

CONVERSATIONS A PHOTO ELYSÉE PODCAST

EPISODE #7 – FELIPE ROMERO BELTRÁN TRANSCRIPTION

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Welcome to *Conversations*, a podcast by Photo Elysée that invites you, behind the scenes of a photography project. In this series of episodes, we're exploring the work in progress of the eight artists nominated for the 2025 Prix Elysée, an international photography prize supported by Parmigiani Fleurier. I'm your host, Katie Kheriji-Watts.

Though Felipe Romero Beltran was born and raised in Bogotá, he's now spent half of his life abroad. It was a recent desire to connect to his roots, as well as some fascinating research into the history of photography that has been the seed for his latest artistic project, *A Body That Speaks as a Bird*, for which he's been nominated for the Prix Elysée, also speaks to a massive shift from rural to urban life in Colombia over the 20th century, something Felipe's family was a part of. We spoke about musical notation, what it means to be “civilized,” and *densidad*.

Felipe, thank you for having us to hear our home in Paris.

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Thank you for coming.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

For people who don't know who you are or what you do. Can you just introduce yourself briefly?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Well, my name is Felipe Romero Beltrán. I'm a Colombian artist and photographer, and I do mostly photographs.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I would love to start our interview by hearing you talk about a particular photograph or image that had a significant impact on you when you were growing up.

Felipe Romero Beltrán

That's an interesting question. I started photographing when I was 15, more or less. At that time, I had a lot of images coming from media in general and some magazines that I looked at, at the time. But to be completely honest, there was some artistic interventions on the streets in Colombia that impacted me in a good way. I remember Óscar Muñoz – he is still an artist from Cali, from Colombia – and then Doris Salcedo, of course, were doing a lot of things in the city, especially in Bogotá,

the city where I grew up. I can't say there is one specific photographic image, but still I can perceive in my memory different images that are quite important, and they were at the moment quite important for me as all these interventions that these artists were doing in the city.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

When you say that there were artistic inventions happening in public space in different cities in Colombia, can you maybe contextualize why that was happening at the time?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Yeah. I mean, in Colombia, the public space is a question, first, of what to show and what you can't show. That was for me, and of course for a lot of people, one of the main questions in the streets of Colombia and the usages of the public space. There was a wave of artists that started to use public spaces in Colombia in a way to somehow question that, and somehow questioning this notion of society that is mostly conservative. And we have a strong history on the relation that people have with public spaces. Of course, all that related to the Civil War that we had, and we still have somehow in Colombia. That's why it was a thing at the time when I was growing up in the city, especially in the '90s, after the disease of Escobar. It was a question in Bogotá and, of course, in the entire country for the people.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You said there's still an image. Could you maybe give an example of one image that stands out to you among these images that you're seeing in public space in Bogotá in the '90s?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

I remember a photograph of a work called *Pasarela*. There was a series of homeless people that were in a fashion show, or in a style of a fashion show, photographed by the artist in the main square of Bogotá. That was one of the first memories that I have of photographic medium can be used in different ways, not only as a photojournalistic way or just for media or just for press. It was also a replacement of that usages in Colombia.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Do you have a sense of what you felt inside when you saw those images or why that was impactful for you and why it stayed in your memory for such a long time?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Well, right away, it was completely uncomfortable. It was shocking. And of course, it placed an ethical question on the entire series. But at the same time, I remember that was especially the framing and the treatment of the photographic surface was quite interesting for me because I had never seen something like that. I was used to seeing images coming from the press, coming from the media in general. And to be completely honest, my family didn't have an image culture in that sense. We barely

had any photographic albums. So, it was completely strange to me and completely different that my daily life and my common knowledge to know reality in a way.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I can tell a little bit by hearing you speak that in addition to being a photographer, you're also an academic.

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Well, more or less.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Well, you recently completed a PhD in photography studies. How does your scholarly work inform your visual arts practice?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

It was interesting for me when I started photography because I thought that photographing was the act of taking a photograph. Just take a camera and take pictures. And to be completely honest with you, it's still a huge part of my practice. But at the same time, for social reasons and for my own path as a person in this world, I started to develop an academic path, academic research on what I was doing at the time. I'm still doing it. So that's why I accomplished a PhD. When I was 17, I moved to Argentina for studies. I got a scholarship there. And then right after that, I moved for a while to Jerusalem for two years, all related to studies. And then I came back to Argentina, and I applied for a scholarship of a master's degree in Spain. So, I did that mostly because it was the way also to get into Europe, basically. And then I finished the master, and I started PhD also as a complement on my own practice. And now I'm realizing that it's been quite important in my personal work as an artist.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Say more about that. Why has it been important?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Of course, sometimes our relationship with a photographic image is purely visual. I completely believe in that. It's almost like a statement for me. But at the same time, we are used to relate to reality through words. We understand things and we are communicating in this moment through words. It's the bridge that we have between that that we call reality and as human beings. So, in that sense, trying to enrich that, trying to make it more, to expand the spectrum of that, was fundamental for me. To also enrich my practice from the photographic side, of course, as also the research that I'm still doing on history of photography.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Basically, what I'm hearing you say is that doing academic studies on the side of your photography practice has really helped you articulate through the practice of writing what you're trying to do as a photographer.

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Yes, but not quite directly. It's more that I am consciously developing research, let's say, on the academic side. But at the same time, because photography is nonverbal, I can't translate it instantly to photographic images. The thing is that, because I'm the same person, I live one life, that means that everything is contaminated in a good way. It's all mixed with the things that I'm normally doing because of course, I'm not taking pictures every single day. It happens tons of times. And in between, I'm cultivating, I'll say, myself in this academic path.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Speaking of all this research that you're doing, you've been nominated for the Prix Elysée Prize with a project based on the origins of the word photography, which I believe comes a little bit out of your academic research. Tell me What was the original inspiration for the project that you've been nominated for.

Felipe Romero Beltrán

It all starts with academic research. I was about to complete one of the main axes of my investigation, of my research for the PhD. Of course, because I'm coming from a place that normally is not seen as important in the history of photography, I was trying to look for different sources that could enrich and at the same time give me more ideas of what happened before in terms of photography in Latin America. So, I found this guy. Nowadays, he's known as the person who invented the word photography. This guy, at that time, was making notations of the sounds of the birds in Brazil. This a coincidence of translation of reality. It's the same. It's translation of a sound, and then it's translation of the light in the case of photography.

I started to develop that a little bit more on the academic side. But at the same time, I was having a moment with my family back in Colombia, and I was trying to figure out how to get closer because it's been 16 years or something like that that I've been away from Colombia. Of course, I keep coming back the time sometimes, but at the time, I wanted to do something a little bit more consistent. So, I started to think "what could I do in Colombia? What could I do near my family and near my relatives and people that I know, that is from my path?" It's the first time that I'm approaching something in Colombia in that sense. So, after that, I realized that these translations were at the same time or were also related to a process in Colombia in the '60s. Well, starting much before, but especially between the '50s and the '70s, including the case of my own family. There was a huge migration flow from the countryside to the big cities.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Do you remember the name of the person? The inventory of the word photography.

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Hercule Florence.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Help me understand a little bit better the link between Hercule Florence, what's going on with him and his research, which I understand is maybe a century or two ago, and the link between this history of rural to urban migration in Colombia?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Well, first of all, the breach is me, basically. I was studying at the time this case in the history of photography, and then at the same time, I was living that with my family. I was researching on the fact that my entire family came from the countryside and then they moved to the city. For me, the logical structure is the same, especially because I must say that my family still keeps behaviors and things from the country countryside. In that sense, the structure is the same. It's a signal that comes from the countryside to the city, and it keeps repeating itself into the city. My family is more or less the same case. It's the signal that they're performing in the city, they are not from the city, they are from the countryside.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

What would be an example of a behavior that strikes you as being from the countryside and not from the city, for example?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

For example, there were at the time – and it's interesting also for me to review and to look at them – attempts from the government and the educational system in Colombia to translate a behavior from the countryside to the city. For instance, there are several manuals of behavior and education programs that tell you how to behave in the city. A governmental program that tries to translate the bodies that were living in the countryside to the city and to educate them in how to behave in a social environment as the urban spaces.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

It's basically a program of quote, unquote, civilizing people. But when you're saying that your family still has behaviors, are they intentionally ignoring these manuals, or is it just a cultural tradition? Help me understand exactly what we're talking about.

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Actually, it's the other way around. Because as photography, too, it's a nonverbal process. You can't actually change that. Basically, the project, it's about that. It's about this impossibility of translation of a body that used to live in the countryside and now lives in the urban spaces. That's mainly what the project is about. Of course, I'm trying to figure out – because it's an ongoing project – how to photograph and how to approach this topic that is, of course, quite dense and, of course, quite political in that sense.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

As you've been mentioning, your project, which I believe is called *A Body that Speaks as a Bird*. Tell me about that title a little bit.

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Well, it's what we're talking about just now. It's a body that still speaks as in the countryside. It's a way of, and of course, a relation with the moment that Hercule Florence was making these notations of the birds. But at the same time, it's a way to say that these bodies that were supposedly civilized, are absolutely not for that. You know what I mean? They were not absolutely subdued by these governmental and educational programs for the civilized, certain part of the population.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

We have an overview of your project. Complex, very fascinating, spanning a lot of history, a lot of time. How are you bringing all these ideas and concepts to life in images?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Well, I'm taking pictures, for instance. Then also, I must say that I normally develop projects quite different on the conceptual basis and the photographic approach. Photographic approach, for me, it's autonomous. That means that I'm taking pictures. I made already some decisions beforehand to start the project. I am working with a large former camera. That means a tripod, that means slowness, and that means a different way to approach reality. In that sense, this is a key point of the development of the project. Then I'm used to work with people, so I normally do portraiture and landscapes. So, I'm doing both, basically. Sometimes I'm creating the body also as a landscape and the landscape as a body. That's a thing that for me, it's quite important. Then, of course, I'm trying to figure out how to put these things together. That means the conceptual basis and the pictures. Not one to explain the other. I don't want the words explaining the images and the way around. I just wanted to put it together to see how they resonate each other.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

You're really putting the concept and the writing you're doing behind it and the images side by side and seeing how they dialog with each other?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

It's the process that I'm doing every single time with my projects. I'm conscious of the conceptual basis that I normally like to work with, and then I start to make photographs.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Tell me about one of the images you've already made for the project.

Felipe Romero Beltrán

It's an image of a tree that is surpassing, is going through this fence that was imposed to this tree, of course, to control this tree. But the tree is getting the shape of the fence, but at the same time, it's getting out of the fence. I think that's an image

that resonates quite well with what we were talking about before. Also, the systems of control and education within urban spaces. It's also applicable for trees.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

So, you just happened to find the tree by accident, or did you already know it was there?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

No, it was not planned at all. The tree was there, basically. I saw that, and it was interesting for me also as a reflection of this attempt to control and limit the nature in the city.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

What makes the Prix Elysée photography prize interesting or relevant to you as an artist right now?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Well, first, it's a platform for me that allows me to keep working on this project. And of course, hopefully, if I get the prize, I will be able to produce the entire spectrum of the project and make a publication, that means a book, that deposits all these questions and also all these images that for me work mostly as a way of questioning certain things of reality that would allow to me to put that in an object that in this case will be a book.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Felipe, I have one final question for you. What excites you the most about the creative process?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Well, that's an impossible question for me. I think the most exciting part of the creative process is the fact of doing it. Especially for this project, because it gets quite physical, I am using a big camera, so that means a tripod, that means certain equipment. And because the city, Bogotá, it's quite high in the mountains, sometimes it gets complicated on a physical level, let's say. At the same time, that leads me to see and to say that the relationship between photography and reality for me is still quite interesting and mysterious and sometimes weird. In every single project that I'm developing and that I developed before, I'm trying to approach this relationship between photographic surface and reality in three ways. The first way is understanding photography as a translation of reality. The second way is understanding photography as a mirror of the reality. And the third axis of this approach is understanding the relationship between photographic image and reality as a construction.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

I'm sorry, I lied. I have one final, final question. I know that Spanish is your first language. When you're on a photography shoot and it's going well and you're enjoying yourself, what would be a Spanish word to describe how you feel?

Felipe Romero Beltrán

That's interesting. When I see an image that I liked, I say that the image has *densidad*. That means density. I know that I think in English, it doesn't make sense to say that an image has density. It's more like depth.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

Thank you very much, Felipe.

Felipe Romero Beltrán

Thank you.

Katie Kheriji-Watts

It's been a pleasure to talk to you.

You've just been listening to *Conversations*, a Photo Elysée podcast produced by Louie Creative – the content creation agency of Louie Media. If you liked this series, please comment and give us a rating. I'm your host, Katie Kheriji-Watts. All episodes were written by me and produced and mixed by Gautam Shukla with the help of Anouk Solliez, with music by Pierre-Antoine Wucal. This series was produced by Eloise Normand, with the help of Lola Lellouche, in close collaboration with Photo Elysée. Special thanks to Julie Dayer, Lydia Dorner and the entire museum's team as well as the photographers who generously shared their stories with us. The Prix Elysée is the result of an exclusive partnership between Photo Elysée and Parmigiani Fleurier. Photo Elysée, Museum for Photography, is a Museum of the Canton de Vaud managed by the Plateforme 10 Foundation.