

INTERVIEW

Reflecting on Childhood: Aggression and Intimacy at the Playground

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Photographs by Rafael Soldi
Interview by Cat Lachowskyj

I N T E R V I E W

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RAFAEL SOLDI

Photographer Rafael Soldi spent most of his career avoiding the most intimately personal subject matter he could think of: his relationship to his home country, Peru. After moving to the US when he was 15 years old, Soldi found himself stuck in limbo between

the region that never fully accepted his differences, and the new home he knew would afford him more creative and professional opportunities. In two current exhibitions—one at Philadelphia’s [The Print Center](#) and one at Vancouver’s [Burrard Arts Foundation](#)—Soldi brings together two new photographic bodies of work that flow in seamless conversation with one another, finally addressing the tension he feels between the two opposing worlds.

In the work *Imagined Futures*, Soldi performs grief for his alternative life, creating self-portraits in photobooths whenever he finds himself thinking about the future that might have manifested for him had he stayed in Peru. This series is brought together in perfect synergy with *Cargamontón*, a group of images that reflect on the violence Soldi was subjected to on the playground as a young queer misfit. The title of the work is the Peruvian Spanish word for “the harrassment of one by many,” the name given to an aggressive playground game made popular at Soldi’s all-boys Catholic school. By bringing the series together, Soldi address the photographer’s queer, Latinx identity, touching on subjects related to childhood, loss, immigration and assimilation.

In this interview with *LensCulture*, Soldi speaks about the importance of photography in his high school experience, how a life of dichotomies is reflected in his work, and why the most personal images are often the hardest to make in photography.



IF-139. From the series “Imagined Futures.” © Rafael Soldi

LensCulture: What compelled you to start expressing yourself through art? Were you always drawn to photography as a creative medium, or did you dabble in other methods before you fully immersed yourself in it?

Rafael Soldi: I've always had ties to photography, which is the case for a lot of people in our generation. My father loved taking pictures. He travelled a lot, and when he returned from a trip, he would create a slideshow for us, showing us tons of images of his destinations. That was inspiring for me, and coming from Peru where there isn't really a solid career path for artists, photography outside of the at-home realm is not common.

LC: When did you start making photographs on your own?

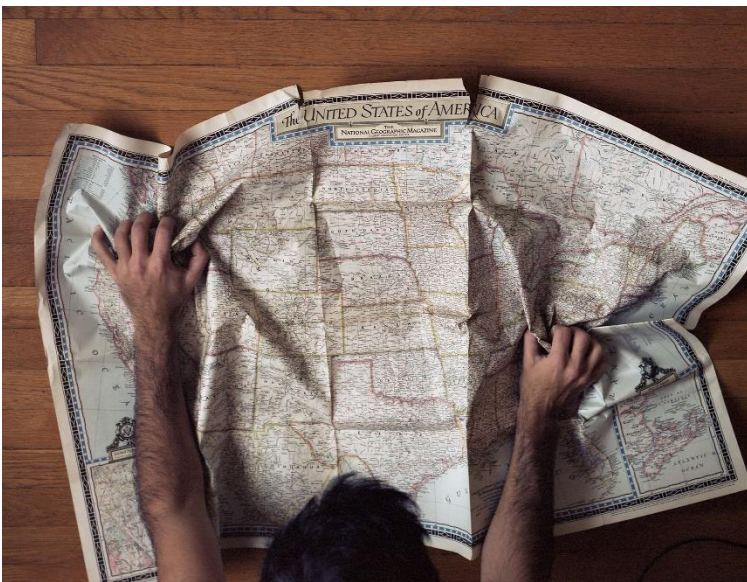
RS: Growing up, my school barely had any art education, but photography really fascinated me—specifically the darkroom. I like to work with my hands, and my computer science teacher loved photography, so he built a little darkroom at school. We could *maybe* fit two people inside of it. He started an after-school program, and I was the only kid who signed up, so I got this private photography education for a couple of years, and I loved it. I felt like such a misfit in so many other ways; I was a queer kid who wasn't interested in 99% of the things that all the other kids were interested in. I didn't like sports. I wasn't interested in any sort of violent or aggressive behavior. I just wanted to be left in peace and make pretty things, and this was the perfect way to do that—it became my escape.



From the series “Sentiment.” © Rafael Soldi

LC: When I look at a lot of your early work, there's a real softness there. It's like a visual poem, and you use a lot of ambient light to make the subject matter into something tangibly delicate. When did you realize this sort of lighting was going to be an important feature in your work?

RS: Light has always been very important to me. When I teach, I always explain to my students—whose education is really grounded in technical training—that my education in photography was not very technical. I've never really been interested in pursuing some sort of technical mastery, so I've always worked with natural light. It's also easier and more simple—I don't like to be handling lighting and managing lots of complicated equipment. I find it gets in the way. I've always worked with whatever is available to me, and that's always been this sort of soft and natural light, especially here in Seattle, which is gray all the time.



From the series "Sentiment." © Rafael Soldi

LC: And with *Imagined Futures*, the lighting changes. You have even less control over it. Tell me about this shift. Of course the method is completely different, but tell me about why that relinquishment of power over light is important.

RS: In *Imagined Futures*, I work with photobooths, which is interesting because, as you said, I have no control over the light and what it's going to do. It's an important feature of this work because it's all about harnessing that element of unpredictability and letting go.



IF-107. From the series “Imagined Futures.” © Rafael Soldi

LC: Why is that? What are you doing with these images?

RS: These tiny little self-portraits attempt to grieve the life I left behind when I immigrated to the United States from Peru. I moved to the US when I was 15, and I had a really complicated relationship with my origins. I avoided dealing with it for a very long time, and I finally felt that I needed to grapple with some of the shame and grief that I felt around this life that I left behind—the life I *didn't* live, and the future associated with it. I call it an “imagined future”—a future that I think about all the time; a future that never quite manifested, because I chose something else.

So, I created a ritual for myself for mourning and grieving that imagined future. For two years, every time those thoughts came to me—What would my life be like right now if I were home? What would I be doing? What would it look like?—I'd find a photobooth, step into it, close my eyes and almost perform it. I'd let it go and then make four portraits. I was really relinquishing all control of the camera. I'm not really interested in the photobooth as a zeitgeist—I'm more interested in it as an apparatus. It's basically a camera that you step into, akin to a confessional. I grew up in an all-boys' Catholic school, so the parallels were very clear to me. A photobooth is a place that's both very public and very private, and I think of it as a tiny stage for a monumental performance.



IF-112. From the series “Imagined Futures.” © Rafael Soldi

LC: That parallel is incredibly interesting. I also find it compelling that the most personal work that artists make often comes from those moments when they let go and relinquish control over their medium or craft.

RS: Yes, when I’m in there, I have no control over what the apparatus is going to do, or how it will light me. Sometimes the images come out entirely blacked out, and sometimes they come out really, really bright, and sometimes there are chemistry deposits on my face. It really depends on what the particular machine is like, and I like it because when I’m making that photograph, what I’m really thinking about is performance. I’m not thinking about how the picture is made—I don’t want to have to think about that. I just want to step into the photobooth and let the machine do its thing. The most important part of the work is letting go—not having to worry about what the light is going to do and how it’s going to behave.

LC: In your current exhibitions, you pair these portraits with the series *Cargamontón*. You mentioned your disinterest in aggression when you were younger, and your growing up in an all-boys’ school, which has a direct relationship to this work. How did the idea for this other project come about, and what is it about exactly?

RS: It was all a bit of a process. I was in a slump where I wasn’t making new work for a few years. I’ve learned to not put pressure on myself in that regard, but in the few years—maybe even since Trump was elected—the environment in the US has put a lot of fire under many creative minds to use our voices and talk about things that are important to us. The world of *Cargamontón* was something I had

been thinking about a lot. The *Imagined Futures* piece with my eyes closed was the first work I ever made that directly addresses my relationship to Peru, and it's a relationship that I've been waiting almost 15 years to talk about in my work—I just never felt ready.



CM-2. From the series “Cargamontón.” © Rafael Soldi

LC: Why didn't you feel ready?

RS: I never quite felt like I had the strength for what I needed to do, but now I feel like I'm finally making peace with it, and this work is my first step in addressing it. As soon as I made it, a crazy flurry of themes and ideas started coming into my head—all about my relationship to Peru. *Cargamontón* actually came about when, out of nowhere, I got a Facebook message from this guy from high school. I didn't have any negative memories of him, but he reached out saying he had been thinking about me for years, and he couldn't shake the fact that he and some other students did some really awful things to me when we were younger. He was carrying a lot of guilt about it, which I thought was interesting, because I don't have any ill feelings towards him. I don't remember him that way. I remember being teased and bullied for being gay, but it wasn't necessarily something that ruined my life.

LC: That's quite revealing. There's often this invisible cultural force that coarsens through bullying that goes unaddressed. Both sides need to heal.

RS: Yes. I find it interesting that as an aggressor, he was carrying so much guilt, while I had moved on from it and likely developed strength from it. I started thinking about everything that happened when I was a kid, and it made me realize that I had, as a means of

survival, blocked out a lot of behavior that happened in my school years. The more I thought about it, the more I started to see how nefarious it was, how dark it was, how strange it was, how mean it was. Now that I'm an adult, I can see how much of that was fed by fear and insecurity, and how many of these kids—although they were awful—were just a product of what they saw and what they were taught, and probably aren't bad people.



CM-19. From the series “Cargamontón.” © Rafael Soldi

LC: So how did this lead to *Cargamontón* as a photographic body of work? How did your process for making this series begin?

RS: I kept thinking about that Facebook message for a year—about my school and playground politics—and I started talking to some friends. I went back to Peru several times, and asked them about their experiences in school. What did they remember? What happened to us? What did they observe? And I started doing some research and asking around about playground hazing games. That's when I started to remember, realizing how twisted they were. The one that everyone kept bringing up and that I started remembering was Cargamontón. The translation of the word—directly from this sort of Peruvian Spanish vernacular—means “the harassment of one by many.”

LC: That's incredibly dark.

RS: Yes, and the game was pretty simple. You would find someone—whichever you wanted to oppress—and you would sort of lift them up and slam them to the ground. Then you would mount them, and everybody would run and pig-pile on top and make a giant pile of bodies. It was pretty aggressive. Sometimes it was more in jest, and sometimes it was a bullying thing. But the objective was to neutralize the person at the bottom—to suffocate them under a pile of bodies.



CM-9. From the series “Cargamontón.” © Rafael Soldi

LC: And this happened to you?

RS: When I was speaking to my friends, it all started coming back to me. I remember, as a kid, being on the bottom of this pile and feeling scared and angry and mad, but also becoming very aware—in an abstract way—of my sexuality and my queerness. I was always aware of it from an early age, and I realized that even though I didn't like what was happening, I came to understand very acutely that if I were to ever experience intimacy with a man, this was it. I developed an understanding that my path to intimacy was experienced in violence, and I knew that because I lived in a place that would never, ever accept the kind of intimacy that I was seeking, or the kind of desire that I possessed, it would always be forbidden.

So it became this really twisted thing where it's not that I wanted this playground initiation to happen to me, but I did learn to justify it by saying, well, if I'm going to get hit, at least I'm being touched by a man. And I think that's a really fucked up thing for a 14-year-old kid to deduce.



CM-32. From the series “Cargamontón.” © Rafael Soldi

LC: Of course it is. But what about the aggressors in that situation? Do you think the interest in intimacy came from both sides?

RS: Yes. I think that in general, the aggressors also seek some kind of intimacy and some kind of desire, because when you look at the footage of this game being played, there's a lot of body contact. It's very sexual. I think a lot of the kids—whether they're queer or not—enjoyed it as a form of closeness with each other. Many of my girlfriends who went to all girls' schools at 13 or 14 were always talking and touching each other in friendly ways; they were hugging each other and comfortable with being physically close to one another. Boys are taught that you can only touch each other if you're patting each other on the back aggressively, or playing soccer or tackling each other to the ground.

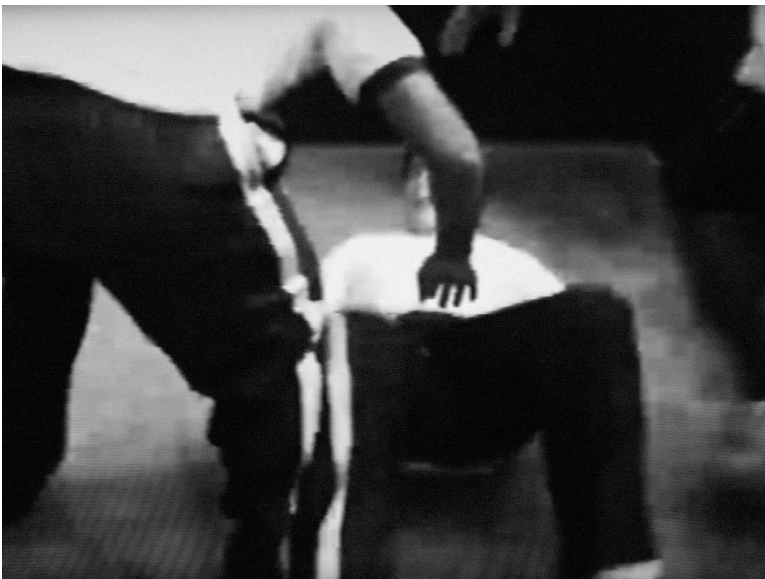
LC: Was there anything in particular that inspired you to start re-visualizing this hazing?

RS: Yes, there's one piece of art that is incredibly important to this body of work. It's a piece by Barbara Kruger, and I've loved it for years. It's a black and white photograph of all these men in black suits in a brawl—they're fighting. And on top of the image, she put

these big red letters that say “You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men.” I love that piece and I think it’s brilliant, and it has absolutely influenced this work.

LC: So tell me more about the material you used to make *Cargamontón*. How exactly did you create this work?

RS: When I started remembering things about the game, I was suspect of my own memory. I thought: Am I making his up? Is this something that really happened? So I started googling, looking for any research or writing on it. And I started finding these videos online. Kids weren’t just doing it—they were filming it and posting it. It was weird looking at the posts, because some of them are more friendly—just a bunch of kids doing a funny pig-pile—but some are quite violent. And the quality is never great, because most of these videos are from the late ‘90s and early 2000s. I became obsessed with the visuals, because when you pause on some moments, it looks like a torture scene, but then there are other moments that look like two young boys embracing each other, looking quite sweet. It was this strange in-between space. I started making screen shots and photographing my screen, and then re-photographing them and putting them through filters and processing it to degrade the image until I had this collection of photographs that sit somewhere between torture and pleasure. This group of boys were seeking to both mask desire and assert power.



CM-33. From the series “Cargamontón.” © Rafael Soldi

LC: The size of these images is also interesting. How did you decide on the sizing of the final prints? A lot of work that plays with digital footage is often presented in massive reproductions, but yours are quite small—they invite the viewer to come closer.

RS: The final prints are about 17 x 21 inches, and the actual image is about 8 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches, so they're fairly intimate. I wanted them to be small enough so that they were intimate, but large enough that they would have a presence on the wall. When I make work, I tend to always see the final image in my head first, completely finished, framed and ready to go. And then I kind of work backwards from there.



Installation shot from the exhibition “Cargamontón”, on view at Vancouver’s Burrard Arts Foundation.

LC: So you pictured how these should look before you even started playing with the footage.

RS: When I first imagined the work, I saw them in black and white. I saw them with a really big, generous white border and a simple, maple frame, and that’s how they are being displayed right now.

LC: Why is it important for you to bring *Imagined Futures* and *Cargamontón* together into one space? How do you see them working together?

RS: In photography, we’re always taught to work in series and projects. That did work for me in the past, but lately I find it very limiting. I’m in this place where I’m trying to find balance between the two, and I think that *Imagined Futures* and *Cargamontón* are one, single piece.



Installation shot from the exhibition “Cargamontón”, on view at Vancouver’s Burrard Arts Foundation. The images from “Imagined Futures” are hung tightly together on the far right wall, and the images from “Cargamontón” are hung on the other walls, evenly spaced apart.

LC: That also fits perfectly with the themes in your work, because you reference a lot of dichotomies: violence and intimacy, past and future. And then you also bring these two visual threads together to create another balance.

RS: I never really thought about it that way, but it’s true. There’s a of duality in my work, which probably has a lot to do with my upbringing and some of the hang-ups I have around it. In a practical sense, I had a wonderful childhood—I was comfortable and provided for. And when I talk to my family about how hard it was to grow up queer, I find that there is a disconnect because they know they provided me with this great life. But at the end of the day, you can be provided for and happy, *and* feel unaccepted by everything that surrounds you.



IF-120. From the series “Imagined Futures.” © Rafael Soldi

LC: This is that same tension you discussed earlier with *Imagined Futures*.

RS: Exactly. I still struggle with it. Having grown up in this really intense dual place of having a happy, solid family, which makes me feel guilty for feeling negatively about what was happening around me culturally and politically. But you're right, it shows through bringing these works together: one is really quiet and meditative, and one is bombastic, chaotic and violent.

LC: When someone walks into the space and experiences this duality firsthand, what do you want them to walk away with? What do you want them to think about?

RS: I always want my work to have multiple access points. When I walk into a show and I can see that an artist has invested a lot of thought and time into making the show look good, I feel content. A few years ago, I had a show where several people who walked in said, "Man, I don't know exactly what this is about, but these are making feel a certain way." And I thought, "Perfect." You don't need to know what it's about, but I'm glad that people are able to project their own feelings onto it. If someone can walk away and even remotely feel something close to what I was feeling while making the work, I feel like that is success.

Editor's Note: If you'd like to see Rafael Soldi's work in person, there are two exhibitions of the work opening soon. If you're in Philadelphia, you can check out the work at [The Print Center](#) from January 18 - March 30, 2018. And if you're in Vancouver, you can check out Soldi's work at the [Burrard Arts Foundation](#) from January 18 - March 23, 2018.

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