

IN CONVERSATION

G. T. PELLIZZI and RAY SMITH with Phong Bui

by Phong Bui

A week after the opening of *The Execution of Maximilian: Border Paintings* at Y Gallery (February 9 – March 6, 2012) artists G. T. Pellizzi and Ray Smith paid a visit to the *Rail's* headquarters to discuss with publisher Phong Bui what led to their first collaboration.

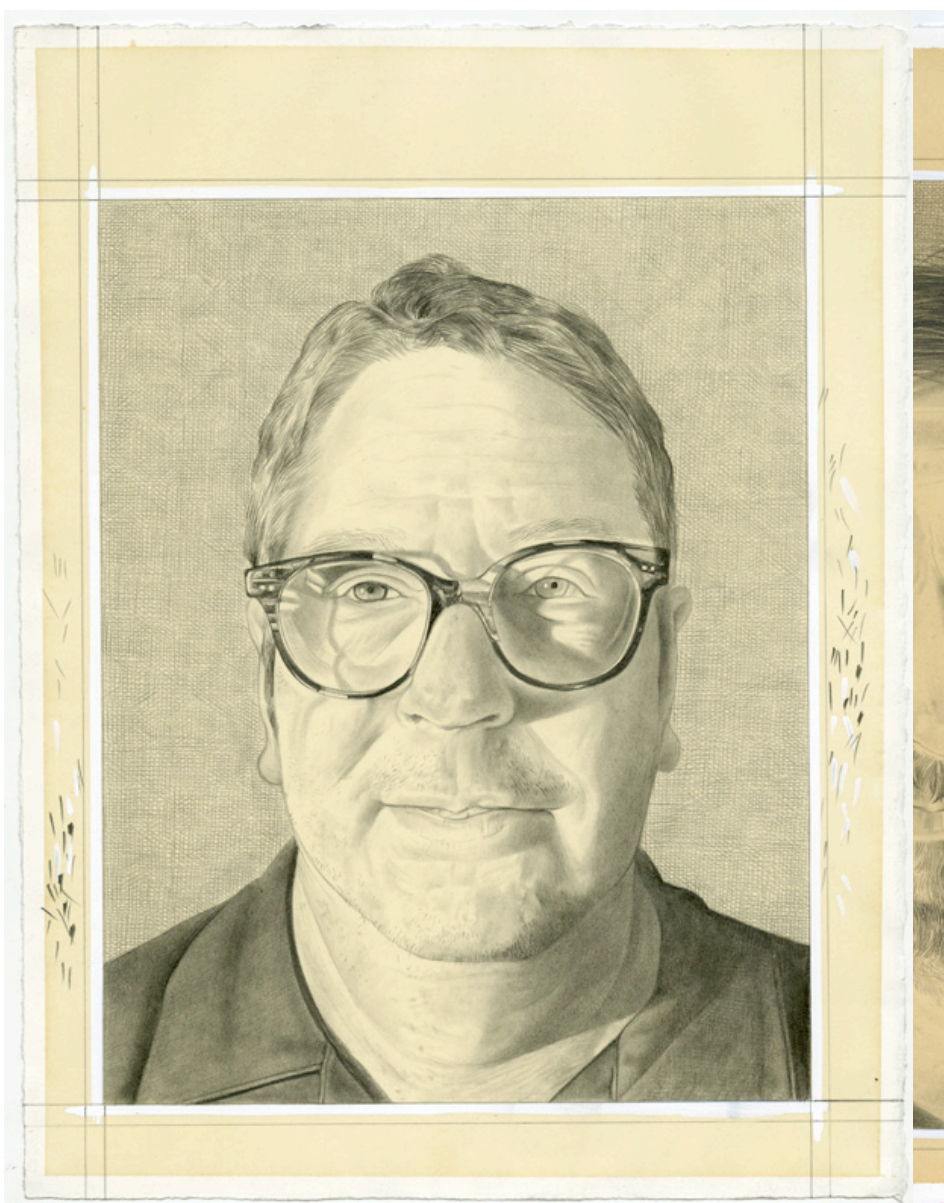
Phong Bui (Rail): It's an unlikely collaboration. One of you is an older, seasoned veteran of the '80s art scene whose wealth of images fed off many artists of that generation. The other is a younger artist, who, up until his solo debut at Y Gallery last year, was primarily associated with the collaborative Bruce High Quality Foundation. How did the show come about? And why were you both interested in Manet's paintings of the execution of Maximilian as a subject?

G. T. Pellizzi: Well, our relationship goes back pretty far. I worked as Ray's assistant when I was 16. So in a sense Ray was one of my first visual arts teachers, and we have been close friends for a long time.

Rail: Ray has been a patron saint for many artists, old and young.

Pellizzi: And I shared a studio with Ray for the last three years. Last Thanksgiving he invited me to visit his family's ranch, the Yturria Ranch, which has been in his family since Spanish colonial times. It's located in Brownsville, Texas, which is right at the border of the U.S. and Mexico. It was then that the idea of the collaboration got initiated.

Ray Smith: I think the spirit of collaboration was certainly revived in the early '90s at the Smith Street studios where all of us—Ron Gorchov, Saint Clair Cemin, and Göran Tunström—decided that we were going to come up with this communal idea called “universum universitat,” which is the university of the universe. Pretty soon we began conversations with many writer friends including Lee Smolin, Julian Barbour, and Jaron Lanier, who is famous for popularizing the term “virtual reality,” as well as philosophers like Remo Guidieri. So this whole idea of a community of sorts in a



Portrait of Ray Smith. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Portrait of G. T. Pellizzi. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

sense had already germinated around the studio's dialogues. When G. T. Pellizzi (Tona) moved into the building, he not only heightened that spirit; he also brought with him the new energy of artists of his generation. That's how I was introduced to Bruce High Quality. I instantly found what they were doing very exciting. Also, when Tona first came to the ranch 10 years ago, he and I did discuss some potential long-term collaboration regarding the landscape in terms of architecture. At that point, Tona was about to study architecture at Cooper Union so he was very invested in making the most of the natural resources and materials that were already there in the land. But when you're there in that landscape, you feel quite insignificant, like any form of intervention would be futile. The whole area is tundra, with a very low population density, probably no more than maybe three thousand people in three million acres. Because it's right on the border, it's really no man's land. It's the landscape Cormac McCarthy wrote about in *No Country for Old Men*.

Rail: Is it far from the infamous Armstrong Ranch where Dick Cheney shot Harry Whittington?

Smith: It's literally right next door.

Pellizzi: It's also right next to King Ranch, where the movie *Giant* with Rock Hudson was filmed.

Smith: Although both that novel and film are fictional, the basic idea of the oil and gas industry taking over from the cattle industry is generally true. Most of those ranches were created right after the Civil War, with the exception of my family's ranch. It belonged to Spain, and then at some point the Spanish crown granted it to my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather. But the real development of course happened after the secession and the formation of Texas into a republic.

Rail: So one can say that you're both Mexican-American artists of different heritages but who share similar cultural backgrounds.

Pellizzi: Yes. I was born in Mexico and spent a lot of my early childhood there. My mother's family is in Mexico. Ray was born in Texas but grew up and went to art school in Puebla and began his career as an artist in Mexico City.

Smith: I moved to New York in 1985, which was my first experience of America in terms of living in it.

Pellizzi: Also, our families both had houses in Cuernavaca, another coincidental happenstance.

Smith: It's like what they say in Mexico: God makes the men and they attract each other, so you do eventually end up in the same neighborhood at one point or another. And in the '70s, I met Francesco, Tona's dad, in New Mexico, then in Mexico, and we both knew a lot of people in common so it was like meeting a brother who had been in the same family that you had just never met before.

Rail: Given the history between you two, where does the execution of Maximilian fit in?

Pellizzi: Ray's great-great-grandfather was partners with General Tomás Mejía, who along with Miguel Miramón, was executed with Maximilian. Actually, Maximilian had knighted Ray's great-great-grandfather. And Maricruz, Ray's wife, is a great-great-granddaughter of Mariano Escobedo, the general who captured and killed Maximilian.

Rail: Opposites attract, shall we say? [*Laughs.*]

Pellizzi: But it's even more uncanny because Ray and Maricruz met at Maximilian's tomb in Innsbruck, Austria, actually on the bus to see the gravesite.

Rail: Weird. And you looked at each other and fell in love right away. [*Laughs.*]

Smith: Well, something like that. I don't know if we fell in love; we fell in heat.

Pellizzi: And then Maricruz says, "So what are you doing here?" and Ray says, "Oh well, my great-great-grandfather was knighted by Maximilian." Then Ray asks, "What are you doing here?" and she says, "Well, my great-great-grandfather killed Maximilian."

Smith: [*Laughs.*] So now if you go back to the history of how these ranches were created after the Republic of Texas formed, it's an odd coincidence—it's just a really weird time in history because Texas becomes a republic so they're Republicans, and Benito Juarez is also a liberal Republican, which is not the same as being Republican, as it's known today, with the conservatism. Liberal Republican and Republican don't seem to mesh too



"The Execution of Maximilian." Oil, acrylic, and enamel paint on wood fence, 151 x 80", 2011-2012.

well anymore. Nonetheless, in those days these ranches in essence get formed by these alliances between the opposing forces, across the border between the Republic of Texas and the French crown at that point, or probably just the conservative generals on the Mexican side.

Rail: Which brings us to the Manet painting.

Pellizzi: All of these different histories and backgrounds built up and eventually led to a dinner conversation in which we began to talk about William Burroughs's shotgun paintings and Niki de Saint Phalle's "Shooting Paintings," and so on. We realized that, given the whole history of Maximilian and the family, including the ranch and the broader political context of the border, transposing the action in that painting into being the action that generates the work would be a really beautiful thing, as a reference.

Smith: A kind of excitement began to brew, and this was Thanksgiving so my kids and friends are all there. At the ranch we've accumulated trash, so there's a dump we figure is 150 years old and it became a kind of anthropological or historical site. You go there and start kicking things around, and remember family history, that grandma used to cook turkeys in that oven, or that tractor blew up one day—because somebody was smoking and they were drunk and blew it up—there's a memory for the place. We also discovered that the ranch's barn was filled with all kinds of paint: car paints, house paints, glossy enamel, flat enamel—endless different surfaces and brand names. We said to ourselves, "What the hell difference does it make what's in it?" So we just took as much as we could carry out to the dumpsite. There was a pigpen with all these old fences at one end, which became like a shooting gallery.

Pellizzi: We placed various paint cans on top of the pigpen and started to shoot at them. It was just like transposing the paint into body fluids.

Smith: It all happened at one fatal moment because the whole idea and excitement had been building up between everybody.

Rail: So it wasn't just the two of you shooting [laughs]. There was an audience.

Smith: Yes, just like in an actual execution where all the waiting and tension builds up until the moment of reckoning.

Pellizzi: Actually, Bruno, Ray's son, also shot. We all had in mind to improvise our performance in reference to the second of Manet's series of paintings on Maximilian's execution.

Rail: The London picture.

Pellizzi: Yes, partly because the various panels look like fragments, similar to Manet's painting, and we used many panels at once.

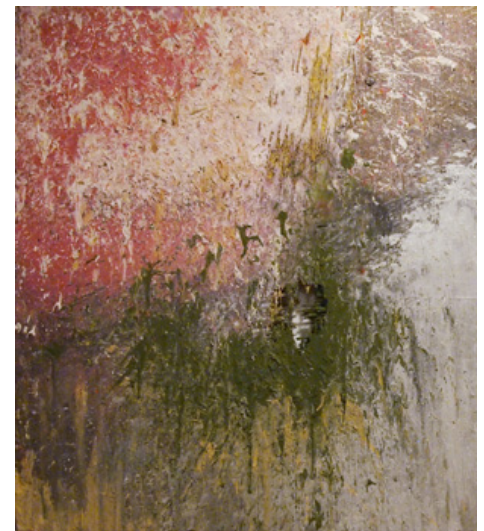
Rail: How long did it take to declare it finished?

Pellizzi: Two full days of actual production, but then there were several days planning, setting up, and all that.

Smith: So much of our set up we thought would be of some consequence, and of course, we were wrong. [Laughs.] I mean, no one could calculate, for instance, how much silver paint does a spray bottle explode



Tona Pellizzi & Ray Smith, "Miramón," 2011-12. Oil, acrylic, and enamel paint. Paint cans on palettes. 47 × 49 × 43".



"Border Painting (Cerro de las Campanas 1)," Oil, acrylic and enamel paint on plywood, 28 × 48", 2011-2012.

into if you hit it with a 12-gauge shotgun? The splatter really covers an enormous amount of space when you puncture the can with that many bullets. It was a complete surprise.

Rail: How far was the distance between you and the set-up?

Pellizzi: I'd say 25 feet.

Smith: The other thing that was mixed with the violence aspect, the shooting, was the sublime beauty of the color. And the whole process of editing all the pieces. Some wouldn't dry quickly enough. Some we carried back to be reshot in order to get different color patinas. Then came the issue of transporting them from the dry landscape to clear space in the gallery.

Pellizzi: They obviously refer to action painting, but the elements that are particular to this project, I think, are the fact that it transposes the action from enacting a painting into the action that is making the object, and the fact that the action is tied up with past and present politics—the politics of the border and our identities as being both Mexican and American, and—

Smith: And the wall going up on the border, and the drug violence on the Mexican side.

Pellizzi: The government polices on either side, how they affect the drug violence, is pretty tense. Mexico, as it exists today, is defined by this moment, in a sense. The country is becoming a republic—

Smith: The second independence.

Rail: Well, in some uncanny ways there are some similarities between Lincoln and Juarez. Both grew up poor. Both were trained as lawyers. What Lincoln did in his effort to unify the U.S. during the Civil War is not that different from what Juarez did in Mexico.

Pellizzi: Exactly. Maximilian was supporting the South during the Civil War. The fact that Juarez fought the French in Mexico saved the Union a lot of trouble. They could have actually maybe even tipped the balance, because if the French had not had to focus their resources on fighting Juarez, they might have been able to send troops, or at least much more reinforcement—supplies and weapons—to the South.

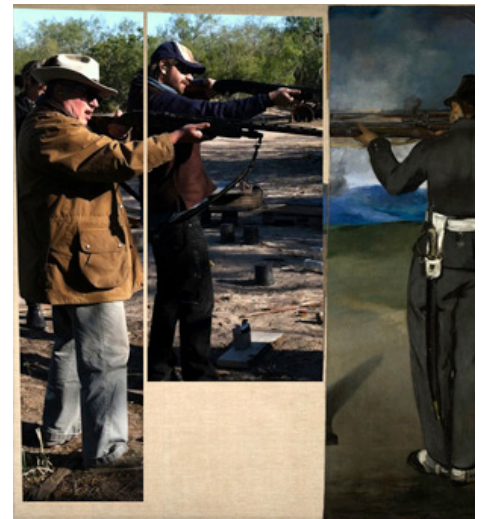
Smith: That's right, so the contraband that moved along the Rio Grande during the Civil War and the French intervention in Mexico was a huge source of money among all of these different factions. Even New York was buying Confederate cotton at the port of Bagdad in Matamoros, which was at the mouth of the Rio Grande but on the Mexican side. As long as the southern cotton would go from Louisiana, through Texas, and into Mexico, then it was almost legit for people to buy it on the other side.

Pellizzi: Because there was a sea embargo everywhere else. The South couldn't get anything in or out by sea, so anything it got had to go through Mexico.

Smith: It was a very confused moment in time. On the one hand, Texas was a republic; it had fought with Mexico to formulate that republic. Yet somehow it got caught into the contradiction of its own formation, and then gradually got stuck between the Confederates in the South and the French in Mexico. Growing up there and knowing the history of South Texas, I always felt how malleable the identity is on both sides of the border. Everything is constantly moving in terms of culture, language, music, and everything that goes on in regard to the drug war. It's very intense.

Pellizzi: That element is mirrored in Manet's subversive choice to make the paintings against Napoleon III's regime; they were never shown in France during his lifetime for that reason. He did manage to show the final versions in New York and Boston.

Rail: That's right. It was shown in rented rooms in the Clarendon Hotel and the Studio Building. Amazing. You know, I once had a long and memorable conversation with John Elderfield on the occasion of the show *Manet and the Execution of Maximilian* at MoMA in November 2006, which included all four paintings, plus one lithograph. We talked about how the first (Boston) picture evokes this dramatic air and romantic mood. Although we can hardly recognize Maximilian and his two generals, we can see that the firing squad is dressed in the rebel republican uniforms of the Juarez Mexican army, whereas in the London picture, they are all dressed in French army uniforms. And it's painted more matter-of-factly. We can see how Manet painted Mejia like a Baudelairean dandy figure.



"Border Painting." Oil, acrylic and enamel paint on plywood, 28 × 48", 2011-2012.

Smith: Whose writing about prostitutes and marginal figures influenced Manet's early paintings.

Rail: Exactly. And what's so brilliant about the painting is it depicts Mejía being shot, not Maximilian. Therefore it can be read, as both Elderfield and Michael Fried have conceived: Had Manet painted Maximilian being shot, the entire narrative of the painting would have been less effective. It's a portrayal of an event of the past that should have already happened, but when you look at it carefully it hasn't happened yet. It's amazing.

Smith: I was always fascinated by execution paintings, especially Goya's "Third of May," on which Manet's paintings are based.

Smith: Exactly. And even though "Guernica" wasn't exactly an execution painting, its fatal moment has a similar intensity. "Guernica" is a political painting, but one that doesn't seem to have any one particular agenda or even a real straight narrative. It's just simply busting through time and through all different types of private and public spaces. I think the Mexican muralists knew how to achieve this power as well.

Rail: No doubt.

Pellizzi: Another interesting element about this painting is he was painting it as the news was coming out. It was the very beginning of photojournalism. There were photographic images of the U.S. Civil War that Manet had seen. That's also why he altered the uniforms as he began to see what was available. He had no way of actually picturing Mexico, or how the Juarez rebel soldiers would be dressed, except using the news and snippets of the reports to reconstruct the event.

Smith: Orozco used to say, when he was asked why he painted so many political figures, "Don't worry, 50 years from now nobody's going to know who the hell they are." So there was the irrelevance of the political figures; it's the painting that survives after all.

Rail: Yes, I think Manet was definitely aware of that element when he made the paintings. It's fairly evident how he revealed different treatments, alterations in each painting. Even though the Maximilian figure refers to Goya's central and three-quarter profiled figure with the raised, extended hands in the "Third of May," the emperor's two arms are extended downwards while holding the two generals' hands. You might also notice in the London picture the execution takes place in a bare landscape with an open sky, as opposed to against a wall in other pictures.

Smith: And people are looking over as the spectators.

Pellizzi: There were spectators, smoke, splatters, and other surprise elements that occurred in our execution.

Smith: Even the cows were unexpected spectators. They wanted to try and figure out what we were doing, and we kept trying to get them away, so there was a definitive interaction with everything. The wind was intense. We thought everything was getting ruined because the leaves, the dust, and everything were blowing up in the air, and then getting stuck on the pigpen and the panels.

Pellizzi: We also read the walls in all three versions of the painting as borders, which in our case, is referred to by the fence. Similarly, the containers of paint are the bodies; their remains are the paint mixed in with dirt and other debris accumulated more in the center of the trough.

Rail: Did the post-9/11 emergency of the Patriot Act come to mind?

Smith: First of all, we have to take the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which opened up the border between Mexico and the United States, into account. Then, as you said, after 9/11, the border was closed up, which created this fantasy called the drug war. All of these different elements have played themselves very, very intensely into the Mexican political arena. At this particular point what they're describing as the war on drugs, particularly on the Mexican side, has produced an enormous amount of violence along that border, from our front gate at the ranch to the northeastern regions near San Fernando where they found the 300 bodies, which is literally about an hour and a half south. People don't go to Matamoros, Tamaulipas anymore. Matamoros is suffering from a lack of tourism and trade. It has become a ghost town, which is devastating. Many families from Matamoros or Monterrey or from a lot of northern Mexican towns moved to the United States. Drug gangs like the Zetas have essentially taken over the state. The military forces or the marines can't really control it.

Pellizzi: And most members of the Zetas, who are the most violent and really wreaking havoc in this respect, were once special forces trained by the U.S.

Rail: Hardly a new story.

Smith: Exactly, we train everybody. But in this particular instance you can't identify the different forces that are involved. It's too complicated. On the one hand, you have the military, and then you have the judicial police. On the other hand, you have the Zetas and other drug lords. Within them

you have the different cartels that are fighting each other. So really it's very difficult to identify precisely who anybody is. For example, cousins of mine run factories in Mexico, and when the police show up at their factories for a check-up, they can't tell whether it's the police or not. For all they know it can be the Zetas dressed up in police uniforms. Same thing that happens when you're driving on the highway: You just can't tell who is who. At this particular point I don't know what the game is, on either side of the border.

Rail: On the show card, did you position the photo of yourselves shooting back at the firing squads of Manet's London picture in order to make who's good and who's bad, who's going to kill who, even more ambiguous and subversive?

Smith: Well, the moment we generated that imposed collage, so to speak, we both realized it was a bizarre situation that touches on our personal histories, which are so intertwined and divergent. One side of the border is wracked with intense violence while the other is calm and beautiful.

Pellizzi: But Texas also has the highest death penalty rate in the country. Werner Herzog's documentary *Into the Abyss* gives a good account of two men (Michael Perry and Jason Burkett) convicted of a triple homicide. One of them (Perry) committed a murder in order to steal a car for a joyride.

Smith: It's very bizarre.

Rail: Last question: Is there an editing process involved during the making of the works?

Pellizzi: Yes, the editing is more like, "Does this need more paint? Let's put it back in and shoot some more." [*Laughs.*]

Smith: We were always wrong and always right. Sometimes it's a tiny matter that can go either way. There was a point when everybody was moving around in circles.

Pellizzi: And we kept shooting from different angles as if it was a processional firing squad just trying to make paintings.



"Border Painting (Cerro de las Campanas 3)," Oil, acrylic and enamel paint on plywood. 17 × 48", 2011-2012.

