

MACHO SENTIMENTAL

Interview MICHAEL SLENSKE
Photography PATRICIO MALAGÓN

During Mexico City's Art Week this past February, the name that seemed to be on everyone's tongue was that of Bárbara Sánchez-Kane. At every party or opening she attended, in her signature three-piece suit, disco-ready wide lapels, blue-lens glasses, and slicked back hair, the Mérida-born fashion designer and artist was swarmed by a coterie of in-demand artists, curators, and collectors. At the Zona Maco art fair, her paintings and sculptures—including a bronze of an eagle emerging from a pair of spread, high-heeled legs, the same logo she employs in her belts and hoodies—sold out from the Kurimanzutto booth during the preview. When I went to her light-filled, multi-level studio in Roma Norte one morning where she was preparing her new collection, *Sánchezkaneismo*, which she would present as a performative artwork at the gallery in April, she was also busy fitting Kibum Kim of Commonwealth and Council for a baby blue suit with operatic, Gehry-esque details coming off the lapels. Kim is part of a growing number of art world fans clamoring for her provocative, genderless designs, which incorporate everything from stilettos with miniature shopping carts as the heels, to denim with multiple pouches for flowers, to the logos of Banamex bank on hoodies and hats. Defined by her "Macho Sentimental" moniker, Bárbara Sánchez-Kane's world is at once whimsical and polemical, sensual yet restrained, camp and chaotic, and it is growing every day beyond its humble roots in Mérida to an international audience that is embracing her, not only as a designer, but as a painter, sculptor, and performer. One who is participating this fall in the Okayama Art Summit in Japan curated by Rirkrit Tiravanija with a showstopping rawhide sculpture that blends both her art and design practices while teasing out the complexities of her conservative upbringing and her queer identity. Over two conversations in Mexico (and via WhatsApp from her childhood bedroom in Mérida), we discussed the juxtapositions that comprise her shape-shifting oeuvre.



MICHAEL SLENSKE What was it like for you to grow up in Mérida? You've told me about the Catholic identity and how it was very conservative there. Were you involved in anything creative?

BÁRBARA SÁNCHEZ-KANE It was super, super conservative. I analyze it now in therapy, but I was depressed until I was twenty-two. I didn't even go to art exhibitions. It was not like I wasn't interested, but I just didn't know that world existed. It was very difficult to be motivated or think about making a living as an artist. You're born in this world that has one collective psyche and there's no other path. So, it was very difficult. It was tormenting to have all these fantasies and not be able to reach them.

SLENSKE What were you fantasizing about?

want to do." Even while studying fashion, I didn't know how to make a brand. I wanted to stay in Europe, because I studied fashion in Italy. I was in Florence for four years and I couldn't stay because of my visa. I knew the designers in Mexico were not representative of my creative process. I didn't feel attracted to that, but if I were in Mexico, why not make my own brand? So, I moved back to my parents' house when I graduated, I was twenty-seven. They gave me a space in the house and I started the brand there.

SLENSKE Going back a little bit, after realizing you didn't want to become an industrial engineer, you said you were depressed until you were twenty-two. Can you talk a little bit about this?

"The first time somebody questioned my sexuality was because I was wearing a tie"

SÁNCHEZ-KANE Just building things. I remember decorating my room when I was seven. I slept in a room with my older sister, and she didn't even care about the color of the carpet or the ceiling. I was always asking for my birthday gift to be the decoration of my room. When I was sixteen and seventeen, I was obsessed with Andy Warhol. It was the art that I was exposed to. So, my room looked like Andy Warhol's Factory. Silver, gray walls with a light that changed colors, like a discotheque. And I was always reupholstering the fabric of old furniture. That was something I always did growing up. But it was very difficult to think I had a creative side, because it was very much turned off. Everything was just part of my imagination and I thought it wasn't going to be used for anything.

SLENSKE What did you think you were gonna become then? What was the reality?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE The reality I imagined was becoming a systems engineer in computers. I studied that for six months and I was like, *no, no, no*. And then, I wanted to become an industrial engineer and I finished that. I wanted a career that could give me a broader perspective. As an industrial engineer, I could work in an office, or a motor shop, or a manufacturing company. It all depends on which area you specialize.

SLENSKE So, if you had this Andy Warhol silver Factory in your room, what were you dressing like? How did you express yourself in fashion?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE The first time somebody questioned my sexuality was because I was wearing a tie. I was probably thirteen or fourteen, because I have always been obsessed with ties, and still am today. I remember arriving at a party and being dressed like one of the guys. But for me, it was not even about being gay or not. I was born in a world where there's just heterosexuality. The only path was marriage, except for being a priest or a nun. I didn't question whether I liked women or not—I was just very blind to this.

SLENSKE Was your family supportive?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE They are a very supportive family. They said, "Find yourself, do whatever you

SÁNCHEZ-KANE I thought, what if my creative side was useless? You know, what if these scenarios will not play a bigger role in my life? I was just removed from it. And I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when I was twenty-two. It was the year before ending college.

SLENSKE What was it like learning about this diagnosis?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE Basically, they had to operate on me without knowing it was cancer and they removed a teratoma. They gave me a pelvis scan and they told me that they needed to remove a fallopian tube and an ovary from the left side. But they said, "Don't worry, you will be able to have children in the future." So, I had surgery here in Mérida and the recovery was very tough. I remember a picture of the teratoma and it was huge. After the biopsy showed some troubling signs, I went to a cancer specialist in the US—the head of his department at a Methodist hospital in Houston. My mother's family is actually from there. They didn't talk about death or anything like that, but they told me that the worst thing that could happen is that it could spread, and you will need chemo or radiation and all these things could be painful. Obviously, at that age, I was so scared and that fear really pushed me to start questioning my life. When I came back to Mérida, the doctor said I only needed two small operations and otherwise I was okay. I think it was the best thing that happened to me. Spiritually and mentally I was awakened. You know, *what am I doing with my life? What's my sexuality?* It's when I finally questioned my sexuality. Before, I was too afraid of going toward this different path. So, it was an explosion, literally. It was when I was like, *oh I want to study fashion. I'm gay. I want to move to Italy*. That's when everything happened.

SLENSKE So, it took a near-death experience to question these things. Growing up, what were the outlets you explored that indicated you would want to live a life of creativity?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE I was very much interested in fashion. I would know every runway show and all the designers. I was reading fashion magazines,

and blogs, and going to music festivals. I would design my stuff growing up, but I never thought about pursuing something in fashion. I just found this tartan skirt that I designed when I was sixteen and it had a super low waist. Now it fits me perfectly, but it has such a low waist (laughs). Even now I don't buy things—everything is secondhand, or things that I make.

SLENSKE And did you design your quinceañera dress?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE It wasn't so much a quinceañera, it's something they do in the Yucatán when you're sixteen that's like a princess ball (laughs). And yes, I designed my dress. It had feathers and it was black. It's not something I would like now, but at that moment I thought it was beautiful.

SLENSKE So, in this traditional environment, with a princess ball and traditional dress, did that influence what you are doing now with genderless fashion?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE In terms of sizing, it is difficult to mix a man's body and a woman's body. I think the body and space is something that has been very fascinating to me—the performance of what you're wearing. Clothes become our skin, and what drives that psychologically? The transformation of what you're feeling—whether you're melancholy or you're happy—using that as an exploration of space. We all occupy space with what we are wearing, even the colors and the structure. I think it's something that is very palpable in my work—through fashion, sculpture, painting, there's always these scraps of clothes.

SLENSKE Did that lead to the idea of Macho Sentimental?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE When I graduated from fashion school in Italy, I was just trying to see what was gonna happen to the work with the hybrid of my experience in Europe and coming back home. It didn't have any form yet. I didn't even know if I was going to call the brand Sánchez-Kane. So, in that discourse came Macho Sentimental—this person that I believed was in contact with both their masculine and feminine side.

SLENSKE And that was inspired by getting a tattoo with a friend.

SÁNCHEZ-KANE In 2018, I was getting a tattoo with a friend, and he showed me a sketch and I was like, "It's too macho. I want it to be more sentimental."

SLENSKE If you were to define it, what is Macho Sentimental?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE Well, it's somebody who doesn't question the gender they were born with. Even a woman can be macho, you know? When you look at gender studies, like the writings of Judith Butler or Paul B. Preciado, the construction of gender is something that we perform daily. And we perform it to obtain certain roles that would not be obtained if we were perceived more as a woman or a man, and that should be broken.

SLENSKE So, is it an idealized gender identity, in a way?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE It's more like, what if gender doesn't exist? Society puts these two binaries together and they end up in a collision. Macho Sentimental is a sentiment that instead of being divided, we should be united based on our identities—what covers us is the same. I feel like everything in this world is going backwards. We're





Bárbara Sánchez-Kane *Sánchezkaneismo* presentation at Kurimanzutto, Mexico City.



still living in this era where we're fighting for abortion rights, and it's hard. I can't believe we're still discussing gender, but that's probably because it still needs to be discussed.

SLENSKE These concepts about gender that are in the collections now, were you thinking about that when you were in school in Italy?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE No, I think I was more interested in how to not appropriate the folklore we see in Mexico—trying to find a modern way to portray this modern Mexican. I think that was something I was very interested in at that time. And sometimes being obvious in a funny way, like putting the word *macho* in a phrase. Mexicans will always tell you that they are macho. Or, there are certain stereotypes of religion and how we go about religion. That is very inside of us—it's in our collective subconscious.

SLENSKE When did the clothing fit this Sánchez-Kane profile? When I told people I was doing this interview, they told me that Bárbara is the person you meet, and then there's Sánchez-Kane, who has a more public persona. There's you when you're out at night, and then there's you in the studio. It's almost like armor or something—the suit, the glasses.

SÁNCHEZ-KANE The persona. Well, I guess, as I told you, it's how our bodies inhabit space and sometimes you need armor to not show your bare bones and not be an object of people's perception. Sometimes it's very difficult to navigate—just

trying to be a person is very difficult, and having a brand, people expect things from you. It's difficult to understand that sometimes there's no room for failure. So I guess, yes, there is sometimes this persona that's inside me, but it's not necessarily *me*, and I think it's important to keep this box that you only show to certain people.

SLENSKE So, does Macho Sentimental reflect you as the designer, as the public person, or both?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE I think I'm both. Right now I'm in this period where I very much feel like a loner. The city was too much for me. I'm flying back just to oversee certain projects that need to be delivered, but that's it. But I'm a double Scorpio for god's sake. My friends are like, "Oh you're in your Scorpio zone." I can spend like three days alone in my apartment—not going out on the weekends. I think it's good to understand that sometimes you want to be out and sometimes you want to go inward, and not let people in. And it's in these times I like making work that's just for me. It's not for a museum, or for a show, or for a client. These are the works I adore the most. Like now, I'm working on this sculpture that is the biggest bronze sculpture I've ever made.

SLENSKE What does it look like?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE It's this study I did with two people entangling each other and it comes from a poem. It didn't come from a sketch, but from a 3D cutout that I was doing one night in

my apartment. It's very amorphous—it's like the bodies you see in my paintings. It's like taking the body from the painting and doing it in 3D.

SLENSKE So, you're sort of abstracting this painting, which becomes a 3D version, which goes back into this classical form.

SÁNCHEZ-KANE And it can look like a lot of things from different sides. Even my paintings don't look anything like what I've been painting in the past two years, and I'm still discovering what I can do with a paintbrush.

SLENSKE I want to talk about materiality too, because that seems to be so much a part of the process, whether it's in the art or especially the fashion. Like the shoes with the shopping carts on the high heels, or mesh with leather, with rubber, with screen printing. You combine so many different materials in unexpected ways. Can you talk about the expression of materiality?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE Things are all centralized in Mexico city. So, when I went there in 2018, it was crazy—I discovered a leather manufacturer, and some specialists in dyeing and doing interesting things with denim. Obviously it was a big jump when I moved to Mexico City, especially with the quality and finding people that could sew my clothing. In the south of Mexico, the producers weren't very good, and I couldn't find the fabric I needed. A lot of designers buy their fabric from New York or Italy. I was thinking, *what's the fabric that's available to me?* But pattern-making really

transformed my use of fabric. Obviously you need certain fabrics for certain silhouettes and inner linings, depending on whether you want it to be more rigid, or more soft, or bendable. Moving to Mexico City gave me a bigger range of materiality in terms of the brand. And let's say I wanted to do shoes for a collection, I could easily find a welder. These people that contribute are very important for me and the brand. In Mérida you would maybe find a welder that is doing kitchens—the first welder I found was doing kitchen tables.

SLENSKE In the *Sánchezkaneismo* collection you had shoes with mini shopping carts on the heels. How does that work?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE I made those for the collection, but didn't actually put them in the show. In the end, I decided to use the shoes with the monobloc chair as heels. The thing about the monobloc chair is that it has no real owner—you can go to any factory that does plastic injection and you can have your own monobloc chair. Monobloc chairs can be from any part of the world—not necessarily from Mexico.

SLENSKE Can you talk about this collision of specific materials—like the silk, lace, and leather and how it fits into your designs?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE I've always been curious about how things work and how you can push through the materiality of a garment. And how long it can last, or how it can be sewn or not sewn, or look sewn. Something that drives my practice is curiosity about material. I'm always touching things, smelling things, and learning from other artists, or going to other exhibitions, or meeting people, like welders and artisans. When it comes to the structure, that's why I moved to Italy—to learn tailoring. Tailoring is something that is very rigid and has a lot of layers. In the end, you just see the fabric, or the outside of the garment, but it's a long process to get to the sartorial point.

SLENSKE Would you say that's the breakdown of your approach in general, that you're almost always sculpting?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE Something about giving an object another life is very much part of my practice. And it's very automatic. Sometimes it comes from things I see on the street. For the knife shoes, I was downtown and there was this store full of glassware and knives. I don't even cook, but I bought these amazing knives because they were so shiny and nice. Also, there was something about the symbolism of kitchenware and a woman's traditional place in the kitchen. When I did the *Sánchezkaneismo* collection it was an obvious decision to include them. So yes, whether I'm having a fashion show somewhere or an exhibition, it all collides.

SLENSKE Can you talk about what you're doing for the Okayama Art Summit that Rirkrit Tiravanija is curating?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE I was going to show my first erotic movie. I wanted to show this sex video on these objects being destroyed by dogs. But there was not enough time. So, I'm doing an installation consisting of six students. It's going to be at a closed school in Okayama. It's six students dressed in the same pattern—a dress shirt made of rawhide, and there's the teacher, or god figure according to the hierarchy, dressed the same as them. But the juxtaposition of the shirt is slightly different than the students. Religion played a very

important part in my growing up. Just thinking back to not doing certain things as a six-year-old because you think you are going to go to hell. As a six-year-old, imagine thinking about hell! All these dogmas that society teaches you are quite violent.

SLENSKE Can you talk a little bit about your connection to H. Lorenzo, which is one of the stores in Los Angeles that has supported the brand—how did that come about?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE H. Lorenzo came about through VFILES, which is a fashion incubator and contest that a lot of fashion graduates apply to. That year, 2016, the jury committee consisted of Naomi Campbell, Mel Ottenberg, Fear of God's Jerry Lorenzo, makeup artist Pat McGrath, and rapper Young Thug. They selected five international collections. It was an all-paid New York Fashion Week experience. And then they showed my brand in Paris and that's where H. Lorenzo picked it up.

SLENSKE What has the work process been like with them since?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE Xochitl, the buyer is a very good friend of mine. She's Mexican and has been in LA for ten years. I've done a performance with them and a popup. They have been very supportive. I like the idea of people being able to find me there, but if you go to Mexico, you can experience the brand in my little studio. I don't mass produce anything. It's all small production.

SLENSKE And you got connected to the Kurimanzutto gallery through Sarah Lucas, right? How did you meet her?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE Yes, through Sarah. Back in 2018, I wanted to get into this showroom in Paris and Xochitl from H. Lorenzo was very good friends with the person who owned the showroom. Xochitl told me that she was in LA doing a show at H. Lorenzo with two Korean designers and that I should meet her. So I bought a ticket that day. The next day I was on a plane to LA with two suitcases and my collection. The collection was called *LAS PUERTAS AL SENTIMENTALISMO*. I arrived on Friday and the meeting was the next day. When I landed, my friend Nika Chilewich, a curator at Hammer Museum, invited me to Sarah Lucas's *Thousand Eggs* performance. It was a very small thing—just friends and donors. Then I asked Nika to introduce me to Sarah and we just clicked. I remember Sarah liked the belt I was wearing, which had a buckle with a longhorn cattle that had legs and heels for horns. And I was wearing full Sánchez-Kane—black jacket, black trousers. But we kept in touch and then she invited me, Kris Lemsalu, and Kyp Malone [TV On The Radio] to do a performance at the opening of her exhibition at Barbara Gladstone in 2020—three months before New York went into lockdown. And I met José Kuri and Mónica Manzutto [founders of Kurimanzutto] at the dinner afterwards at Ugo Rondinone's house.

SLENSKE So, how would you describe this show at Kurimanzutto where you presented the *Sánchezkaneismo* collection? Because you are decontextualizing both things—you're taking away the context of the fashion and putting it in the gallery, and putting the gallery in the context of fashion. Was that part of the reason for doing that?

SÁNCHEZ-KANE I was working on a new collection when Monica and Jose came to my studio. It was a much smaller collection at that time, and they told me that they had a space in the gallery because they were between two exhibitions. I got very excited to do a show there—to do what I call my little theater play. Because it's important for me to show that fashion can live for more than one night and not just be something that you consume via Instagram. I still believe clothing can do that. So, we put it together in two days—a 27-minute play. I wanted to do something that everybody could understand: the origin or conception of the world. At that time I was reading *Sexual Persona* by Camille Paglia. That book opened my mind, and gave me the idea of drones and calla lilies hanging from the drones. For some reason, a lot of Mexican people are very afraid of calla lilies because they are very linked to Diego Rivera. And something that is recurring in my work is the question of how you can destroy perceptions of what being a Mexican person is like—where everything is very homogeneous. And so I was trying to push the boundaries of what Bárbara thought the world was going to be like in the future. There was narration and it was my first involvement in a bigger production. I asked everybody to go dressed in black, and everybody thought they were going to be part of the show, and they were part of it. For me it was like entering a womb, this space where we all looked the same. In my practice, this form of engagement, of how you occupy a space, is something that fascinates me.

end