I don't charge for that. And I frame it and I give it to the Aviances or I give it to whoever, and it gives me such a feeling of a healthy release without having to turn to self medication to deal with a person's death or anything like that. Even the death of family members, even with the death of Prince, who's like my idol. I cried for three days, but I refused to go back into self medicating just because he was my favorite artist, you know?

[00:05:33.770] - Milton

So I'm choosing to vent. And this is like an example of that. When Diamond Aviance passed away this year, Diamond and Aviance knew each other. We knew each other. But this is for Mother Juan Aviance, who lives in the area in Hell's Kitchen and is a club promoter.

[00:05:52.600] - Milton

So I'm a little snippet at him because he's got to pick that piece up, and I promise him he's got to pick up.

[00:05:58.597] - Curtsy

Kevin Aviance?

[00:05:58.930] - Milton

No, I know Kevin as well. But it's Mother Juan Aviance. So I wanted to create the Aviance family there and remember Diamond in that way. And I never knew that Diamond Aviance could perform as well as I can perform.

[00:06:16.650] - Milton

And I've seen videos of him on Facebook, like vogueing, and I'm like, I'm amazed. He's got the hands, he's got the movements, he's got the lines and everything. And I'm inspired. And that piece I have to give to Mother--Father Jose Extravaganza from Blonde Ambition. Madonna's Blonde Ambition tour and Truth Or Dare.

[00:06:38.610] - Milton

That's him. So I've had the pleasure of meeting him in person three years ago at the Latex Ball, and he was like, coming out of Terminal Five. That's where the ball is from now. And he's coming outside, from outside, smoking a cigarette. And I was about to leave with another Ninja member to drive me home.

[00:07:00.360] - Milton

And I said, Hello, can I have a picture with you, Jose? Do you know who I am? He said, Do I know who you are? He said, Didn't I battle you once?

[00:07:12.570] - Milton

And he did. He battled me at a club called The World. And one thing that I'm learning in my career is don't come out first. Because if you come out first and compete, you got to size yourself amidst the rest of the competition that's coming ahead of you, in front of you, after you. So I'm learning to take my own advice and wait until the commentator counts down to the one or zero.

[00:07:39.010] - Milton

So when he counts down to five, four, three, two, one, that's when I hit the floor. Because when you hit the floor, you want the crowd to go up and go crazy for you, like "He's coming out!" Like that kind of ambiance and atmosphere. And regardless if I win or not, I'm just very fortunate that I get a standing ovation because every year there's always some sort of situation that tries to deter me from my goal to compete for that year for some reason. And two years ago, I was in physical therapy and I had issues around mobility issues and I was in a nursing home and that drama was the nursing home. And they wanted me to stay in there for my drug use and all of that stuff that I didn't want to admit and all that stuff.

[00:08:30.160] - Milton

And my goal was to walk the Latex Ball the last two years before the pandemic hit and I competed and it didn't matter if I won, but to get a standing ovation from the crowd from the upper level of Terminal Five is big. It's bigger than Roseland. And to have everybody clapping and cheering me on and people coming up to me. After I descend from the runway, I can come back home in Chelsea and walk the streets of Chelsea and own that street like it's my runway, because I feel so enamored and empowered and being, not just fostered by that community, which some members wished me dead, and to have members wishing me dead and still seeing me actively competing.

[00:09:20.410] - Curtsy

That's testament to your fierceness.

[00:09:21.770] - Milton

Yeah. And the best revenge is to be quiet and just not say a word and demonstrate your fierceness. So drag has gave me an element to live in my truth and live in my authenticity like that. And ballroom has helped me to live in that authenticity and multiply it as much as I wanted to.

[00:09:47.520] - Milton

And if I want to come out in all white like we're going to do this year, and to be called out on the flyer is a huge deal. That is a huge deal. And they called me out and they said, oh, and Milton, just to name a few, for Open To All way. And I read that when I was coming home from dialysis. Oh, my God, they put my name on the flyer.

[00:10:10.380] - Milton

That is a privilege like that to be named on the flyer. That means they want you to come out. They're encouraging you to come out and show out. And I'm going to do that. I'm going to do that.

[00:10:26.010] - Milton

Yeah. But this time when we did OTA, the Open To All thing, that's a club night down in Brooklyn. It was epic. Like, last year was epic. We held our first ball event like that in Times Square.

[00:10:41.710] - Milton

Like, live in Times Square, right by the ball, and there were people watching from the stands. We sat in the icon chairs in the front, and I got to compete, and I got up from my walker, and I walked the back of the runway, and I performed. And the reason they didn't give it to me was because I wasn't in all white, because I had gray underwear on.

[00:11:03.490] - Constantine

Technicality.

[00:11:04.430] - Milton

A technicality.

[00:11:05.660] - Milton

You can't overlook that technicality. But I'm an icon. It doesn't matter. I was there for the fun. It was a humid day like today, and I had an amazing time.

[00:11:15.400] - Milton

So I'm about presence, and I just want this artwork to be a catalyst so people can remember me not just for my vogueing, but also for my artwork and the person that I am to them. So I tell them when I'm gone, I don't want them to think about--I don't want them to cry for me, but I want them to know that I'm in a better place and that I'm overlooking them and I'm helping them through their attributes in life, and that if I created a piece for them, that they can cherish it. And the last thing I want to do is see my artwork go up for sale in Sotheby's or something, you know. I said, if you sell my artwork and it goes to Sotheby's, it better be quadruple the price that I charged you if you're going to do that.

[00:12:08.140] - Milton

But aside from that, these pieces are different in their own way. I don't know if you'd like me to explain quickly some of them, but that's a dedicatorial piece to Diamond Aviance, who passed away. So, Juan, if you're listening, you better pick up this piece of artwork, or I'm going to give it to Kevin. Okay? At this point, you know. This piece is for Mother and Father of Giselle and Jose Extravaganza.

[00:12:34.470] - Milton

So please, any member of the House of Extravaganza, come and pick this up in my apartment. I will not charge you for it because I'm waiting this long for it. But if you don't want to come through, I will go to the nearest function and find you, because I will find you, and I'll give it to you there. So this piece is Constantine's favorite piece. That's Alleycat Junction.

[00:12:57.290] - Milton

So I wanted to change not just draw figures, but draw cartoon figures to show that I'm a true cartoonist by nature and have each cat just show their different personalities and create this world of cats in the street. It's kind of like homeless kids in the street, but homeless cats in the street. Sexy As This is basically just like a poem that I had for somebody I was talking to before I found out that this person was deeply involved in drug use with me. And I guess it was just the emotions, the raw emotions coming out of it.

[00:13:40.790] - Milton

And that person and I don't speak anymore, but at least he has a piece that I created for him. So if you're out there and you're listening, don't sell my piece because it's going to be worth money someday. Okay? I'm giving you that warning now. So this piece is the most recent piece that I finished called War of the Birds, and that's simply inspired by the Alfred Hitchcock movie The Birds.

[00:14:06.490] - Milton

And this time, I wanted to show different species of birds that were attacking me and my friends. And that Alfred Hitchcock is a huge influence in me in terms of cinema and stuff. And yet he may be heavyset and rubenesque. That's what I call people. I call it rubenesque.

[00:14:28.010] - Milton

It's like a classy way of saying you're big-boned without insulting them. So I say rubenesque. And I guess the last two pieces that wrote is Mermaid Island. Yeah, Mermaid Island is just something in my imagination. And now I'm fascinated with mermen, you know, with men that are good looking.

[00:14:50.500] - Milton

And there's a cute picture drawn by Glen Hanson, who's like one of my huge inspirations as a cartoonist, and you know, Glen Hanson kind of inspired me with an image of a merman that's in my phone that I could use as a wallpaper. And I created the Mermaid Island as a result of that. And the last piece that I have here that I can remember here is basically...What's that called. Inspiration can come from weird sources. Yeah.

[00:15:26.750] - Milton

So basically I'm just explaining how...And using cotton as the clouds in my head to create the inspiration that it could be three in the morning and I wake up from going to the bathroom and I'm inspired and I have an idea in my head and I have to jot it down or else I'll lose that thought. So that's basically an explanation of some of my artwork that I rarely do. But I'm happy that Visual AIDS is giving me the outlet to do that, so that way people can kind of hit me up on my social media, on Instagram and on Facebook and to contact me in person if they have my information, and we take it from there. So I'm happy that I got to participate in this Oral History Project and meet Curtis and Constantine and Kaz for the first time. And like I said, be on the alert because a cartoon of us is coming real soon.

[00:16:28.890] - Milton

And don't be offended if it doesn't look like you. It's a cartoon. Okay. So it's just not supposed to represent you but a facsimile of you. So I just want to mention that.

[00:16:39.940] - Milton

But yeah, I'm just going to do that little plug. Just on that note, just to say that I had a great time getting to know Curtis and speaking about our lives and how both our lives and with each person that I meet in my age or older or my age or younger, we both have some commonality that we can relate to. And I'm very privileged to have met Curtis and Constantine and Kaz, and I'm looking forward to a lot of future conversations and collaborations or anything like that in the future.