

# Walterio Iraheta

## About the Artwork

There are people who believe that much can be said about a person by looking at their shoes. By their color, shape, style, how well the shoe is taken care of, how it is made, and the materials used in its manufacture. Some shoes are made by hand by expert craftsmen with skills and methods passed down from generation to generation, made of fine leather, wood, natural fabrics and other organic materials. Others are mass-produced in factories using poured rubber, plastics and other synthetic —sometimes toxic— materials. What is at once a seemingly mundane object, reveals details about its maker, and its owner, in unique and inconspicuous ways, causing this footwear to cease being ordinary, but transformed into an artifact, a portrait, an archive, a memento, of a person, time, and place. Each with its own characteristics and personalities of sorts, these fineries become iconographic signs or symbols reflecting the personality of the person who owns them. The object is a symbol of power, a symbol of belonging, of tenacity, status, class, style, of necessity, of history, of beginnings and of end. The object gives testimony to space and time, place, and person.

*My Feet are my Wings* is a collective series of photographs of discarded, found and collected objects, primarily shoes, for which exists an analogy between the object, and the human being. The object, interpreted as a form of “living matter”, is capable of evoking feelings and sensations, capable of passing on to us a large amount of information left by it and contained by the energy of the people who participated in its making, and those who will then make use of it. Depictions of discarded objects, particularly footwear, and mostly white shoes, are remarkable for their sense of harmony, visual drama, and narrative content. There are no images of anatomical parts (feet) or celestial figures (wings), but the reference to the existence of a person, or persons, as they relate to the shoes, is metaphorically clear. Although they are not depicted, viewers are reminded that the feet provide support as well as transportation, that shoes can constrain, but also provide protection, and freedom —both physical, and as a form of expression. Oftentimes they are left behind as evidence of human existence —the proof of one’s passage through life— and sometimes, in the end, even lost, or discarded. Due to their personally hygienic nature, shoes are an element of clothing that is rarely inherited, or passed down, so they essentially represent a unique remnant of the owner, much like a fingerprint, an identification card, or a portrait.

Each of Iraheta’s photos embodies the story of a shoe, or shoes, as the main character/s of the work: the shoes are worn, fixed, arranged in order, or simply dumped. Iraheta shows sensitivity for the history of Central America in compositions such as *Encontrados* (trans. *Found*), which resembles an archeological showcase of objects unearthed from a mass grave. In these works, the artist took photographs of the strewn-away shoes that were discarded on roads and pathways known as immigrant travel routes northbound from El Salvador, where the artist is from. His invitation to reconstruct the history of these personal migrant journeys is both powerful and persuasive.

Just as some stories make readers feel uneasy, other photographs offer a sense of balance. In *Mandala*, the monochrome and essential geometric structure of a circle of white shoes bears resemblance to a garden for meditation. On the other hand, his photograph *Jardín* (Spanish for *Garden*), in which shoes are scattered arbitrarily over a gray surface, suggests the idea of entropy and disarray, or perhaps, order within chaos. Alternately, these also convey a feeling of freedom and a care-free existence.

In certain ways, this series is also a poetic, nostalgic work: When Iraheta was a boy, his family was severely economically challenged, so owning a pair of shoes was something of extraordinary luck. Generally, they weren’t the shoes that one loved to have, but they complied with his

mother’s expectations of durability. One of his most recurring childhood dreams was to see himself arrive home with boxes and boxes of new shoes —Converse All Stars of every color, and perfectly remembering the smell of the new canvas, the rubber sole— then waking in the morning with these sensations still so vibrant and alive. The first thing he would do upon waking was search for them under his bed. Obviously, the only thing he found was his single pair of everyday shoes, ugly and hard. But that beautiful and emotional memory now reproduces a joy and reminiscence that is extended to the sight of abandoned shoes, those buried in the road, or tangled in the telephone pole cables. “I always pick these shoes up when I can, and take them to my studio hoping that at some moment they will talk to me and tell me their story as I get ready to photograph them.”

## About the Artist

Walterio Iraheta studied Applied Arts at Centro Nacional de Artes, CENAR and the University Dr. José Matías Delgado in El Salvador, the country where he was born; Graphic Arts at the Chicago Cultural Center, in the US, and then at School of Visual Arts, La Esmeralda, México. He has won the first place in the Art Biennial Paiz of El Salvador 2007; an Honorable Mention in the competition of Contemporary Art in Palma de Mallorca, Spain 2004; first prize in the Contemporary Art Biennial of Central America, 1998, among others. He has had more than 35 solo exhibitions and has participated in over 150 group shows like the Photography Biennial in Lima, Perú 2012; the Venice Biennial, Italy 2011; Pontevedra Biennial in Galicia, Spain 2010; The X Havana Biennial, Cuba 2009; The Latin American video projects *Visionaries* at The Itaú Cultural Sao Paulo, Brazil and The Museum of Contemporary Art Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2009; Valencia-São Paulo Biennial, Spain 2008, among others. In the last ten years he has combined his artistic work with those of curator and cultural management, coordinating projects like The National Drawing show and Photography Festival ESFOTO in his country. He lives and works in San Salvador, El Salvador.



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Iraheta has gone through a process which began with traditional techniques, but continuously expanded to include any technique or material in the creation of artworks. As a creator, he is constantly moving towards new languages and topics, passing from one to another without losing his way in the search for aesthetic results. At times, however, his choices come dangerously (and consciously) close to being too kitschy, or he seems unnecessarily reticent to breaking with convention, in an effort to preserve a traditional sense of visual structure, and the sort of perfectionism and appreciation for detail that has characterized him as a draftsman.

What remains unchanged is the direct and enriching conversation Iraheta achieves between his work and its viewers. There are moments of mockery and humor, or of social consciousness, as well as more intimate passages related to love and memory. Currently, he is very interested in issues related to human movement, the phenomenon of migration and hybrid cultures, and in mixtures of values and traditions among people of different regions. In some pieces, the focus is on himself as the subject, a natural consequence of the self-referentiality apparent in all his *oeuvres*.

