

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH
ARTIST
STEPHANIE MERCEDES
August 5, 2020
Host: Bryan Smith

Stephanie Mercedes (00:00:00):

When I decided I was going to melt down the six hour MCX rifle. I mean, I was living in New York at the time, and I started calling foundries and they were like, "Lady, you are crazy. You think that we are going to let you take an assault rifle and put it in our industry-level Foundry kiln, like no way in hell."

Bryan Smith (00:00:20):

Brian Smith here, and welcome to the DreamPath Podcast, where I try to get inside the heads of talented creatives from all over the world. My goal is to demystify and humanize the creative process, and make it accessible to everyone. Now, let's jump in. Stephanie Mercedes is on the show. If you like hearing from creatives who work in a unique artistic space, this interview is for you. I don't think it's hyperbole to say that no artist in the country, perhaps even the world, is doing what Mercedes is doing right now out of her studio in Washington, DC. Mercedes is an Argentine-American multidimensional artist who melts guns, bullets, and shell casings into bells, harp strings, and other works of art. Mercedes is fascinated by the concept of taking objects that were built so that they cannot easily be destroyed, objects that are built for violence, and melting them down, transforming them into things of beauty, grace, and instruments of change.

Bryan Smith (00:01:19):

Although Mercedes went to art school, attended Smith college, and did art residencies throughout Latin America, much of what she does as an artist today is actually self-taught. Some of it she even learned from YouTube of all places. Her calling into this form of art started with the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting. As a gay Latina, the gravity of this horrific act of violence against the LGBTQ+ community, inspired her to make a profound statement with her art by taking objects of violence and turning them into a sonic expression of joy. After the Pulse shooting, she melted the same make and model gun used in the shooting into 49 Liberty bells, one for each of the victims of the shooting. This is what launched her career as an artist, allowing her to expand her reach into installations that incorporate movement, dance, music, and history. What's so cool about artists like Mercedes, although one could argue that there are no other artists like Mercedes, is that she's focused on the intersection of art with politics, life, history, and morality. If you can, I highly recommend going to her website, which is stephaniemercedes.com, the link is in my show notes, and checking out her work before you listen to the episode, so you can get a visual of her work as you listen to our conversation. So, let's jump right into my talk with Washington DC based artist, Stephanie Mercedes. Stephanie Mercedes, welcome to the podcast.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:02:47):

Oh, thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here.

Bryan Smith (00:02:49):

Well, I read a little bit about you online and I saw somewhere that you prefer to be called, or that most people call you Mercedes. Is that what you would like to be called?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:03:00):

Yeah. You know, I love my first name, Stephanie, but I just feel like there's something about Mercedes which fits me a little bit better. So I like, as confusing as it is for everyone, I prefer to go by Mercedes.

Bryan Smith (00:03:12):

Alright Mercedes, why don't we start off by you telling the listeners, if you're on a train and the person sitting next to you, a complete stranger, asks you, "What do you do? What is your profession?" How would you answer that question?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:03:29):

I mean, what I would tell the stranger on the train, is probably that I'm an artist, but- Which can mean so many things, which is the beauty of being an artist. But what I do is I take weapons and I melt them down and I turn them into musical installations, works of art, and musical instruments. And that's really the core of what I do. And that can be anything, from choreographing a large-scale performance to commissioning a small piece. But the real core of my goal, and my practice as an artist, is to try to take these objects of violence and these objects which have caused harm, like bullet casings, rifles, pistols, handguns. And to really try to melt them down and transform them into, what I believe is their opposite, which is objects of care and peace.

Bryan Smith (00:04:24):

Hmm. Yeah. Taking those core elements that, at their core, they are harmless, but they've been turned into something that is harmful and has been used for acts of hate.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:04:37):

Completely, yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:04:39):

And you're sort of re-transforming it, taking it back to its roots, but also putting it in a form that is something that people can kind of unify around as an object of peace.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:04:52):

Yeah, totally.

Bryan Smith (00:04:54):

Is that a fair way of putting it?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:04:56):

I think that's completely true. I mean, I think for me, one of the beauties of metal is that you can take any piece of metal, if it's iron, in whatever shape it is, and if you have the ability to get something hot enough, you can melt it down and turn it into liquid and completely retransform it into anything you want. And I think that's what's always attracted me to the medium, that something so hard can become soft so quickly. And you can really remold that thing, and I feel like that's so powerful. And to be able to take these objects, which were really built so that they could not be destroyed. A lot of times guns have multiple melting points, they're made out of a combination of so many different alloys and metals that they're not meant to be melted down. But I feel like there's such beauty in a complete act of transformation. And I feel like, as an artist, that is my end goal, to try to completely something from one thing into another.

Bryan Smith (00:06:01):

Yeah. So, tell us about your journey, getting to the point where you are doing something very specific in an artistic space. Because I don't think that anyone else in the country is doing what you're doing. I mean, that would be my guess, if I were to do a Google search for an artist who is doing what you're doing, it would be very difficult to find somebody in that niche. So, how did you find that niche and what were your influences culturally, politically, or otherwise that kind of guided you there?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:06:36):

Well, I think in a lot of ways it really began with the fact that my whole father's side of the family, who are Argentinian, they're all motorcycle mechanics. And they all really build these hyper custom bikes, which are so custom made that a lot of times the parts which are created have to be made out of scrap metal. They have to be random things which are taken off the street, and then welded or melted down and returned into something else. So, I think, even though I went to art school and studied something else completely differently, I think this idea of working with metal and of taking recycled metal and transforming it into something else was kind of always part of my psyche and part of my blood.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:07:26):

I probably changed the transmission on the car for the first time when I was like under five-years-old. So, I think-

Bryan Smith (00:07:32):

Oh my goodness.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:07:32):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:07:32):

That's crazy.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:07:35):

I know, my mother wasn't so happy about that, but my father used to put us on his chest and go under a car and work on it. So, I think this idea of working with metal was just always part of my unconscious. And I went to art school, I went to Smith college. I took some time off in the middle and did artist residencies throughout Latin America. And I think during that period of time I was really thinking about: What is my framework and what is my context as an artist? And what do I want to be thinking about, what do I want to be reacting to?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:08:13):

So, that was an important period of time for me, but it wasn't until I graduated college that I realized I wanted to start melting down guns. And for me, that really began with the Orlando Pulse club shooting. I'm gay, I'm Latina, and I had always felt very unsafe in Latin America and very naively safe in the United States. And I really felt like Orlando was a big wake up call. I mean, how many times have I danced to reggaetón in a gay club? Like, I can't even count, over the thousands. And how many times have I felt completely safe and completely at home in a gay Latinex nightclub? Again, so many times. So, I really felt like it was this moment in my artwork where I knew that I had to respond to the tragedy which had occurred. But there were so many things I felt, like on one level, how could I even respond to such a horrific and unimaginable act of violence?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:09:17):

How could I make art work and respond to that? How could I create something which was both healing and transformational, and also in some ways brought justice to those people who had lost their lives. And so I really, when thinking about, how did I want it to react to this event? I decided to take, to buy a sig MCX rifle, which is the exact model of rifle that was used by the shooter. And to melt it down and turn it into 49 Liberty bells for the 49 individuals who lost their lives that night. And that was really the beginning of a huge body of work for me.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:10:02):

And I decided that I wanted to work- I wanted to make Liberty bells, because in Latin American culture, when someone dies, you ring a bell in order to resurrect the dead and pay homage their souls. And I think there was something really appealing about this idea of taking objects of violence and objects which had caused hate, and trying to force them into a bell. Right? A bell can also be a form of celebration. It can be a way of, a sort of sonic assimilation with joy, but also with memory and with happiness and with mourning. And so all of those things, I really felt like there was a beauty to casting these bells out of bullets, out of guns. And at the same time I was having a conversation with my mother after the shooting happened. And she said, "I think you might want to cast Liberty bells, because a Liberty bell, it's not only the symbol of the United States." It's a symbol why people immigrate here, this idea of freedom, but it's also the symbol used by the NRA.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:11:20):

And in Spanish there's a phrase, "doble filo," double-edged sword. And I really felt like that was the double-edged sword of gun control in this country. The fact that the one thing which all of our families want to immigrate to this country for, because of the idea of freedom was the same symbol and the same idea, that was allowing all of these people to use it in order to support second amendment rights. So, the Liberty bell just really stuck with me and that's how I cast. That's how I began making this type of work. And that's how I began casting bells out of guns and bullets.

Bryan Smith (00:12:03):

It's profound, and there's so many different interpretations too, of the bell. And I'm glad you brought up the NRA connection, because I think that makes it a little more provocative too. And I think that's important for art to be provocative; sometimes, not always, but to have a sort of a counter narrative to push against the narrative that we've heard for decades from the NRA, about what Liberty means. And if, for instance, you're- And I come from a town, Yakima, you may be familiar with Yakima.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:12:43):

Yes...

Bryan Smith (00:12:43):

But I come from a town which is very politically aligned with the NRA, typically. A lot of gun racks, a lot of flag-waving, truck-driving, Patriot type of people here. And I am not saying that flippantly or disrespectfully, it's just the way it is here. A lot of people are pro gun, but I think sometimes symbols get co-opted by movements. And in this might be a way to take that symbol back and also, in a provocative way, make people think. Think what is Liberty when you say, well, you put a limitation on purchases of guns, whether it's a criminal background check or whatever the limitation is. And they say, "Well, that's taking away my freedom." Yet here you are, a gay Latina woman, who thought it was safe in America, or at least safer in America than it was in South America. But you no longer feel safe and that's not freedom either. I mean, that's the definition of tyranny, where you don't feel safe in your own home. You don't feel safe in a cafe or a club. And so, I think we need to really start redefining, or at least opening up that dialogue of what freedom means. And I was- Liberty Bell's really, I mean, I've looked at a lot of your work and those bells, I think, accomplish that. So...

Stephanie Mercedes (00:14:20):

Yeah, I also think that, it's very interesting because I've had a lot of exchanges with people who have very different views on gun control than I do, through my work. And sometimes, just randomly, people that are walking, passing through my studio- Of course, in a pre-COVID world. And I think, in some ways, it's interesting because my work tends to be, it's very soft. It's very soft and gentle and not aggressive, and it's kind of this alternative form of protest. And I think because of that, and because of the softness of the pieces, it allows for a sort of different conversation to begin and to emerge. I've had people who experience my work and they love it. And then learn the secret behind the piece, that the piece is made out of it. Or they walk closer

to the bells and they read the names of the victims on the bells, and that they're cast out of a rifle, out of an assault weapon.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:15:20):

And sometimes they're members of the NRA. Sometimes they have very different views on gun control than I do. But I think that, because we're entering the conversation through this language of art, they're thinking about it emotionally rather than intellectually. And it creates a very different space and I'm actually, I'm so interested in what that means. And I I actually just wrote a grant with one of my friends, who runs an organization called IssueVoter. And IssueVoter is this amazing platform that allows people to be informed about bills and reach out directly to the representatives, if they are support or don't support a bill. It's amazing, because it's apparently one of the most effective ways for any individual in the United States to directly make sure that their voice is heard and to directly impact change.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:16:12):

And so, what we're going to do is, we're basically gonna facilitate these conversations using art as a medium with people who have opposing views. And the first one is going to be about pending gun control legislation. And it's going to be with a variety of people, maybe with someone who might be in your hometown, and then maybe who has different views on gun control. And then also maybe someone who lives in DC and believes that all guns should be abolished. And I think it's really important to have these conversations right now, especially because we live in such a bipartisan world. And I think that art can really be the sort of language and the space of mediation for those conversations to be had. And I'm always surprised by how open people are to my work.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:17:05):

I just cast a harp out of bullets. I learned how to make harp strings out of bullet casings. And I had to interview this woman who's a professional harpist, and it turns out that her family are members of the NRA. And I didn't learn that until after I made the piece. And I said, "Well, why do you want to work with me? You know what my intentions are, even if they're not so intense, but..." And she said, "Well, at the end of the day, I think that your work is about humanity and how could I think it's okay for any person to die unnecessarily?" And I really love that, you know?

Bryan Smith (00:17:45):

Yeah.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:17:46):

And I also feel like, coming from someone who- I have spent- I mean, it's kind of funny. My day job is literally like taking apart rifles, you know? And I have spent so much time taking these rifles apart. I think there's a really big difference between a hunting rifle that has an RPM of, let's say, like one a minute. And it's this antique hunting rifle, which is engraved and handmade and super, super slow in contrast to an AK 47 with a bump stock. There's a big difference right there.

So, what I also say to people who have, who do believe in the Liberty bell as a form of second amendment rights, and they don't want those second amendment rights to be taken away. I was- I think it's fine if people want to have that hunting rifle with a slow RPM, but do you need to have a really fast glock with the bump stock? Do you need to have an AK-47 with a bump stock? That's a different story. But you know, I do hope that artwork, and my artwork in general, will create spaces for those conversations, because we really need to have them right now, especially in this country.

Bryan Smith (00:18:56):

Yeah. I think, the way I would describe what art does like yours, not only does it create a space, but it's almost a portal. Like a safe place portal to reach people, as you say, emotionally as opposed to intellectually. It's easy to get those two confused too, because I think a lot of what we see on Facebook when people post a meme on whatever side they're on it comes from a very emotional place. It comes from a place of anger. But if the emotion, if you're listening to bells, or you're looking at these bells hanging from an installation, and you realize how much work went into what you did and also the place within you that this came from; it did not come from a place of hate. You're not holding a picket sign or saying, "Fuck the NRA," or whatever. Your message is a very soft message. And that's the great thing about art like yours, is you're coming at something from a completely different angle. And I think it can catch people by surprise. They can be caught off guard, like, "Wait a minute, I'm actually connecting with this."

Stephanie Mercedes (00:20:15):

Yeah, yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:20:17):

"And I'm, I don't know why I am, because I'm a big second amendment person, but I'm really connecting with it." And that's what's so special about your project.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:20:26):

Yeah, and I think, and again, I can't tell you the number of times people, sometimes fellow artists where they are like, "Well, I have different, very different views on gun control, but I also love your work." And I think that speaks to, sometimes I think that people mistaken issues of humanity with politics. And I do believe it's important to- You can influence politics as an artist, but sometimes I think people get confused at the end of the day. If it's about people, the value of their lives, and if they can remain to be alive, that's a question of humanity. And I think that, at the end of the day, that's what I want my work to be about.

Bryan Smith (00:21:14):

Your work on the Orlando project, the Pulse nightclub shooting that inspired you to do that first piece of gun melting work that you've done. Have you had any conversations with survivors of that shooting, and seeing their reaction to it? Or family members who may have seen your work?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:21:36):

Yeah, so I was actually- I have a... So part of my practice too, is I'm very into performance. And specifically participatory performance, which just means that a lot of times they make these large-scale installations made out of melted bullets or guns, and then I like to choreograph musical performances around them, which sometimes involve choirs and dance. And I like to sort of involve the audience as much as possible. And the reason why I do that is, because I feel like my work is about people who have died and I hope that my practice can always return back to the live body.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:22:15):

And in this case with Pulse, I always wanted this particular piece to always return back to the live queer body. Right? And so, after I made the Ring of Freedom, which is the 49 Liberty bells cast out of the sig MCX rifle, I decided to also choreograph a performance, which is called The Last Song. And it's called The Last Song, because the shooting happened in the middle of a nightclub, which means that these people were dancing. And in the middle of dancing, in the middle of celebrating, in the middle of listening to music, that's when they took their last breaths. And so in this performance, I'm essentially finishing the last song, which should have, but could not finish.

Bryan Smith (00:23:01):

I saw that by the way.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:23:03):

I'm so glad.

Bryan Smith (00:23:04):

Very moving, yeah.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:23:05):

Yeah. And so, I've re-performed it a couple of times and each time, a little bit differently. And I was invited to re-perform it at a anti gun violence concert here in DC, at the National United Methodist Church last fall. And it was really special, because they had the piece suspended from- I don't even know how tall it was. It was this enormous vaulted ceiling. And then we did the performance with a hundred person choir. And I got really lucky, because one of my friends was doing a residency in Baltimore very close to DC, and she called me and she was like, "Mercedes, I have someone you have to meet, you have to meet this person." And so, I invited the person out to come see the piece. And it turns out that this individual had survived the pulse club shooting.

Bryan Smith (00:24:01):

Oh my goodness.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:24:02):

And it was just kind of this amazing moment, because she's also a photographer, she's a very talented photographer. She also has a beautiful voice, but, at the end of the day, all of these pieces that I have been making are really for her. It's about feeling like there's this small ounce of justice in the world, but she also said something which was so intense for me, is that she was like, "I so easily could have been one of those bells," which is hanging in front of her. And so, I'm really glad that I got to see, that I got to meet her and that she got to experience the work and that it meant so much to her.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:24:45):

And then, the other thing that I also learned from her is that, in Pulse there were actually multiple dance floors happening all at the same time, which means that there were multiple last songs. So, the performance which I have done so far is to a Shakira song, which was one of the songs that was playing, but it turns out that there was also a song by Drake that was playing. And so, I hope at some point to also, again do another iteration of this last song performance, but to do it with this individual who survived Orlando, because she also happens to have a beautiful voice. And it's really crazy, because in the song some of the lyrics of the Drake song are, "I pray to make it back in one piece. I pray, I pray." Which is, that's just crazy.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:25:37):

So, I think, I always think as an artist that your practice sometimes knows more about what you're doing than you do. And the best thing to do is just try to follow your practice. And I feel like meeting her was just a continuation of my practice, really knowing what's going on. And I also hope, at some point in the fall, I want to make her a camera cast out of melted bullets, which will be fully functional. So, the world just has a way of making sure you meet the right people and that everything comes full circle.

Bryan Smith (00:26:13):

Wow. You're going to make a camera, a fully functioning camera? That is pretty ambitious.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:26:20):

So, I mean, I think that I'm always like this, but I think a big part of my work is conceptually deciding, okay, what do I want to do? And sometimes it's the craziest idea in the whole world. And then afterwards I have to sit down and I have to think, okay, how can I actually do this? And all of my pieces have been like this. When I decided I was going to melt down the sig MCX rifle, I mean, I was living in New York at the time and I started calling foundries and they were like, "Lady, you are crazy. You think that we are going to let you take an assault rifle and put it in our industry-level Foundry kiln, like no way in hell." But it took me a year to make that piece, but I eventually figured it out.

Bryan Smith (00:27:02):

Did you have to make your own kiln?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:27:04):

Yeah, all of the pieces since then I've made my own kiln, but for that one piece, it was such a big rifle that I ended up getting really lucky. There was the New York Art Foundry, which has since shut down. I was able to convince her to let me melt the rifle there. And then we got a jeweler to make all of the molds. And so, that was, there was like this combination of trying to convince her to do it, and also trying to teach myself at the same time. And so, after that piece, now I make everything myself. But it was really intense. And part of the intensity was the fact that she kept on freaking out. She thought I was gonna blow up.

Bryan Smith (00:27:46):

Even if you show that it's a- There's no bullets in the chamber and all that?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:27:55):

Part of the issue, of when you're melting down metal on a big scale is, of course, it's not even an issue of gunpowder. Gunpowder is very bad, obviously. I mean, I clean all of the bullets specially, you have to dry them. But melting metal it's a very fickle art, and it's a very fickle chemistry.

Bryan Smith (00:28:16):

Okay. That makes sense. Yeah.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:28:19):

And part of the issue is that you just don't want to have one alloy, which has a little bit of a higher melting point than another alloy. And again, a gun is very often like a mutt dog. Like, you have no idea what's in it, but we got lucky. A sig MCX rifle is surprising, is one of the few guns of its size in the world. It's made mostly out of aluminum, and that's because it is the civilian equivalent to an AK 47. And if you are in the military, you're working out every day, you're super strong and you have the capability to hold something which is really heavy. And a sig MCX rifle is made for people who are not in the military, they're civilians. And so it's supposed to be lighter and easier to use, which is kind of crazy. But yeah... A lot of times I just think of something totally insane, and then I have to figure out how to do it. But the beauty of art, and the beauty of metal smithing and a blacksmith thing, is that almost anything is possible. Which is amazing. So, fingers crossed, I will be making a camera out of melted bullets and hopefully it'll be fully functional.

Bryan Smith (00:29:32):

Film camera or DSLR?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:29:34):

Oh, I think we're going to go for a film. I don't think I'm ready for a DSLR. I think that would be like a lifetime project. But yeah, but I think a film would be really cool.

Bryan Smith (00:29:47):

As you may have noticed, there are great resources and advice mentioned in all our episodes. And for many of them, we actually collect all of these resources for you in one easy place: our newsletter! You can go to dreampathpod.com/newsletter to join. It's not fancy, just an email about each week's episode, featured artists, and resources to help you on your journey. Now, back to the interview.

Bryan Smith (00:30:12):

So, you told us about your experience changing transmissions and dismantling transmissions at age five. So, you obviously have this technical knowledge that probably translates really well into metal smithing. What else did you have to do in terms of education and classes and reading to really get up to speed to do what you do now?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:30:37):

Well, to be honest, it's really difficult because metal smithing and blacksmithing are they're really dying. It's a dying art form. It's something that is- I was an artist in residence recently at Montgomery college, and I could not believe they have a jewelry studio. And it's really one of the few universities in the area that has a small Foundry set up. And, oh my god, I was just like drooling over all of the equipment they had. It was beautiful, and I had nothing like that when I was a student. So, it is a little bit sad. It's a dying art form. Not a lot of people are studying it anymore. Not a lot of people are learning how to do it. And then, on top of that, if you're trying to force metal to make sound that's even harder. I mean, casting is one thing, but then trying to force it to- Trying to take this material, trying to cast it and then to force it to make a beautiful sound, it's like a whole new level of difficulty. But one that I enjoy the challenge and I think that, to be honest, a lot of I'm super self-taught. And a lot of the things which I learned, I have learned off of YouTube.

Bryan Smith (00:31:55):

Wow. That's great.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:31:55):

Which is really funny, but there's a lot of back home people making their own kilns YouTube videos. And I do a lot of sand molds, which are- It's a beautiful medium, because the object tends to be super organic. And it's really cheap. It's easy to do, you add oil, you can remix it. But a lot of what I've learned has been off of YouTube, which is really strange and funny, but it's worked, so far it's worked. And I've also gotten really lucky. I mean, normally what I do is, I have to- Let's say I want to make, for instance, harp strings out of melted bullets. What I have to do is, I have to reach out to a professional harpist and then I have to find someone who knows how to make harp strings.

Bryan Smith (00:32:47):

Aren't those usually nylon or gut or something like that?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:32:51):

Yeah. So they're normally cat gut, like violin strings, but the Celtic harp is actually cast out of brass.

Bryan Smith (00:32:58):
Oh, ok, yes.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:32:59):
Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now I know way too much about harps, but...

Bryan Smith (00:33:04):
I interviewed a harpist, by the way.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:33:07):
Oh, that's so cool.

Bryan Smith (00:33:07):
Yeah. Chris Kincade, if you want to go back and listen to it, it's a good interview.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:33:11):
Oh, I should. I should listen to it.

Bryan Smith (00:33:14):
Yeah.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:33:14):
Yeah, so a lot of times I just, I have to figure out how to do it myself. And I am super excited. I'm going to be a graduate fellow at the University of Maryland starting in September. And what I'm going to be learning there is basically how to do everything which I do now, but on a much bigger scale. So, instead of casting, let's say a gong, which weighs like 50 pounds. How can I cast a gong, which weighs a thousand pounds, how can I work on a much bigger scale?

Bryan Smith (00:33:45):
Hmm. Have a team of people helping you?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:33:48):
Yes.

Bryan Smith (00:33:48):
Yeah. Well, that's what I see in the glass blowing world, because I've interviewed a glassblower and a neon artist as well. Dan Friday's a glassblower from the Lumi tribe. But what I've noticed about glassblowing is it's a- 'cause you're working with high temperatures, probably be very similar to metal smithing. High temperatures, there's a limited window of time to do certain things that are really important to get what you want out of this material. So, it requires a team of

people. And I would imagine that, having that, being a fellow and having other students who want to learn and kind of help you do this would be immensely beneficial.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:34:30):

Yeah, yeah. You know it will be beneficial. There gets to a point, like right now I have a- So your crucible is what you put the metal in, and it's basically made out of graphite. It's made out of the same thing that the tip of your pencil is made out of. So, that starts out black and then it will go up to about 2000 degrees. And then that's what you use to pour into your mold, which you've made beforehand. And so, I have different sized crucibles and kilns, but right now my, when I'm casting really big things, I have my girlfriend help me, because it's too heavy for one person to carry. So, we cast big stuff. But yeah, I mean, I think that the beauty of metal is that a lot of times the equipment is not very expensive.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:35:19):

And the mold making, if you're not working in lost wax, it also can be very cheap. But it's all about learning how to do this stuff. And the other thing is that it's dangerous. It's really dangerous. I mean, I wear a leather apron. I wear the same thing that firefighters wear over their hair and a face shield. And like, gracias a Dios, nothing has happened so far, but you always want to be protected in case something goes wrong. And there's YouTube videos of guys doing pours, and then they sweat, and the sweat goes down their leather apron, goes into the crucible and the whole thing explodes. And imagine... So, when you start working on a bigger scale, everything just becomes more dangerous. Which is not a bad thing. It adds to the beauty of the work. But you definitely have to be a little more careful.

Bryan Smith (00:36:14):

So, can you tell our listeners, how do you make a living doing what you do? Because I would imagine that you're probably self-employed, so you're on your own and it's a hustle to figure out a way to get paid fairly for your work. It sounds like you have fellowships that you've landed with various schools over the years, and you have one coming up. Does that mean in a fellowship that, I really don't know what a fellowship is, but does that mean that a school has certain funds that are available for artists to help teach their students for a year, and also get the benefit of the studio and that type of thing?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:37:03):

Yeah, so I would say a big part of being an artist, especially I would say more experimental artist, is residencies and grants and fellowships. So, the one that I'm going to have at University of Maryland three year fellowship, I'll be there. I will do some assistant teaching. But basically they'll pay me to make my work and to help a little bit around. But I think that's a big part of being a professional artist is, I moved to DC because I was invited to be an artist in residence at Halcyon Arts Lab, which is an amazing space here. They give you an apartment and a studio and a stipend, and you just basically make your work for a year.

Bryan Smith (00:37:46):

And then, once you make the work, are you allowed to sell it and profit from that work? Or do you have to...?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:37:52):

Yeah, yeah. No, no no, yeah, you can sell it. And so I would say that, when you graduate from school, one of the big issues of art school is that they're not going to teach you any of this. There's very little of the business side of things or the actual practical things, which is not so helpful.

Bryan Smith (00:38:10):

Same thing in law school, same thing in law school. They don't teach you anything about practicing law.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:38:16):

That's so funny actually, you know, I did an art and law program.

Bryan Smith (00:38:18):

Oh really?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:38:18):

Yeah, in New York. So, because my mother was a lawyer, I was always super interested in this idea of artists manipulating legal structures as a student. And so, I wrote some contracts as works of art. And when I graduated from university, I moved to New York and there's a program there in Brooklyn called the art and law program, which is like a year long program. And so, I went through that which I really loved. I actually have this other body- So, part of my work is melting down guns and bullet casings. And the other part of my work is really responding to Argentinian history, and trying to think about the history of the disappeared during the Argentine dictatorship and how can that history be kept alive and remain vibrant. Despite a lot of times it's nil. And so I have this big project, which I feel like is just going to be ongoing for a long period of time. And it's in response to pending copyright legislation, which if passed, would basically make a lot of the images, which document this horrific period of time where 30,000 people disappeared because of the military regime, it would make all of those images, which are currently in the public domain, become privatized.

Bryan Smith (00:39:38):

Yeah, I saw that online. What another ambitious project, I mean, you're changing- I mean, talk about art and law and how that, I'm sure that your art and law experience helped you with that vision because, well, why don't you just tell listeners what you did with those images to try to preserve them, while also not violating copyrights and being able to preserve them for future generations?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:40:06):

Right. So, in United States copyright is 70 years post production, which means, or post-mortem. Which means, after the artist or the photographer dies- And currently in Argentina it's 30 years post-production, which is after I make a work of art or after you take an image or whatever the case might be. And so, the pending legislation would change it from post-production to post-mortem, which should be a good thing for individual photographers and artists, because it basically means they have the right to their work for a longer period of time. However, in the case of the Argentinian dictatorship it's very particular, because a lot of the people who documented this horrific and brutal, and mostly covered up, violent history in Argentina were photographers who themselves disappeared. And one of the horrible loopholes in Argentina is that if you disappeared, you do not have a death date, and you do not have the legal rights to death.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:41:07):

So, if all of these images, if the legislation is passed and all of these images will essentially become retroactively privatized by the state, and they'll be inaccessible to the public at large. And so, what I'm doing is, I'm taking these images which have been photographed by photographers who themselves disappeared, and I'm altering them in four ways. So, I'm cropping them, I'm layering them, I'm reverting them back into a negative, and I'm changing a little bit of the contrast of the images, so that I personally can copyright the images and then donate them back into the public domain. Which sounds super complicated, but essentially what I'm trying to do is just create this, is to kind of, sort of sidestep and both use the law at the same time, and create this archive images which will permanently and forever be accessible to the Argentinian public.

Bryan Smith (00:42:06):

That's amazing. That, I mean, going back to your original statement, I think of something that's insane and I just figure out how to do it. I mean, look what you've done, I mean, that is so crazy ambitious and so cool, because what's happening is a coverup of history. And a horrific chapter of history I didn't know a lot- I mean, I learned about los desaparecidos, I think they're referred to by my Spanish teacher Señor Chama in college. And I remember him telling us the story of that horrific chapter, I think it was like '76 to '83 or something.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:42:47):

Yep, yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:42:47):

And he was crying, telling the story, 'cause I think he was Argentinian. And that was it though. There wasn't- In American history books, you don't see a lot about that chapter. And perhaps it's because it's a different country, it's far away, but that is very recent history. And I mean, if you look what's happening in terms of the strong man governments that are happening in Brazil and in America even, we need this type of history and we need those pictures, like you're trying to preserve. So, thank you for doing that

Stephanie Mercedes (00:43:25):

Well, and I always say that it's really something that should be taught in American history, because the United States was very largely responsible for allowing the disappearances to happen. The US government propped up the Argentinian and the Chilean dictators at the same time. There's clear evidence, which I've included in my archive, that they sent a huge amount of funds to buy military supplies for the dictatorship. And they also sat right next to the dictator during the world cup in 1978 in Buenos Aires, which was the height of los desaparecidos.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:44:05):

So, it's a very, it's a dark period of time. And also the very issue of a disappearance. And sometimes I think of these two bodies of work of mine as totally separate, but at the end of the day, I think they're both trying to think about rituals of mourning, and how there's so much justice associated with having the right to mourn, and having right to mourn and to reconcile and to find justice through artwork. And with this archive, I mean, imagine if you have a loved one and that loved one disappeared, you never have a body. You never have a body to mourn. Argentina is a very Christian, very Catholic country. And Catholicism, it's all about the body; you bury the body. And so I think that's, there's so much tragedy to that. And if the bodies of the disappeared are effaced, then how are people, how are students, how are historians, how are regular individuals who learn later on in life that they, that someone in their family disappeared, how are they supposed to to understand, and to acknowledge this history? And, I remember the last time I was in Argentina, I was in the the national archives of Argentina. And it's very similar here in United States.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:45:26):

I have an aunt who works at national archives where they have a picture of the president and essentially the views of the national archive, and what is seen in the national archive is a reflection of whoever is in power at the time. And I was there, and I had already been there before, but it was a different president at the time. And I'm talking to the researcher about what I'm looking for, and she tells me in Spanish, she was like, "If you want to find more images about what supposedly happened during this period of time, you can go to this other archive." But here was, like the head researcher of the national archives of Argentina basically denying this entire period of time, and this entire history had happened. That's so it's so tragic.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:46:17):

And I think that sometimes artists and art really need to remind people both of the tragedies of the past and how they relate to the present. If you, and I think that it connects to the gun melting down work, because if I tell you 112 people die from gun violence in this country every day, maybe that means nothing to you. Maybe it's water which goes off your back. But if you see 112 bells cast out of bullets, maybe -and you would listen to them chime, and then you see them accumulate more and more- maybe that's, you develop a different relationship to that number. It becomes more real. And I think that's so important.

Bryan Smith (00:47:04):

Yeah, yeah. Each of those bells is a voice that is being heard by who was ever in the room or watching the video online. It's a very profound way to give a voice to the disappeared or to shooting victims. I think the disappeared have been represented through lockets. I've seen that in your work too.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:47:30):

Yes. Yeah, so I have a body of work, which is called Los Relicrios. And one of the most poetic things about this period of time in Argentina is that the first people to speak out against the regime were really mothers, and then later grandmothers who had lost their children and whose children had disappeared. And so, they're now referred to as las madres de la Plaza de Mayo, or las abuelas. And now we have, of course, hijos and hijas, as time has passed on. And they were the first people to walk into the streets and to truly protest, and protest during a time when protesting may mean that you disappear, which is so brave. And one of the things they used to do, is they used to protest both wearing lockets of their loved ones and also holding lockets in their hands. And I found that by going through the personal archive of a photographer who really focused on documenting them.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:48:31):

And I really just, I loved that, because in the same way that I think that my bells are kind of this alternative form of protest, I felt like they were taking this thing, which is so soft and intimate, something which you normally wear close to your chest. It's normally very personal and intimate. You wear it under your clothes, it's this emotional, raw, feminine thing. And they were taking that in order to speak truth to power. And I love that. So, the installation is a thousand lockets and each one of them have their own individual lights. So they basically act like little light boxes. And some of them don't have any faces, because we don't have faces for everyone who disappeared, and some of them have faces of the disappeared. And part of the installation is song and it's me re-singing the song of the mothers and the abuelas. So, it kind of comes through the ceiling that the lockets are suspended.

Bryan Smith (00:49:36):

This is a crazy question, it could be a total coincidence, but I was looking up the history of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. And there is a name for one of the founders of that group, María Mercedes. And I was just wondering if there's any relation to you?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:49:54):

Oh, no, I'm not related to her, but Mercedes is a super common name in Latin America.

Bryan Smith (00:50:01):

Might be like Smith in America.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:50:03):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:50:05):

Bryan Smith. So, have you found that through your work when you go, 'cause you have family in Argentina, right?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:50:12):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:50:13):

When you go back or even when you're in American, in DC, do you ever hear about pushback from government officials or folks who are sympathetic to the Argentine government about your work? And whether you're getting positive feedback, negative feedback, concern about how vocal you are, anything like that?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:50:37):

I mean, I think that in some ways it's kind of similar to these conversations with people who have different views on gun control. One of the things that always surprises me is that, no matter where I am in the world, I can be in the United States, I can be in Europe, if I'm somehow presenting the work or showing the work, doing a performance, there is always somebody in the audience who either lost someone during the dictatorship, has a family member who is one of the disappeared, or knows someone else who is. And so, I guess I feel that there's something important about this aspect. That a lot of times, no matter wherever I am in the world, there's someone who personally connects to the work. And I think that it's this interesting thing, right?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:51:27):

Where, like I was just recently talking to one of my friends who works for a cultural organization here in DC. And she was like, "Mercedes, we have to get your work. Like, we want to do a big public project outside." And she was like, "But we can't do the gun melting stuff, because it's too relevant to right now. So we should do the disappeared stuff." Which is so funny because, she's thinking, oh, it's history, it's less political. And of course, it's not less political, you know? So, it really depends on who you're talking to and what their understanding is of the history. At the same time, like I had a meeting with a museum the last time I was in Argentina and they were like, "We love your work. It's beautiful, but we have to wait like five years before we can show it until there's a regime change."

Stephanie Mercedes (00:52:12):

So, and I think I'm always constantly surprised how people can deny that 30,000 people disappeared, that makes zero sense to me. But it's also part of the violence of the era, is that there are no clear numbers. There's no clear fact sheet, right? Everything was burned. The few images that we have from inside of the torture centers are literally because the photographers used to put them, used to risk their lives, put them inside of books and sew them inside of clothing for when they came back outside. And that's how we still have some of the original negatives. And I have another body of work, which is called Desplazamiento, and it's this huge,

basically it's an installation, society-specific installation. And what I do is, I build in the gallery floor about a 60 foot long pond with real water in it.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:53:13):

And then I have a machine above the pond, which has negatives and the negatives that are slowly fluttering from the ceiling of the gallery into the pond. And that's because during the dictatorship, one of the ways that they used to get rid of bodies was they used to throw them into the ocean, into Rio de la Plata. And in Argentina, there's an area called Parque de la Memoria. So, it's like the space that remembers the people who lost their lives. And the mythology is that there's so many people who were dropped into Rio de la Plata that the sea level rose slightly during the era of the dictatorship. And so, That's why this piece, which I have is called Desplazamiento, because like the bodies which once fell, the negatives are slowly fluttering into this body of water and displacing in the sea.

Bryan Smith (00:54:05):

Yeah. I saw that online too. And what an image that fisher in the floor that you have, it's a really profound image and also message too. And if people are interested in that history, if you look up just Google, 'Argentine dirty war,' that's what the CIA refers to it as, the dirty war. Lots of history on it. Probably don't want to get your history from the CIA completely, but that's a starting point. Then there's Wikipedia, and then there's probably a lot of good books on it too. But yeah, it's also interesting. I mean, you talk about the unwillingness to accept that the disappeared, that it even occurred. And I think that really lines up with what's happening right now in the world, the willingness to disregard history, to disregard what's happening.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:55:07):

Yeah, yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:55:07):

Right before your eyes.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:55:08):

Especially in the United States right now. Yeah.

Bryan Smith (00:55:10):

Sort of the Orwellian, it's very Orwellian to see it happening in real time. And, but then you go back and you realize that this is not new. This is a phenomenon that's just unfortunately been part of our humanity, our collective humanity for hundreds of years.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:55:29):

Well, and I think that's actually one of the reasons that art is so important. There is an artist who, he did it last year, but he basically recreated one of the largest slave rebellions that ever happened in New Orleans and which, I mean, it was amazing. Like talk about an epic work of art, it was really, really enormous. And I think similarly, sometimes I have conversations with

people in this country and they're just like, "No, the past was the past. What are you talking about reparations? Like, why is that important?" And it's like, which is so difficult to have a conversation with, but then if you have these works of art, which allow for people to maybe have a better understanding, understand the true tragedy, or to maybe open up the section of their brain which is like closed-off intellectually and to open it emotionally. Hopefully they can understand a little bit more, the history. And I think that- Because, of course, history constantly repeats itself and history is so relevant to the present and there's no way that we can deny history. And the injustices of history will constantly follow us as a nation, as a people. And I truly believe that art can be this kind of funny gray area where people can enter into it and experience history in a different way, and hopefully learn for the better.

Bryan Smith (00:57:08):

Thank you so much for your time. I just have a couple of followup questions that are a little more practical, maybe. If you're giving advice to a room full of high school, students who have aspirations to create art in some way, is art school something that you would recommend? You've been through art school, but it sounds like you're doing something different than what you learned in art school. So, how important was it for you and do you recommend it to other kids?

Stephanie Mercedes (00:57:38):

So it's funny. So I am just starting to start my own podcast called La Valentina. And it's a queer Latinex podcast and you know, it's just me and another one of my friends hanging out and talking about, what does it mean to be an artist? And we talk exactly about this for an hour, because art school is so difficult. And I think that, for me personally, I learned a lot more things from doing artist residencies at a young age, starting probably at like age 19 or 20. Because I was surrounded by professional artists who are full time artists, they were about 10 to 15 years older than me, and they were really doing it and they already had full established practices. And I think being around them was like the best form of education I ever could have had.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:58:26):

You know, this is how they price their work, this is how they got commissions, this is how they sold their work. And that was really valuable. I think that, to be honest, I think it is very much a privilege to go to art school. I was very lucky, I got a a big fellowship. I would say that if you want to go to art school, go to Cooper Union. It's in New York city, it's completely free, it's one of the best schools in the country. If you want to go to art school, I would say go to there. But the life of an artist is so hard. You have to be willing to die for your work. It's really intense. You have to really, really love what you're doing. So no, I would say if you want to go to art school, go to Cooper Union.

Bryan Smith (00:59:12):

Not many free schools out there to choose from probably, but that sounds great. And then you don't have that student loan burden to deal with after you graduate.

Stephanie Mercedes (00:59:23):

Yeah. I think that the, really the best thing for an emerging artist to do is that you need to develop a a comprehensive body of work. Which can be really hard, right? You have to figure out, what are you interested in, what do you want to do? Develop your body of work. If you need to learn techniques, learn techniques, but also just go to workshops, go do artist residencies. You will meet other people who will who will help you so much. And you'll meet curators, cultural organizers, individuals who will support your practice, because what you need as an artist is you need a village of people who believe in you.

Bryan Smith (01:00:00):

So, it sounds like that tribe and community is really important. Just finding your people.

Stephanie Mercedes (01:00:06):

Yeah. You need someone who -and they don't have to be in the art world- but you need a group of people who really believe in what you do and will fight for what you do alongside you.

Bryan Smith (01:00:18):

Nice. One more practical question. You live in Washington, DC. Where are the hubs in America that are most conducive to finding your community and your tribe, and also succeeding in the art world?

Stephanie Mercedes (01:00:35):

Well, I mean, I lived in New York before I came to DC, and I was actually... Immediately after I graduated from university I was like, all of my friends were working as art professors and they were making no money. So, I was like, I can't work in the arts, it's going to be a disaster. So, I started working as a sailor in New York which I really loved.

Bryan Smith (01:00:59):

What's that?

Stephanie Mercedes (01:00:59):

I was working for a sailing company, so I was sailing,

Bryan Smith (01:01:03):

Oh, actual sailing. I thought you meant like sales or something.

Stephanie Mercedes (01:01:09):

No, no. So I was, I mean, basically what I would do is I would work as a full-time sailor in New York during the summertime. And then I would do artist residencies the rest of the year. And then, because this fellowship in DC, I was able to transition to being a full time artist all year round. But I thought, "Oh, I should go to New York. That's what you do as an artist." But it was a horrible idea, because it's so oversaturated with artists, right? There's an artist like every square foot or something. And I think that as an artist, it doesn't matter where you are. I mean, you

need to be surrounded by a couple of people who also can support your creative vision, but it's not good to be in a place where there's more artists than there is like dogs or something, you know? And New York's also very difficult, because it's a particular type of artist. I don't make sexy male art, I don't 3D print beer cans, my work is a little bit different. And I think that I also truly believe that, for every single artist, there is a city that makes the amount of- That makes perfect sense. You know?

Bryan Smith (01:02:18):

It's going to be unique to them.

Stephanie Mercedes (01:02:20):

Yeah. And I think that, maybe there's a different artist who's not me, and New York is perfect. They want to make sexy male art and they want to 3D print beer cans, and that's fine. And I think that, for me, what's unique about DC is that there's more lawyers, politicians, activists that come through my studio than quote unquote art people, but that's super conducive to my practice, right? A big part of my practice is that I work with the DC department of forensic science. So, a lot of the guns that I melt down, come through there after they've gone through forensic evidence, which takes a couple of years, and that's a huge part of my work. And I don't- That would definitely not be possible in New York city, or maybe any other place, because there's such a valuable connection in between culture, art, and politics in the city.

Stephanie Mercedes (01:03:13):

And that just happens to be the sort of right niche for me. And the other thing I would say too, is that it's very important that you live in a place that values art. So, one of the things that's very unique about DC is that they have grants for artists which are fellowship programs, public art grants, and it's really, really well funded. So, in New York city, you can apply to like an NEA grant, which I think is like \$7,000, but you only get to get it like once in your lifetime. And in DC, there's so many grants which are available for you know, not just quote unquote artists, but musicians, cultural producers, and they're available on a yearly basis. And that makes a huge difference as a creative.

Bryan Smith (01:03:54):

Oh, that's great information. Mercedes it's been so fun and informative to talk to you.

Stephanie Mercedes (01:04:01):

Oh, it was my pleasure. Yeah.

Bryan Smith (01:04:04):

Can you tell us where people can find you online and social media?

Stephanie Mercedes (01:04:09):

Yeah. So my website is stephaniemercedes.com and Mercedes is spelled just like the car. And and then my Instagram is [mercedes_theartist](https://www.instagram.com/mercedes_theartist).

Bryan Smith (01:04:21):

Awesome. Are you pretty active on Instagram?

Stephanie Mercedes (01:04:24):

I actually, before before the pandemic, I was not active on Instagram. And then the quarantine started and my girlfriend was like, "Okay, you have no choice. You have to start an Instagram." So, since COVID hit, I have been very active on Instagram and I'm better for it, yeah.

Bryan Smith (01:04:42):

Fantastic. Well, I'm really pleased to talk to someone with such a unique niche in this industry. And I encourage all of my listeners to go online, look at your work and do that history, do your homework on the Argentinian dirty war. It's really fascinating.

Stephanie Mercedes (01:05:03):

Yeah. Yeah. And if you go, actually, if you go to my website too, there's one section which is called excavating histories, and there's a bunch of also YouTube videos which go into the history of the dictatorship and in conjunction with my work.

Bryan Smith (01:05:17):

Awesome. Mercedes, thanks for being on the show.

Stephanie Mercedes (01:05:20):

Oh, thank you so much.

Bryan Smith (01:05:23):

Hey, thank you for listening and I hope you enjoy today's episode. If so, I have a favorite ask. Can you go to wherever you listen to podcasts and leave me a review? Your feedback is what keeps this podcast going. You can also check us out on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook with the handle @dreampathpod. And, as always go find your dream path.