

RAFAEL SOLDI SOFT BOY

Oct 7, 2023—
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FRYE /
Art Museum

Seattle artist Rafael Soldi (born 1987, Lima, Peru) uses photographic media to examine the intersection of individual identity with larger political and social themes such as immigration, memory, and loss. Soldi's current work builds on his experience as a queer youth in Peru to focus on the construction of masculinity in Latin American society. *Soft Boy*, the artist's first solo museum exhibition on the West Coast, brings together three recent projects that explore how gender expectations are encoded—and can be subverted—within language and childhood games.

The central video installation, *Soft Boy* (2023), follows a group of uniformed adolescents as they perform a series of violent, yet intimate rituals based on the artist's memories of attending an all-boys Catholic school. The video expands on the print series *CARGAMONTÓN* (2022), which depicts a pile-on form of hazing that hovers in Soldi's recollection between bullying and homoerotic self-discovery. The artist translates pixelated found footage of the practice into a sequence of large-scale etchings, evoking obscure memory and an ambiguous mix of pain and pleasure.

Moments of fluidity and dissonance also animate the handwritten text installation *mouth to mouth* (2023), which presents Spanish-English word pairings that reveal gendered power structures built into language. For the artist, probing states of in-betweenness—especially as it occurs across tongues—provides nuanced insight into immigrant identity while also offering a rich metaphor for queer experience.



SOFT BOYS

Rafael Soldi in conversation
with Luisebastián Sanabria

Luisebastián Sanabria: I'd like to start with *CARGAMONTÓN*, the group of photogravures where the exhibition begins. I read that these images originate from videos you found online of students tussling [a type of playful, teenage roughhousing that ends in a pig pile, colloquially called "cargamontón" in Peru], filmed by their peers during these forms of schoolyard horseplay. You then selected specific stills, which you etched into copper plates and printed on paper. When I saw the images, I first thought of the early days of silent cinema. I thought of us—the viewers—imagining the voices, creating the narrative, widening the frame. I thought of the students piling on top of one another like the workers in the silent documentary film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* [Louis Lumière, 1895]. Your images display a similarly repetitive human contact: one body over another, over another, on a horizontal plane. And if we zoom in on Lumière's shot of the factory, we also see how those bodies accumulate, from the motion of collectively exiting the same place, this time on a vertical plane.

Before you composed your sequence of quiet images, you recontextualized the video content to shift the way we perceive it. Your gesture tells us, "There is something else here, beyond the roughhousing." So my question is, What's behind the decision to reorient the viewer's gaze in relation to the nature of *cargamontón*?

Rafael Soldi: The shift in the gaze is one of the most important parts of this work, and it operates on a few different levels. First of all, the fact that these "games" have been filmed and posted to the internet adds an external gaze to an otherwise contained act; it adds an element of surveillance and dissemination that didn't exist when I was a student and we did not have recording devices on our bodies. Something that existed only in my memory can now be observed by an outsider.

Then there is my intervention on this footage, in which I search for specific, nuanced moments that act as a proxy for my own memory and experience of those events. I am looking for moments that confuse the viewer's gaze, forcing each of them to consider how individual bias may influence their understanding of the evidence before them. I was interested in moments when the line between the violent and the playful, the forceful and the sensual, disintegrates. My intent is to invite viewers to make that decision for themselves, to project their own gaze.

As I recalled the mechanics of this aggressive game, I noted the moment I began to embody my queerness and accept my attraction to my classmates. So the *cargamontón* mutated from an oppressive interaction to an opportunity for intimacy and connection—to feel touched, entangled in the breathing and the sweat of our bodies collapsing into one another.

I like to think of this action and its available recordings as an archeological site for a certain type of masculinity. In its excavation I found vestiges of parallel realities, emblematic of queer existence in everyday sites of violence. The experience that to some felt normal, playful, and largely trivial, to me felt frightening, erotic, and scarring.

The complicated element here is the reality that many queer people find affection and intimacy through violent interactions; we run the risk of normalizing that relationship as the price we must pay for connection. But more importantly, it became clear to me that the epidemic of touch isolation extends to all men, and that, in the words of Barbara Kruger, we "construct intricate rituals that allow us to touch the skin of other men."¹ So I reorient the gaze toward these moments, the moments that reveal the cracks in the foundation of these rituals.

LS: Right. It's true that before the viewer even asks what these images are and where they originate, a reactivation of memory occurs. There's a confrontation between what we remember from school and the images you found online. We return with you to the classroom, to the schoolyard, to find that the dynamics between adolescent boys remain intact. The images you present have no temporal mark that might signal whether they're from the 2000s or the 1980s, for example. The perpetuation of the game, the repetition of the acts that construct gender—these behaviors are transversal and indifferent of the place where we may have grown up.

I also think that *CARGAMONTÓN* invites us to listen to the images. The series shows how difficult it can be to recognize whether the sound of an open mouth is one of pleasure or of pain, if the contact between bodies is a struggle or an embrace. However, this silence in the images is never absolute and does not exist in a space like a school. Adjacent to *CARGAMONTÓN* is *mouth to mouth*, an inventory of words you have been collecting and handwriting in ink. Can you tell me about the problem of language that, in *mouth to mouth*, ends up becoming a poem?

RS: Language itself is a subjective, ever-changing entity. Many people consider it an institution, but words are constantly invented. They mutate and shift in meaning throughout time; they even fall in and out of fashion. I began to understand this more when I migrated to the U.S. and started to think in two languages. Our relationship to our primary language can often be so embodied, it is hard to separate from it. The flow between the two created a distance that allowed for a more critical and flexible gaze toward words and their meanings.

There were moments when I felt my Spanish slipping away but I still struggled with English, when I felt orphaned between two languages. From this dynamic surged "errors" or misunderstandings that eventually produced invented words or tiny unintended poems. I began to feel some freedom from the constraints of the scaffolding of language, an approach to a liminal tongue of my own that aligns with the fluidity of queer identities.

I also noted how power and violence are woven into the connective tissue of language, and how simple interventions could soften that violence and disarm that power—essentially queering it. For example, inventing an incorrect translation for the Spanish affirmative "sí, sí" to the English "sissy," which share the same phonetic pronunciation. As in *CARGAMONTÓN*, the reading of the words depends on the bias of the reader. Certain words in the installation are small gifts to those who understand them.

LS: It's another game: you have the opportunity to speak, to choose a language, and you instead choose to reside in between, to use two tongues. That mixture results in a unique voice for which no word is singular in its makeup. Those double words are written on the gallery walls as if in the margins of a notebook, constructing fissured verbs of a poem written by that same boy who played *cargamontón* and sensed desire.

As we navigate the exhibition we notice a continuity between the works—the actions and sounds of the body. For that reason I'd like to mention that while the public experiences *CARGAMONTÓN* and *mouth to mouth*, they hear a sound emanating from the large adjacent gallery, the source of which is obscured. Yet any of us could identify it, know from afar it is the smack of bodies colliding or the agitation of a body running. We approach *Soft Boy*—the three-channel video installation that lends its name to the exhibition—with this anticipation. In the projection we see ten students playing *fútbol*, arm wrestling, slapping one another's backs, and marching, this time as staged interactions in front of a camera. They're not in school but they know, from experience and instinct, how to play along. I'd like to ask you about the duration of each action: What happens when the game ends?

RS: Of course. Like in the last few works we discussed, this piece is born from memory, but later it finds its own language. I think I'm starting to see a pattern here! The filming process, the experiment we carried out in the studio, is just as—if not more—important as the final installation. I was very nervous leading up to the filming; it was difficult to produce an audiovisual work without much of a script or linear narrative guiding the process. I was never interested in a dramatization of my experience or a theatrical take on memory. I instead used memory to call out certain rituals I felt worked as tools in the building of patriarchal masculinity and presented them as a prompt rather than a script. We asked the boys to interpret, rather than act out, each prompt through their own bodies and lived experiences.

Even in that process the differences became visible. When it came to having conversations about masculinity, I found that the boys who identified as queer were incredibly well versed in articulating the nuances of the topic and their experiences. Conversely, when it came to prompts that demanded roughhousing, the boys who identified as straight often felt more at home. I do want to note that this observation is not absolute; there was some bleed in these behaviors.

We used two strategies that I think were important. First, we pressed the boys to sustain the actions for extended periods of time, to break down the "actor's façade"; we wanted to reach the moment when their behavior began to feel authentic, and that often meant pushing their limits to reveal their fragilities. The second strategy involved secretly rolling the cameras well before and after calling "action." This way we captured vulnerable moments after playtime and struggle. Often when they thought we were no longer filming, they would collapse to the ground to rest, reclining on one another in a collective *contrapposto* that almost breathed as one. In that moment I felt I was witnessing the version of *cargamontón* I always wished for as a child. These in-between moments, off-script, are what I was searching for and hoped to document.

LS: Yes, you're right. The video installation reveals the artifice of the actions, of the posturing, while also making them more tender. When a boy's body loses

tension, it truly opens up and becomes vulnerable. I think this is when the drive you've been talking about appears—the implications of feeling, of playing differently, of being an "other" in the lot, in the troop. This brings me to my last question, about the exhibition title: Who is the *Soft Boy*?

RS: The soft boy is me, but also you, and anyone else who identifies as such. I've always found it curious that in Peru we use the word *maricón* (fag/queer) to refer to someone who is a coward or is fearful. And yet I can't think of anything more courageous than to embody a soft masculinity, to lead with an open and vulnerable body, as you put it, in a world that punishes that way of being.



Luisebastián Sanabria

(born 1991, Colombia) is a visual artist and author of *Sé Huir* (Dos Filos, 2020).

Endnote

1. "Untitled (You Construct Intricate Rituals)." Collection Works, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, accessed May 23, 2023, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/35582>.



Para obtener una traducción al español de este texto, escanee el código

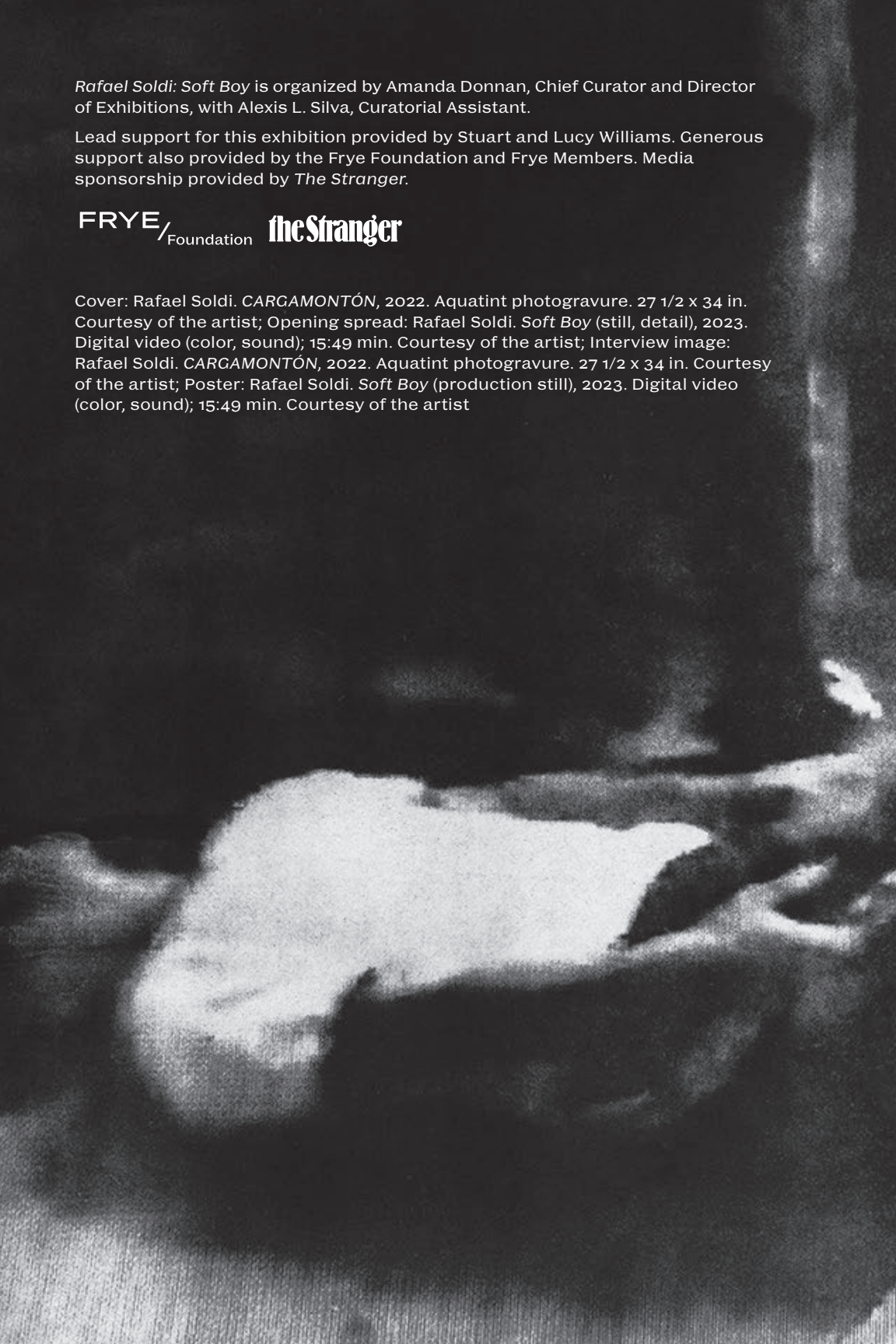
ryemuseum.org/soldi-soft-boy-interview-translation

Rafael Soldi: *Soft Boy* is organized by Amanda Donnan, Chief Curator and Director of Exhibitions, with Alexis L. Silva, Curatorial Assistant.

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Cover: Rafael Soldi. *CARGAMONTÓN*, 2022. Aquatint photogravure. 27 1/2 x 34 in. Courtesy of the artist; Opening spread: Rafael Soldi. *Soft Boy* (still, detail), 2023. Digital video (color, sound); 15:49 min. Courtesy of the artist; Interview image: Rafael Soldi. *CARGAMONTÓN*, 2022. Aquatint photogravure. 27 1/2 x 34 in. Courtesy of the artist; Poster: Rafael Soldi. *Soft Boy* (production still), 2023. Digital video (color, sound); 15:49 min. Courtesy of the artist



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