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*Dark Mirror*, 2004-05  
animation and video, two-channel projection  
on floating screen  
André Pahl (animation)  
José María Serralde (original score and piano  
performance)  
dimensions variable  
duration: 6:14 min

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This work is made in collaboration with German graphic designer André Pahl and Mexican composer José María Serralde. Amorales invited Pahl and Serralde to respond to images in his *Liquid Archive*. Pahl selected specific drawings from the archive, which he sequenced into this silent animation. Serralde, a silent movie pianist, also worked on a selection of images and, without seeing Pahl's animation, composed music to accompany this work. The animation and music were united by Amorales to form *Dark Mirror*. The animation and music combine as a double projection on a two-sided screen – one side is a video of Serralde performing his composition on a grand piano, and the other side is Pahl's soundless animation. Black and white graphics of animals, humans and machinery dissolve from one entity into another, merging and separating, creating a sense of ambiguity, and thereby deliberately thwarting any chance of identifying with one central character or engaging with a linear narrative.

# Carlos Amorales

## Dark Mirror



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**Carlos Amorales**  
b. 1970, Mexico. Lives and works in  
Mexico

Carlos Amorales was born in 1970 and studied in Spain and The Netherlands before returning to Mexico City where he now lives and works. Recent exhibitions include Yvon Lambert Gallery, Paris (2012); Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach (2010); Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel (2009); Sala Verónicas, Murcia (2009); Meet Factory Gallery, Prague (2009); and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania (2008). His work is featured in many public and private collections including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; La Colección Jumex, Mexico City; Tate Modern, London; and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin.

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## Background to Carlos Amorales' practice

Carlos Amorales' practice uses drawing as the basis from which to develop performance, video animation, paintings and sculpture, working both in an individual and collaborative capacity. In his multifaceted body of work, he creates phantasmagorical worlds, which are characterised by animated scenes made up of many elements capable of invoking collective experiences of anxiety, fear and fantasy. Amorales applies a unique visual vocabulary that stems from his expansive and on-going archival project titled *Liquid Archive*, which he began in 1999. This is a digital database of drawings and collected images from books, magazines, the Internet and his own photographs of the urban environment of Mexico City. He applies a technique known as *Rotoscopy*, used in the animation industry and which involves a range of digital and hand-drawn techniques to produce silhouettes and line drawings for live animation. The images in Amorales' archives include line drawings of animals, cut-outs or silhouettes of butterflies, birds, machines, geometric patterns and people. Over the years, he has added to this archive, much like we add new words to our vocabulary. Now he has over 1,500 digital drawings. This growing collection of images is the tool that unifies Amorales' artistic *œuvre* as its motifs migrate from medium to medium transforming to create unexpected hybrids that are both beautiful and horrific. Hybridity in the context of Amorales' work refers to the bringing together and/or distortion of objects in the broadest sense to create something new, different or indeed fantastical. The use of these images might relate to his childhood when he was attracted to fantasy and monster tales from Mexican folklore and, in particular, the role and meaning of costume and masks in which the transformation of human to animal form is common. For Amorales fantasy is a way of dissolving the lines between art and life.

## Some questions to consider

What are your immediate reactions to this two screen animated installation?

Is it shot in colour or black and white?

What role does light play in these projections?

What role do you think the sound track plays with the animated images in this work?

Are sound and images synchronised (playing at the same time) or are there gaps of time between the sound and the images projected on to the screens?

If so, does this experience heighten or intensify the projection of animated images for you?

What sorts of animated techniques does the artist use (e.g. close-up views, dramatic lighting, block colour)?

## For discussion

What kind of imaginary landscapes does the artist evoke with this work? Are they familiar or unknown to you?

Why do you think the artist has created this installation using two screens rather than using a single projection?

How do these projections relate to each other?

How does the particular use of sound and image make you think about time?

How does the artist manipulate the material?

What kind of relationship do the animated drawings have with sound and video?

Do you feel part of the animation or simply an observer?

What is your experience of being in the space with these two projections?

Moving through the space of the work changes our perspective on the visual and sound project as an installation. Do you think this is the intention of the artist?

Familiar objects have been changed, to create a fantastic or scary landscape where man and machine morph or transform together. Can you identify any of the animals, moving objects, plants or machines?

Are there particular issues that concern the artist? What might they be?

What are the advantages of artists working in a collaborative context with artists from other disciplines? Do you think this adds more value to the working process?

## Activities

### *Making your own archive*

Why not create your own archive of visual and textual material that you find around you. This can be achieved by collecting and cutting images and text from newspapers and magazines, taking photographs of things that interest you or even finding things on the street. Some of the images that you collect could evoke a range of strong feelings, such as happiness, sadness or fear, similar to the way that Amorales' animations do. Keep your images/data in a folder or scan them (if you have a scanner) and save them on your computer or in a scrap book. Make a record for each image: write the date, where you found them or even describe how you felt or what attracted you to a particular image. Perhaps it reminded you of a place or a close friend or family member. This may be the starting point for you to reassemble these images to develop a series of books and collages of hybrid creatures or imaginary landscapes. Your archive does not have to be limited to the visual. Why not think about recording sounds from your environment. Most mobile phones can record images and sounds these days and there is a range of free and cheap sound software available, such as 'pyro audio creator' ([www.cakewalk.com/Products/AudioCreator](http://www.cakewalk.com/Products/AudioCreator)). Or, if you do have a computer, compose your own animation based on the visual and sound data that you have collected. Stop motion animation ([www.stopmotionpro.com](http://www.stopmotionpro.com)) is a great place to start.

### *Different ways of drawing*

Experiment with some of Amorales' drawing techniques.

### *Cut-out or silhouetted objects*

A starting point for creating silhouettes is to cut out a picture of a distinct or clearly visible outline of an object from a magazine. Then turn the image around and paint it black. The history of silhouettes is fascinating. It combines magic lantern projections, shadow theatre and puppets with the advent of optical illusions and the camera obscura. To create shadow plays use a strong light that casts shadows of objects and people onto walls in an enclosed space. You can carry out a range of actions with this activity. For instance if you have access to a video camera (or indeed a still camera) create a film of these shadows – producing your own live animations. Consider adding sound or narrative to add depth to your work.

## Key words

### ANIMATION

The suggestion of movement through the rapid projection of still images (16 frames or more per second).

### ARCHIVE

A collection of unique records or documents.

### COLLABORATION / COLLABORATIVE ART

A form of arts practice where two or more artists, often from different disciplines, collaborate in the creation of an artwork.

### HYBRID

Something of mixed origin or composition.

### MACABRE

A term associated with ghoulishness and death.

### MOTIF

A recurring theme, pattern, form or idea.

### ŒUVRE

The total body of work of an artist.

### PHANTASMAGORIA

A form of theatre presentation developed in the eighteenth century which involved the combination of live performance and the projection of ghoulish imagery using a moving projector. It is associated with the macabre and with Gothic culture.

### ROTOSCOPY

Also known as 'roto', this term is used in the animation industry to refer to a range of digital and hand-drawn techniques to produce silhouettes and line drawings for live animation.

### SILHOUETTE

From the name of an eighteenth century French finance minister, Étienne de Silhouette, associated with austerity and frugality. Silhouette is the representation of a three-dimensional subject, such as a person's profile, as a flat, opaque form (usually black), where the outline corresponds with the outline of the subject.

The second activity with this technique is to trace the outlines of the shadows on a wall or large sheet of paper. Paint in the shadows using black paint. Think about how you can arrange or compose your shadows to make a weird or wonderful landscape of distorted and odd shapes.

### Tracing

Place a sheet of tracing paper (I sometimes use tracing paper that you can buy from supermarkets that come in rolls for baking) on top of an existing image and trace the outline or details that are of particular interest to you.

### Mark-making

You will have noticed that Amorales creates a range of wide, thin, crooked and jagged lines combined with a variety of geometric forms or patterns mainly using black on white. Lines of different thickness can be tested using different materials, such as sticks dipped into ink, markers or graded pencils that range from a light grey (HB) to an almost black (9B). Compressed charcoal is also a very good material to create a range of organic lines and marks.

### Stories about real and imaginary landscapes.

Carlos Amorales is influenced by the iconography and religious systems associated with his native Mexico. This could provide a starting point to learn about a new country in terms of historical traditions and cultural practices. For example, pre-Columbian Mexico has a long tradition of mask making. The earliest evidence of mask making in the Americas is a fossil vertebra of a now extinct llama found in Tequixquiac in Mexico. This was carved sometime between 12,000 and 10,000 BC and represents the head of a coyote. One of the reasons that this tradition of mask-making continues to the present day is because the Aztecs believed a powerful relationship exists between humans and animals, plants, and natural and supernatural phenomena. Among Mexicans today, there are those who believe each man and woman shares a destiny with an animal counterpart, and whatever happens to one will happen to the other, whether it is illness, hunger, injury or death. This soul companion is called a 'Tona'.

Historical information may provide the inspiration to make your own mask that identifies you with your favourite animal. It can be simply made from re-cycled cardboard boxes and painted using a range of colours. Gluing different materials on to the mask found in the home can create textures. The mask can be worn by attaching string from both sides of the mask making it easy to wear. Make sure to cut out either a hole for the nostrils or mouth so that you can breathe!

### Animating Movement or Processes of Transformation.

This could be discussed and understood in relation to the life-cycle of a butterfly, which goes through four distinct stages of transformation: egg to caterpillar (or larva), caterpillar to chrysalis (or pupa) and chrysalis to adult form (or imago). This is the butterfly or moth visible during the summer months. Make your own hybrid creatures that merge aspects of machinery with natural objects such as plants and trees. Write a descriptive short story to accompany or animate your hybrid object, asking a range of questions such as:

What does it look like?

What does it feel like (soft fur, sharp spikes, etc.)?

Where is it from?

How does it move (walk, crawl, etc.)?

Does the creature have a story to tell?

### Phantasmagorical

The Phantasmagorical is characterised by the use of fantastic imagery to recreate a personal view of the world in which familiar images and objects are capable of invoking a range of collective experiences of different and contrasting emotions. However, it is not limited just to the visual. Amorales is equally informed by stories from literature. This includes Edgar Allen Poe's book *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, a tale of exploration which concerns a fantastic voyage to unknown lands. This work inspired Amorales to create a multi-media installation titled *Discarded Spider* (2009). Read about this work, focus on the type of horror suggested and have a discussion relating Poe's works to Amorales' works. Discuss what it is in the stories that make them scary and how they compare to Amorales' images.

## Further Explorations

One of Amorales' first animations, *Rorschach Test Animation* (2004), was made from a series of inkblots whose shape changes as the black spots progressively increase and decrease in number, producing new forms against the white background.

The work *Manimal 6* (2005) combines three-dimensional animation techniques with two-dimensional drawings of silhouettes, allowing the artist to produce the effect of a virtual shadow theatre. The accompanying soundtrack by Julián Ledé is characterised by an electric heavy-metal rhythm whose mounting intensity creates a sense of tension as a story slowly emerges. In a post-apocalyptic landscape dominated by barren trees and two glowing moons, a pack of wolves migrates from the wilderness to an urban environment by crossing an abandoned airstrip where several passenger planes are positioned. The only indication of a human presence is the erratic flight of a number of airplanes in the dark sky. Although the elements of a traditional narrative are in place, making sense of the sequence demands an imaginative effort. This is undoubtedly a dark tale, one in which, as the title suggests, man and animal have morphed into one sinister creature. In staging the drama of *Manimal 6*, Amorales chose for his cityscape adobe-style houses that resemble dwellings in the working-class districts of Mexico City. By choosing a familiar setting, the artist makes the game of free association personal, as aspects of his own life permeate the work.

With *Black Cloud* (2007), Amorales takes the *Liquid Archive* into the three-dimensional realm, materialising its potential for communicating terror by giving it an overwhelming physical presence. The artist replicates thirty-six types of moths – all culled from his archive – in thousands of life-size, black paper cut outs that are individually hand glued to the walls and ceiling of a space. Multiplied to create a dense mass with both wondrous and threatening qualities, *Black Cloud* becomes a surreal yet sublime gathering of insects delicately poised in sculptural formations that suggest the potential for harm, destruction and irreversible doom. The biblical plagues of the Old Testament come to mind, as two of the ten calamities inflicted by God on Egypt, and recounted in the Book of Exodus, involved swarms of

flies and locusts. The association of such a spectacular installation with a Judgement Day narrative indicates Amorales' propensity toward ambiguous scenarios where the boundaries between beauty and awe, good and evil, calm and calamity are constantly blurred and where imagination is called upon to mediate between multiple interpretations of the work.

While building this lexicon of the macabre, the artist reveals his personal vision of the world and a profound involvement with the artistic process through which he expresses it. In combining the visual motifs of the *Liquid Archive* and transposing them in various mediums, Amorales creates new and exhilarating works of art demonstrating not only that a unique visual language can still emerge but also that, as he strongly believes, the artist's critical voice is imperative as the art and the everyday become more indistinguishable.

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## Further reading

### publications

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Julie Rodriques Widholm. *Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City*, Yale University Press, 2007

### websites

[www.nuevosricos.com](http://www.nuevosricos.com)

[www.yvon-lambert.com](http://www.yvon-lambert.com)

[www.highpointprintmaking.org/editions/amorales\\_carlos/bio.html](http://www.highpointprintmaking.org/editions/amorales_carlos/bio.html)

[www.vimeo.com/21253921](http://www.vimeo.com/21253921) [Carlos Amorales. Remix by Agave Film]

[www.vimeo.com/24613759](http://www.vimeo.com/24613759) [Caca Grande (Big Poop)]