

1998.03

GI Juan

I need to find an action figure for my kids that will help them to formulate who they are and where they come from. There are no "tino" action figures, I think I will have to make my own. I think it would be possible to appropriate an existing figure and paint a moustache on it and find the clothes. GI Joe has the right features, and I know he has alot of accessories and a big wardrobe, let me start with him.

2000.11.05

The words concerning an action-figure of Juan Valdez have been on paper for almost two years now.

Last week, Spin Magazine included a spread showcasing a wide variety of action figures made from musical personalities. I don't know if I should take this as a sign that it is too late to act on this idea.

Timeliness shouldn't matter. Whether action-figure, voodoo doll, or sculpture, I feel the need to make one.

2000.11.10

went to "location scout" -- sorry, no better words --
with Elaine Bay. Realized we can't script, Just have
to pick a location and go do it.

I ask myself: "Do I dress in Juan Valdez attire?"

Cameras have to be surreptitious so that we don't have
to get permission to film. This is a guerilla
activity.

Do we buy the action figure?

[Do we] Take it home, document it? Change it to Juan
Valdez and return it and document the return?

Or do we merchandise the transactions, doll, receipt,
"improvements"? To return the doll to the shelves is
an intervention.

2001. 11. 26

Kokie Roberts reports on NPR's Morning Edition that Colombia is being considered the next likely target in the war on terrorism. This sounds like a public opinion trial-balloon. A test to see what the public reaction will be. Why else would the deliberations be shared? The terrorists in Colombia must be scattering for cover. They must be leaving Colombia in hordes, at this very moment.

2001. 11. 28

David Letterman announces in his monologue that GI Joe is now the nations top selling toy for the coming christmas season. He makes a weak joke about Osama Bin Laden, to cover his cynical observation with the month of patriotism. (the "Tickle-Me-Osama" doll being the worst selling toy of the season) Two weeks prior the nation was coveting fire-fighter costumes and the Fisher-Price Billy Blazes Rescue Hero.

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2001.11

Hispanic Magazine reports that Hasbro will release its first hispanic GI Joe. A Vietnam era Mexican-American named Benavides. I haven't been able to find one despite weekly trips to the Toys R Us.

[the following meditations were originally written
between 1997-1998]

I have not been indulging by purchasing the Sunday
(NY) Times, but I know he generally buys at least one
full page of the Magazine, often the back cover. He
keeps himself in front of the cosmopolitan crowd.

He tells the story of his compatriots.

Juan is endearing, he's not a hard sell.

His charm relies on his ability to be where people
don't expect him to be, like on a surfboard, with his
burro, in his traje tipico.

Juan projects an image of quiet virility. Of
confidence and competence. He accomplishes. He acts.
He exercises judgement and discretion in his work,
and, by extension, in every aspect of his being. He is
a man of few words, though he is not taciturn nor
gruff. He has a self-assured smile. He exhibits great
poise.

I try to imagine Juan in jungle camouflage, with his machete in his hand, appearing to the guerillas, struggling for democracy, for capitalism, for peace. I can't imagine him shedding blood though. He would find/know some way to persuade, to turn the rabble to the righteous path. His revealing himself to them through the mists of the jungle could illuminate their darkened hearts and minds. _Nuestro Señor de los cafetales_ libranos.

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"We don't grow the quickest coffee in the world, we grow the richest." This has been the mantra, the story so often repeated that, whether it is factual or not, it is accepted as true.

Juan is a photogenic portrait of earnestness
of nobility in labor,
of an amish sense of integrity,
of craft growing,
of micro-farming,
of collectivism that works, [but don't let that get
out]

Juan is a peddler
a skill (more accurate)
the selling is done by the voice-over announcer
if Juan says anything at all, its a hardy _¡Buenos
Dias!_

The indigene is rendered present, but voiceless. His
body language signals complicity.

He is a phantom who appears to an elect, both within
and without [the commercials/ads] and bestows good
feelings and wisdom.

He is an embodiment of magical realism.

He is a tangible spirit
who has been sought out
by elite athletes
for an autograph

I don't know what crosses people's minds when I
mention Juan Valdez. Most - if not all - give a smile
of recognition. But what they get beyond recognition
is unfathomable to me. Associations may be of coffee,
or of good coffee. They may be able to build a
perception of excellent coffee if the advertisers have
success.

Are we slumming? Is this hyperreality?

I think of Juan as an übercampesino

I think of a cleaned-up hyper-magical-realism. Juan
pretends to be a campesino. My parents pretend to be
campesinos yearly on the feast days of _San Juan y San
Pedro_ (which fall in the end of June). My mom dons a

satin skirt with hand painted flowers, and my father a hat of straw. When I was growing up, the upper-class in San Antonio, mainly of germanic origin, would wear mexican peasant dresses to fancy parties.

How is he a simulated indigene?

He is a persona created by Doyle, Dane, Bernbach / Needham advertising conglomerate on commission from the Colombian National Federation of Coffee Growers.

Does Juan own the Huerta?

Is he a tenant farmer?

Is he an employee?

Does Juan have a family?

Juan is a long term strategy, a human face on an abstract concept of quality, caring, trust.

Juan wears white trousers and a light blue shirt -- the light colors of the hotter lowlands. Greys and Blacks are the colors of the highland males where coffee is grown.

Colombia is not the only place where coffee is harvested by hand. The beans mature at different rates, there is no other way to harvest them. Juan has made a virtue out of necessity.

My mom is getting a kick out of the thought that I am sewing clothes for a Juan Valdez doll. She wanted to know what my boys thought about it. They (the boys) don't think it's a big deal. They don't have any basis in comparison for how an adult male might behave. I am establishing the basis by which they will compare the behavior of other men.

He has not yet turned his powers to bringing peace to Colombia and so I am offering up an icon, a statue to call or conjure him, to render him present.

This project is an expression of feelings of powerlessness, of disenfranchisement. It is gallows humor. I can do nothing, and so I look for a hero. Finding none, I try to form one from the likeliest of raw matter. A formless smiling spectre that I wish and pray would become corporeal, and potent. I create a fetish, a talisman, and keep him by my side. Or give him to another, who may feel more vulnerable than I do and who may take some comfort in his existence.

He [Juan] is a joke, and I make a joke of the joke. I hope that the recursive one liner will gather complexity with each iteration, with each layer. I want it to be nuanced. I want that to make me feel powerful, as an artist, as a man. I want to feel that I can *do* something.

I want my son(s) to have a favorable impression of where they come from, of where I come from. Juan is the most visible favorable aspect. Still, he needs a bit of a push.