

## The Ambassador and Mr. Smith

*El Pais Semanal*

June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014

By Maite Rico

Photography by James Rajotte

On June 15th Barack Obama called Juan Carlos I to say goodbye and congratulate him on his reign. The U.S. President was in California, at the home of good friends James Costos and Michael Smith, the Ambassador to Spain and his partner. At their residence that has been converted into an art gallery and meeting point, the TV executive and the decorator are breathing fresh air into the work of diplomacy.

The foyer of the resident of the U.S. Ambassador to Spain has a whimsical, even eccentric feel. It is dominated by a Robert Rauschenberg canvas in buff tones that measures over six square meters. It is entitled *Notes on Bilbao* and was painted in 1997 for a retrospective at the Guggenheim. Facing it, as if it were a mirror, is a yellow oil painting on a round frame by Roy Lichtenstein. To one side is a word painting by another star of Pop-Art, Edward Ruscha, *Screaming in Spanish*. To its right is a watercolor on rice paper by minimalist recluse late Agnes Martin, deceased in New Mexico in 2004.

This is no casual mix arising from decoration automatism. The canvases were chosen with utmost care, as a sort of tribute to easygoingness and cultural fusion. It is a declaration of intent by the occupants of less than a year of this two-story residence located on the Castellana: James Costos and Michael Smith.

Costos is an atypical ambassador, but not because he is gay, a vegetarian or an animal rights advocate. Before taking on the diplomatic position, he was a top executive at HBO, producer of emblematic series such as *The Sopranos* and *Game of Thrones*. His partner of nearly 15 years, Michael Smith is an internationally known figure in decoration and design.

The first thing pointed out in news reports was that both were major donors to Barack Obama's campaign for reelection. The second was that they are friends with Hollywood movers and shakers and that Michael Smith is the decorator of choice of Cindy Crawford and Steven Spielberg, and that Michelle Obama entrusted him with redecorating the Oval Office at the White House. The third thing is that the couple now rules in Madrid *la nuit* and dazzles the local celebrities.

But this cloak of frivolity and any misgivings fade after the first few minutes of conversation. As the Americans they are, Costos and Smith are cordial and unpretentious. The Ambassador has a degree in Political Science. Smith is an expert

in art. They come out of the competitive, relentless high corporate world, where the balance sheet leaves little room for triviality. And they approach this challenge with the same drive.

“Being an ambassador was not something I was looking to be. When the President asks you to join his Administration in an official position, the only possible answer is yes. That’s why I did it, because he asked me to. I had a great career at HBO and a marvelous life with Michael in California,” explained James Costos.

It is impossible to overlook the tradition of U.S. presidents awarding ambassadorships to election campaign contributors. And, according to *The New York Times*, Costos and Smith raised \$3.4 million for Obama. How are outsiders received at the State Department? “I think the system works so well precisely because of the mix of profiles. Career ambassadors do hard, generous, incredible work. Michael and I do not come from the diplomatic world, but the work is also a matter of attitude. It is a matter of building relationships, working together and reaching agreements that benefit both sides.”

Spain was certainly not new to them. They are fascinated by this country and have been visiting somewhat regularly in recent years. But their debut could not have been more complicated. Just after they arrived, the massive NSA spying scandal blew up. Costos was called in to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in October 2013 to offer an explanation --a difficult episode for someone without prior experience.

“I must disagree with you regarding lack of experience, because all your experiences in life come into play as an ambassador. Everything I’ve done in my life up to now has prepared me for this role. And when that issue blew up, I just had to deal with it. Spain is a great partner and we were able to handle things well.” The relationship ended up stronger, added the Ambassador.

From time to time there is a flash of determination on James Costos’ affable face that allows you to imagine him a relentless, aloof negotiator. When it’s about bilateral affairs, he doesn’t deviate from the script, and if you’re hoping for an indiscretion or an *off the record* moment, that’s out of the question.

The NSA case is resolved, he states, and not going to affect the negotiations for a free trade agreement between the United States and the European Union (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, or TTIP). As he recalls, Mariano Rajoy himself stated very clearly in Washington, “We’re in the fifth round of negotiations and there will be another, or perhaps two more, before the end of the year. Everything is going pretty well, in agriculture and energy, too. I am very optimistic.”

Military cooperation proceeds in full, with a Marine rapid deployment unit coming to Moron and whose area of operations will be North Africa, along with the arrival of four destroyers at Rota Naval Base as part of the NATO missile defense system. The ships are equipped with Aegis combat systems that are able to track and shoot down enemy rockets. Two of them, the *Donald Cook* and the *Ross*, are already anchored in Spanish waters. The *Porter* and the *Carney* will arrive next year. “What surprises me is that more is not being said about this. It should be a source of pride. It is not a bilateral matter between Spain and the United States, it’s a NATO matter. Spain is responsible for the safety of its allies.”

The Ambassador highlights the economic benefits that will come from the arrival of hundreds of military personnel and their families, as well as the importance of the exchange of information and technology. He also refers to achievements in the joint fight against piracy on the Horn of Africa, in which Spain has played a leading role.

“WE WANT TO OPEN THE EMBASSY, JUST LIKE THE WHITE HOUSE WAS OPENED UP BY OBAMA”

Now, from piracy at sea to digital piracy. Costos’ specific position at HBO was Vice President for Global Licensing and Retail. If anything has caused cracks in bilateral relations it is precisely the laxity with which Spain was treating intellectual property. In 2008 the United States PUT Spain on the 301 Watch List, a blacklist of countries with legislative shortfalls that are subject to trade sanctions. We were taken off the list in 2012, with the advent of the so-called *Ley Sinde* (Sinde Law, after the then Minister of Culture), that was a small first step towards protecting copyrights on the internet. “This is one of my big priorities. I’ve spoken about this to President Rajoy, the Vice President and the Ministers of Culture and Industry. Important steps are being taken. The legal terms were somewhat vague, but I hope the laws being reviewed will adequately determine the offenses involved.”

But that is not enough. The underlying problem, the ambassador points out, is education.” One of the things I would like to see is a public information campaign on piracy, which has become acceptable in this country. People have to understand that if you steal content, you are preventing people from earning a living. I think this has not been sufficiently presented to public opinion.”

So much for the formal part of the interview of Ambassador Costos. In the informal part, it is Michael Smith who calls the shots. The decorator is away half of the time, dividing his time between his studios in New York and London, where he attends to projects all over the world. However, his involvement in the work of the Embassy is absolute.

“You asked earlier about bilateral relations, which is a high-sounding term, but I want to add something about being a professional. James has always dived head first into the

cultures and the companies where he's worked, to the extent that his work has become an extension of his life and family experience. That is the case now too, not only with the Embassy team, but also in the relationship between Spain and the United States. Everything we do relates to that idea. Promoting relations. Linking people together, seeking out opportunities and creating synergies. This is what we've always done in our careers, what we did for Obama, because we are friends and we believe in him, and it's what we're doing now. It's in our being. We don't know how to do it any other way. It's not just a matter of sitting down and saying: 'Okay, this is the agenda.' It's more instinctive. It has to do with the Ambassador as a professional and as a person. James's whole career is based on great curiosity and his interest in what he is doing. This is not a job, it's an extension of himself, and part of his life."

And here's where alternative diplomacy comes in, with the residence itself as a focal point. The building on the Castellana, attached to the imposing U.S. Embassy, has become, according to Costos' own words, a "platform." "Just like the White House was opened up when the Obamas took up residence, we have wanted to open up this house to our Embassy team and to people, and make it a meeting point, so that Spaniards and Americans of different walks of life can meet, enjoy the art and the conversation and work together."

Take, for example, the thorny issue of piracy. In his orthodox role as ambassador, James Costos meets with the Government and defends the American companies that are suffering the piracy. At the same time, he holds a debut of the film *Spiderman*, or brings Ridley Scott to shoot *Exodus* in Almeria and the Canary Islands. Or he gets the *Game of Thrones* team to come and scout locations in Andalusia to shoot the next season next year. All in all, he tries to showcase in a practical way the benefits that come from cultural production.

Another area of alternative diplomacy is promoting entrepreneurship. "As you know, this is part of the American way of life." Yes, and as such is absent from the Spanish civil service way of life. "Many people I have spoken with here hesitate to take initiatives because they are afraid to fail," says the Ambassador. "But I believe there is a great deal of entrepreneurial spirit in this country."

The crisis has undoubtedly spurred it on. "When President Obama asked me to take this position a year and nine months ago, the news we were getting about the situation in Spain was very different from what we get now. I feel very fortunate to have come at a time when we can start to celebrate and attract U.S. investors. There's a sense of hope and optimism. President Rajoy and his government have done excellent work with the reforms, and President Obama congratulated him on it. Great progress has been made, but we cannot overlook that there is still 26% unemployment, particularly among youth. And this is one of our big concerns."

They are organizing roundtable discussions with people from the business community to discuss challenges and opportunities, and they are promoting contacts between young people and established professionals, particularly in the art world. Every painter, actor or filmmaker who comes through Madrid has to pay “toll.” “We kidnap them, even if only for a couple of hours,” jokes Michael.

The couple also has focused on the Art in Embassies initiative, a program started by the State Department in the 1960s through which different museums and foundations loan their works of art to diplomatic missions, to promote American art. Costos and Smith have taken it further. They’ve reached out to artist friends, museums and their own collection and have converted the residence into an extraordinary gallery of contemporary art. Many of the works have just arrived. Some evoke Spain. Others have personal significance. All have their own story, that Michael tells with a passion.

He is particularly proud of the five Josef Albers oils in tones of yellow that are hung going up the spiral staircase. Three are from the U.S. from the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, that collaborated in the master of Bauhaus’ retrospective being shown now at the Juan March Foundation in Madrid. The other two are on loan from the Albers Museum in Germany. “I studied his books. I find it incredible to have them here together.”

The collection continues, with Julian Schnabel, Catherine Opie, Philip Taaffe, Andy Warhol, Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell (*Madrid Image with Green Stripe*). There are also Spanish artists, such as Javier Romero and Esteban Vicente. In the garden there is a fountain by Cristina Iglesias. “We want to bring in more.”

*Greco* accompanies the group. He’s a dog of mixed breed that the Ambassador adopted from the National Friends of Animals Association rescue facility. “We named him in honor of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of El Greco and my own Greek roots.”

The most impelling pieces are in the dining room, a huge room with a long table in it. “This room is very dear to us. We have brought together three works by African-American artists, who are also friends of ours. They are any collector’s jewels.” The first is a four-handed tar-based canvas painted by Theaster Gates and his father, who supported his family by building roofs made of that same material. Gates is today a well-recognized artist and very involved in recovering poor neighborhoods. “It reminds me somewhat of Goya’s black paintings,” commented Michael. “It is not just a work of art. It is also a tribute to a man who was able to send him to school by working that very hard, arduous job.” There is also an enormous canvas by Julie Mehretu and a neon sculpture, *Double America*, by Glenn Ligon. These last two are vanguard artists who explore race, identity and sexuality in their work. “Julie has a wife and two children, and an extraordinary sense of family.”

James and Michael consider themselves a lucky couple. Michael grew up in a liberal environment, they never hid themselves, their families accepted them and they did not have problems at work. “That’s not what happens in many parts of the United States, or even of Spain, where there are people who have had terrible experiences, and not only because of being gay,” Michael points out. And James adds: “Despite everything, things are changing for the LGBT community.” Before President Obama came into office, only two States recognized same-sex marriage. Now there are 19. “We’re going in the right direction, but there is still a lot to be done.”

On May 17<sup>th</sup>, International Day Against Homophobia, James Costos flew the rainbow flag alongside the American flag in the residence garden. But he eschews being labeled a gay activist. He prefers to define himself as a human rights defender. “We’re not here on any kind of mission, or to promote anything. It’s just that I am the ambassador and that I am also gay. That sends a message of normalcy. It’s not something that’s on the agenda, but it makes a difference in people’s lives.”

The couple has not had any problems with rigid diplomatic protocol. “It’s changing all the time,” Michael explains. What does it say on the formal invitations you get? “Mr. Ambassador and Mr. Smith. The welcome has been wonderful. Everyone has been very kind.” “You know something,” intervenes Costos. “Just before coming to Spain, Michael and I met with President Obama. I asked if he had any advice. ‘Be yourself,’ he said. ‘If you try to act like you think an ambassador would act you’ll be a failure. I only know you the way you are, and that’s the person you have to be.’ And we’re being ourselves. It’s just that now we’re in Spain and we have some great people to work with.”