

MIDTOWN OCTOBER 25, 2016 2:05 PM

# Word Portraits performance art explores the way our society communicates



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FU Gallery co-owner Miguel Ullivarri, artist Enrique Baeza and co-owner Valeria Fiñana at the opening reception of Word Portraits. **JOLSON DIAZ** - For the Miami Herald

BY CHRISTIAN PORTILLA

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Imagine telling some of your deep secrets to someone you just met? Now imagine doing that in front of an audience as part of a movement called Word Portraits.

Elena Fernandez spoke in front of an audience of 25 people as part of a performance piece Oct. 19 at FU Gallery in Little Haiti. For about 30 minutes, she talked about her relationship with her husband, her parents and friends and herself. The purpose is to highlight the channels of communication to get a deeper perspective through spoken language.

Spanish artist Enrique Baeza has been exploring the way societies speak since the popularity of social media began. He said the development of those channels, advancement in communication and technology has reversed the way people communicate. Through Word Portraits, he can gain a more profound understanding of people in a few moments after a few exchanges of questions than what most persons experience with long-term partners or relatives.

“I think in the last years the intimate language has faded. People talk like they’re in the movies, or in reality television and worse than superficial — with stereotypes,” Baeza said. “Donald Trump is a perfect example of this. Twenty years ago people probably wouldn’t have listened to his language thinking he is crazy, but now people say ‘it’s OK, it’s normal’ and for me, this is against common sense and the sanity of the people.”

Word Portraits is a series of 100 questions that vary depending on the answers. Baeza begins with a few queries, and as the person answers, he deducts the words that stand out and types them onto a word document in different sizes and colors. There's a screen projecting the text to the audience and the structure continues until Baeza gains an understanding of the person and determines who they are in about two to three words, creating the individuals "portrait."

The words eventually become neon signs where Baeza will create a collective piece intertwining all of the phrases to represent the unity of a collective conscious and how humanity is all just one connection.

Fernandez, Baeza's subject of that night, was portrait 100. She said the experience was unreal and although there were many people in the room listening to her secrets, she said there was something about the connection Baeza created with her that made her feel comfortable enough to speak her truths publicly. Her word portrait was "Bloque Optimo" or "Positive Block."

"It has been a marvelous experience; I was not expecting it to be so incredible. I wanted to do it, and I expected it to be different, but not so powerful, he was able to reach the essence of who I am as a person in two words," Fernandez said. "I told him he hit the nail on the head. He defined me perfectly, and an essential part of who I am like most people could never do.

"For me a positive block it's a duality I possess and being blocked is something intimate that happens to me in different parts of my life. I get over the blockages and not seeing the solution or why this is happening with optimism and positivity and talk myself through those hard times."

Baeza said these moments and the reactions of the people are what drive his work. He's hoping these experiences excite conversation around intimacy and language and quotes sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, saying that now in communication there are no implications.

"Zygmunt said, 'Before when you were upset with a friend, you had to call them and explain to them why you were upset and what they did to hurt you.' Now all you do is press a delete button. This is what I'm referring to that these things are devouring our intimate language," Baeza said. "Now you don't have to explain to people who you are and your intentions. Using language in its profoundness is essential because if you don't speak then, you can't choose the words you want and belong to you."

Carmen De Terenzio, a South Beach local who attended the performance, was intrigued by the piece and was encouraging Baeza to create his portraits on a larger scale.

"We were talking to the artist to project this idea to a community perhaps making a portrait of a city or a country with leaders. It generated a conversation between my husband and me that everyone has a story to tell and everyone has an opinion. Art is like a stone in the water, and it ripples, and it rippled here tonight."

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For more information on Word Portraits or to learn more about Enrique Baeza's work, visit <http://enriquebaeza.com/>

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