

# disillusions

Gendered Visions of the Caribbean and its Diasporas

Edited by TATIANA FLORES



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Gendered Visions of the Caribbean and its Diasporas

Curated by TATIANA FLORES

**Studio Theatre Gallery, Middlesex County College, Edison, NJ**  
September 27 – November 8, 2011

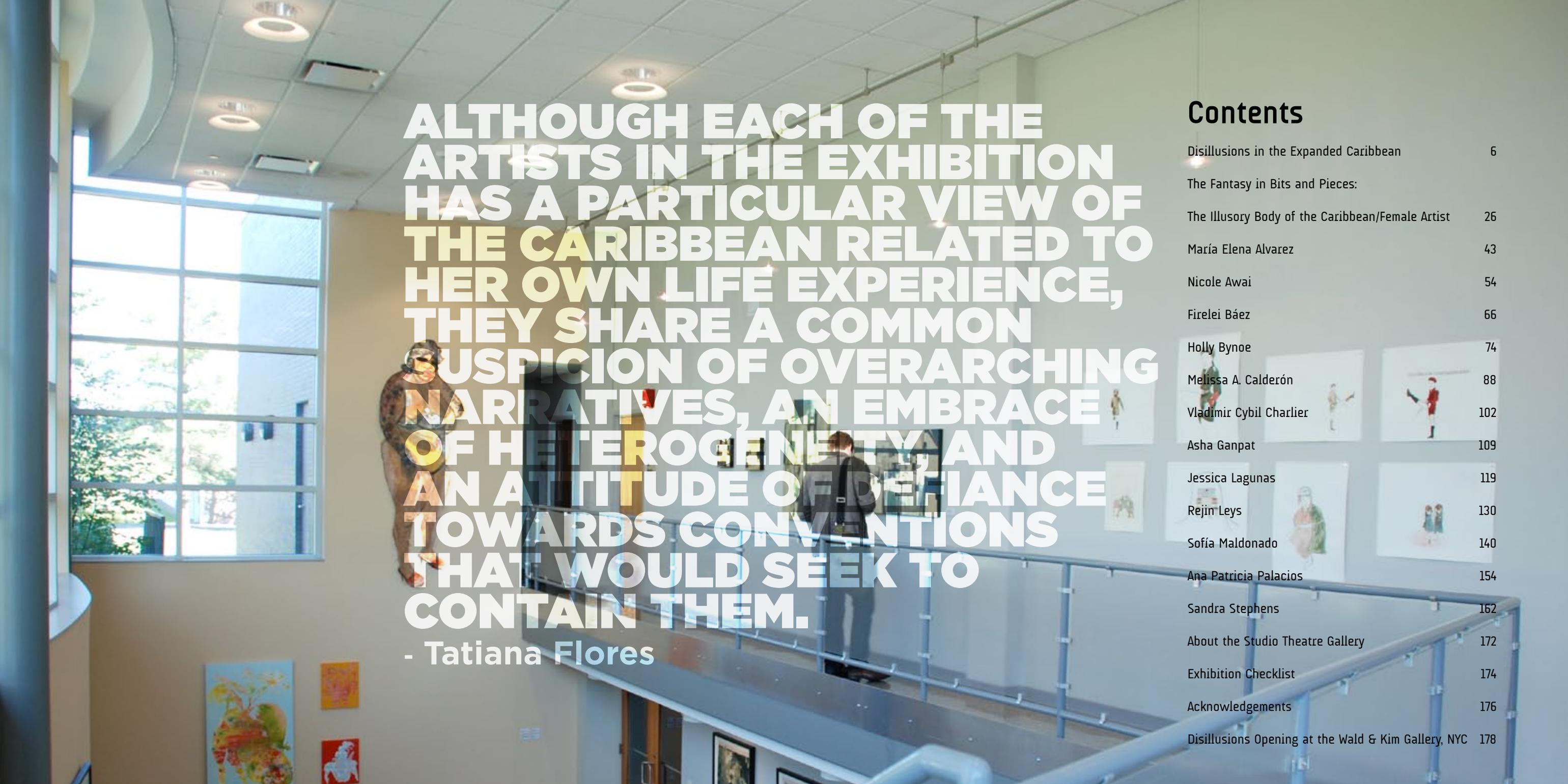
**Sylvia Wald and Po Kim Gallery, New York, NY**  
November 22 – December 31, 2011

this page detail: Firelei Báez  
*Questions for Doig in Trinidad, from the series*  
*Geographic Delay*, 2011  
Mixed media collage  
120 x 36"

cover: Ana Patricia Palacios  
*Faltantes 2*, 2009  
Pigments on canvas  
46 x 44

detail back cover: Sandra Stephens  
*Intangibility*, 2009  
Single-channel video, tire  
00:09:56





**ALTHOUGH EACH OF THE ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION HAS A PARTICULAR VIEW OF THE CARIBBEAN RELATED TO HER OWN LIFE EXPERIENCE, THEY SHARE A COMMON SUSPICION OF OVERARCHING NARRATIVES, AN EMBRACE OF HETEROGENEITY, AND AN ATTITUDE OF DEFIANCE TOWARDS CONVENTIONS THAT WOULD SEEK TO CONTAIN THEM.**

- Tatiana Flores

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# Disillusions in the Expanded Caribbean

by Tatiana Flores

Once upon a time, the mark of a true artist was how well he (and it was always a he) could create illusions. The representation of reality was the hallmark by which artists were judged. In this scenario, it was easy to assess quality and consequently to determine worth. The work of women artists was always deemed subpar. Fast-forward a few centuries to the advent of modernism. Despite breaking with the rules of representation and proposing a new set of values, modernism still adhered to a master narrative from which women, again, were largely excluded. Deeply Eurocentric and heavily invested in the notion of genius, modernism promoted the illusion of a linear history founded on myths of progress and universality. Those artists and places that fell outside its purview were either ignored or branded as retardataire.

Though today the space for art is more open and plural, illusions continue to determine our engagement with the world. On a biological level, this is unavoidable. From the point of view of neuroscience, perception is very much a product of the mind. The brain edits the disparate stimuli that enter our eyes in order to create the impression that “reality” is a coherent entity. According to Édouard Glissant, illusions also govern the condition of transplanted and colonized peoples of the Caribbean. He writes that domination “introduces into the new relationship the insidious promise of being remade in the Other’s image, the illusion of successful mimesis...with the consequence that meaningless know-how will encourage the illusion of universal transcendence. A relocated people struggles against all of this.”<sup>1</sup> Such a struggle may be located in the works of art in *Disillusions: Gendered Visions of the Caribbean and its Diasporas*. Their makers refuse to present a world that is whole or intelligible, acknowledging instead that contemporary experience is disjointed, subjective, and often incomprehensible. Perhaps this awareness is a result of their condition as Caribbean subjects or women or perhaps it is because they all, to some degree, inhabit a space of diaspora—an out-of-place-ness that has left a deep imprint on their art. Whatever the reason, they offer a thought-provoking body of work that shatters illusion—whether pictorial or otherwise—by engaging in formal fragmentation, embracing discontinuity, and obfuscating meaning. Ultimately, their work provides a model of resistance against master narratives, social conventions, gendered prescriptions, and other traditional forms of representation.

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<sup>1</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, Trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 66.

**María Elena Alvarez** is a photographer turned painter who has embarked on a mixed-media practice that courts opacity. Whereas the single photograph promotes an illusion of an intelligible object, she has chosen to place sundry elements on her canvases that suggest stories without closure. In *Equipaje (Baggage)*, she intersperses fragments of text upon which silhouetted figures are drawn atop abstract shapes of black, gray, and beige that evoke both architecture and landscape. A small photograph of palm trees in the same tonal range as the painted elements both alludes to her place (the artist lives and works in Caracas, Venezuela) and also shatters stereotypes of the tropics with its blue skies and beaches and lush vegetation. In her smaller paintings, *Dormir en el sofá (To Sleep on the Sofa)* and *El lado más cálido (The Warmest Side)*, through fragmented forms she suggests domestic spaces that are punctured by loss, absence, or violence.

Alvarez’s practice could be characterized in terms of Glissant’s notion of transversality:

The implosion of Caribbean history (of the converging histories of our peoples) relieves us of the linear, hierarchical vision of a single History that would run its unique course. It is not this History that has roared around the edge of the Caribbean, but actually a question of the subterranean convergence of our histories. The depths are not only the abyss of neurosis but primarily the site of multiple converging paths.<sup>2</sup>

Glissant goes on to characterize this condition as a “network of branches” and as “free[dom]...from uniformity,” both phrases that succinctly describe the compositions of Alvarez’s paintings. Her relation to Glissant’s thought is not necessarily a happy coincidence. The artist has always been conscious of her Caribbean identity, both as the daughter of a Curaçaoan mother and Venezuelan father and as a transplant in the United States during her years of study.

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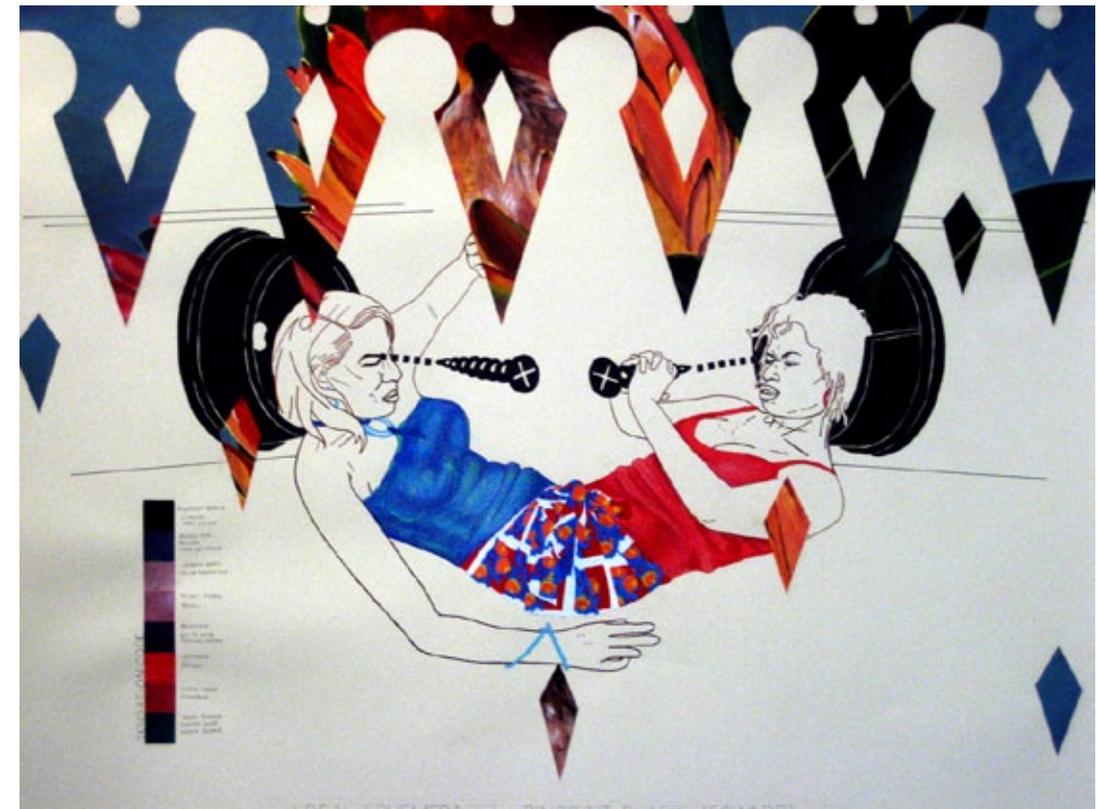
<sup>2</sup> Glissant, 66.

Nicole Awai challenges the notion of passive spectatorship with her drawings from the series *Specimen from Local Ephemera*. Featuring two morphed-together human torsos juxtaposed against a stark white background, the drawings also include cut and pasted borders suggesting an exuberant tropical landscape, a key of colors with the names of nail polish tones, and schematic images inspired by blueprints. These compositions are visual puzzles that challenge the viewer to decipher their meanings. In *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Pinpoint Black (Backward)*, exhibited in *Disillusions*, Awai and another woman are joined at the hip with a colorful flowered textile. Their backs to the spectator, they each peer through a hole framed by a round black element. Unbeknownst to them a screw appears behind each of their heads,

threatening to impale them. In the companion image *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Pinpoint Black (Forward)*, the same figures, this time facing forward, resist the approach of the screw, whose march, nevertheless, seems inexorable. Above them, a cut border with pointed edges, resembling the pattern of an iron-wrought fence, points ominously towards their heads and bodies. In both drawings, the strip of nail polish colors—which the artist calls “Sensation Code”—echoes the colors of the composition. The feminine gendering of the bodies, colors, and the tropical landscapes visible in the cut-outs contrast with the masculine attributes of the visual language of the blueprint and of the screws that threaten to pierce the figures’ heads. Like her drawings, Awai, a Trinidadian of



Maria Elena Alvarez *Equipaje (Baggage)*, 2011 Mixed media on cotton 25 x 45"



Nicole Awai *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Pinpoint Black (Forward)*, 2007 Mixed media on paper 38 x 50"

African, European, and Asian descent who has lived in the United States since the eighties, defies easy categorization. She inscribes her drawings with a similar structural complexity that she herself embodies.

**Firelei Báez** is a figurative painter of Dominican and Haitian descent who grew up in the Dominican Republic before immigrating to the United States as a child. Almost the entirety of her work deals with the representation of women and also engages with cultural practices, visual tropes, ethnic constructions, and myths and legends of the Caribbean. Her series *Geographic Delay* features monumental full-length portraits of women with voluminous forms inspired by the dancers of the West Indian Day parade in Brooklyn. Embedded in the women's bodies are markers that signal the syncretic character of the West Indies. The Afro-descendant female figure in *Questions for Doig in Trinidad*—exhibited in *Disillusions*—is covered with tattoos related to Haitian Vodou, whereas other figures hark back to Amerindian peoples and reference Chinese watercolors. The commanding presence of the women is intimidating; standing ten feet tall, they are comfortable in their own skin and refuse to be passive recipients of the gaze. To view them completely, the viewer must keep his distance, and, even then, the visual information can feel overwhelming, making it is easy to get lost in the details. *Questions for Doig in Trinidad* is unique in the series for being the only figure whose body is a cut-out (the others are drawn on sheets of paper), making her presence all the more powerful. Both *Geographic Delay* and the series *A Carib's Jhator* thwart the tourist image of the Caribbean as a blank slate for the creation of personal fantasies and of its women as sexually available. *A Carib's Jhator* references sky burial traditions in Tibet, in which bodies are left exposed to the elements and predatory birds. In Báez's visions, female bodies fuse with plants, amorphous shapes, and abstract patterns to suggest an interpenetration between person and place—in Glissant's words, "a creative energy of a dialectic reestablished between nature and culture in the Caribbean"<sup>3</sup>— that counters received essentialist ideas about the region's landscape and peoples.

**Holly Bynoe** mines her family photo albums as a way of uncovering concealed narratives and probing to what degree the experiences of a small group in a small place (the artist hails from the island of Bequia in St. Vincent and the Grenadines) might function as a synecdoche for the larger history of the Caribbean. In her *Compounds* series, she creates composite images out of scanned photographs layered atop each other in such ways that it becomes impossible to locate where one picture ends and another one begins. Through digital technologies, the artist manipulates images to look old and weathered. *Generation*

<sup>3</sup> Glissant, 63.



Firelei Báez, *Just Another Geographer, in Search of a Space which Will Fit his Poetic Design*, from the series *A Carib's Jhator*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40”.



Holly Bynoe, *Generation Fight*, 2010. Digital collage, 60 x 40”.

*Fight* depicts an enigmatic grouping of present and absent people in what appears to be a portrait of a family of European descent juxtaposed to abstracted elements in shades of gray and olive green, fragments of text, and the face of an Afro-Caribbean figure alongside the barest suggestion of a clenched fist. The image demands to be read in order to make sense but ultimately does not uncover its secrets. It is impossible to know whether the face on top belongs to a man or a woman, whether the fist is intended as symbol of empowerment or a threat. For the artist, these constructions come to function as a metaphor for the unknowability of history, akin to Glissant's notion of nonhistory:

Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment, as it were, as happened with those peoples who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history, for instance European peoples, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive sources. This dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterize what I call a nonhistory<sup>4</sup>

Bynoe expresses a similar view through the images in her *Compound* series and through a related poem that reinforces this notion through the experience of an individual: "reuniting the maternal and paternal/ embedding stories and small/samples of the moments that i remember/and how they are forever corrupted and/false because of my chemistry and biology."<sup>5</sup>

Melissa A. Calderón comments on expectation imposed on her gender through her performance and installation *Linger*. In the gallery, the artist constructed a nest of twigs and moss, which she inhabited during both opening receptions of *Disillusions*. Wearing a white dress made of tear-stained tissues, she sat meditatively in the nest, embroidering little eggs onto squares of tan-colored cloth. After finishing each egg, she would get up from the nest, pin the cloth on the wall, and return to the nest to continue her embroidery. She repeated this activity for the duration of the reception. After the performance was complete, Calderón left the dress in the nest and the little eggs pinned on the wall as silent memories of the event. The maternal and nurturing actions of the performance represent the artist's enactment of motherhood and her assertion that her works of art are akin to children. Burdened by the social expectations that a Latina should be a mother, the artist responds by likening the process of artistic creation to motherhood. *Linger* could also be read in relation to the artist's diasporic self. A New York-born Puerto Rican, Calderón has always been highly aware of her displaced identity. The 2011 performance *Nevermine* marked her futile

<sup>4</sup> Glissant, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Holly Bynoe, "Meek and Mild," 2009, [http://hollybynoe.com/artwork/1113635\\_meek\\_mild.html](http://hollybynoe.com/artwork/1113635_meek_mild.html)



Melissa A. Calderón, *Linger*, 2011. Performance at Wald and Kim Gallery.

attempts to fuse her body to the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, site of United States military operations and bombing range until eight years ago. Wearing a plastic body wrap, the artist lay on the beach and covered herself with sand as the waves washed over her. In *Linger*, the artist creates a shelter in an unfamiliar place. She marks the nest as her own space, a personal little island to call home.

**Vladimir Cybil Charlier** is a multifaceted artist, comfortable in a variety of mediums, who engages with the history and visual traditions of Haiti, her native country, through personal and collective narratives. *Basket of Women*—a self-portrait whose title could well be *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* for the way in which it offers an intellectual autobiography of Charlier—provides a good point of entry into her art. Pages from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, attached together in a grid pattern, form the ground of the picture. A childhood photograph of Charlier appears at the bottom center. Atop her head is a basket, also made up of pages from the classic tale but which are distinguished visually by appearing in a larger font. From the basket emerge female figures from the history of art, including Botticelli’s Venus, the Venus de Milo, the wing of the Winged Victory of Samothrace, and references to Gauguin, Degas, Chinese painting, and Egyptian art. The image reveals Charlier to be a citizen of the world, a person of privilege steeped in a Western intellectual tradition. Though the weight of history weighs down on her, her younger self remains unperturbed, innocently staring out at the viewer with wide-open eyes. The image stands in stark contrast to *Dreamaker I* and *Dreamaker II*, 9-foot high paintings of anonymous women of color carrying baskets full of fruit and tropical motifs above their heads. Where *Basket of Women* is textual, the *Dreamakers* are overwhelmingly visual. Their colors and textures delight, and it is only after moments of optical enjoyment that the viewer realizes that the life-sized baskets balance on the heads of peasant women. Whereas Charlier’s burden is the Western tradition, that of the *Dreamakers* is that the Western desire for the tropics turns them into objects of consumption.

**Asha Ganpat** is active as an artist, curator, and educator. Her art—primarily sculptural—broaches a variety of forms and subjects, with humor often playing a central role. *Disillusions* marks the first time that her work has appeared in a Caribbean-themed exhibition, and her piece *Things* was produced specifically for the show. *Things* is an affectionate family portrait of objects referencing the artist’s eccentric relatives from Trinidad. Having grown up in New Jersey to an American mother, the artist’s exposure to her Indo-Trinidadian heritage took place over sporadic summer visits, during which she felt acutely out of place. Nevertheless, as the “white” foreigner, she was able to cross gender boundaries in ways that would not

have been socially acceptable to her female relatives. A drawing in shades of gray mounted on wood, *Things* reflects on gender and memory in the Trinidad that Ganpat knows, combining the genres of still-life and landscape in unexpected and creative ways. Objects representing the male members of the family appear on the left and those standing in for the women are on the right. Arranged on a wooden shelf, they include a cutlass, a coconut, a feather, a hairbrush, a computer mouse, a toothbrush with a cockroach on the bristles, a bottle of hot sauce, and a box of matches. Each is labeled with a caption that identifies the name of the family member, their relation to the artist, and a verbal description of the object. Below the shelf is an ambiguous landscape with a stray dog, an old tire, and bits of garbage. On its own, the piece is whimsical and unusual, but the stories that activate it add another dimension. Ganpat’s Uncle Preman is represented by a coconut because the artist remembers hearing as a child that he was killed when a coconut fell on his head...except that she later found out that he died of a brain tumor, which perhaps was the size of a coconut. Jaigobin, her father, is identified with a hairbrush because of his long hair, which he would spend hours brushing. Her grandmother would always make her a bottle of hot sauce, and after she died, it became one of Ganpat’s most treasured possessions. Though *Things* reveals the artist’s ambivalence towards Trinidad, it also reflects on how memories of people and places become inextricably intertwined.

**Jessica Lagunas** has spent her career reflecting on gender from an unabashedly feminist perspective. Having grown up in Guatemala, she has lived in New York for the past ten years, which has given her the critical distance to challenge the rigid gender categories and social expectations of her native country and consequently to question assumptions about masculinity and femininity in the United States as well. In a series of video performances, Lagunas obsessively applies lipstick, mascara, and nail polish to the point where these actions become grotesque. Filmed against a stark white background, Lagunas isolates and zooms in on the body parts for graphic impact. When she began, she set out to use up the container of makeup, and we see her applying lipstick over and over with the same motion. Eventually, the color bleeds past the borders of her lips and stains her teeth; the artist recounts that she was not able to actually finish the tube because at one point, there was so much lipstick on her mouth that her skin could absorb no more. Similarly, when applying so much red nail polish that it dripped off her fingers like icicles of blood, Lagunas started to feel the chemicals seeping into her nail beds and drew the performance to a close. Though the artist remains critical of the feminine obsession with youth and beauty, she is also keenly aware of the unique character of the lives of women. In her recent piece *Intimate Stories*, she compiles letters from her



Asha Ganpat  
*Things*, 2011



Jessica Lagunas  
detail: *Para besarte mejor (The Better To Kiss You With)*, 2003

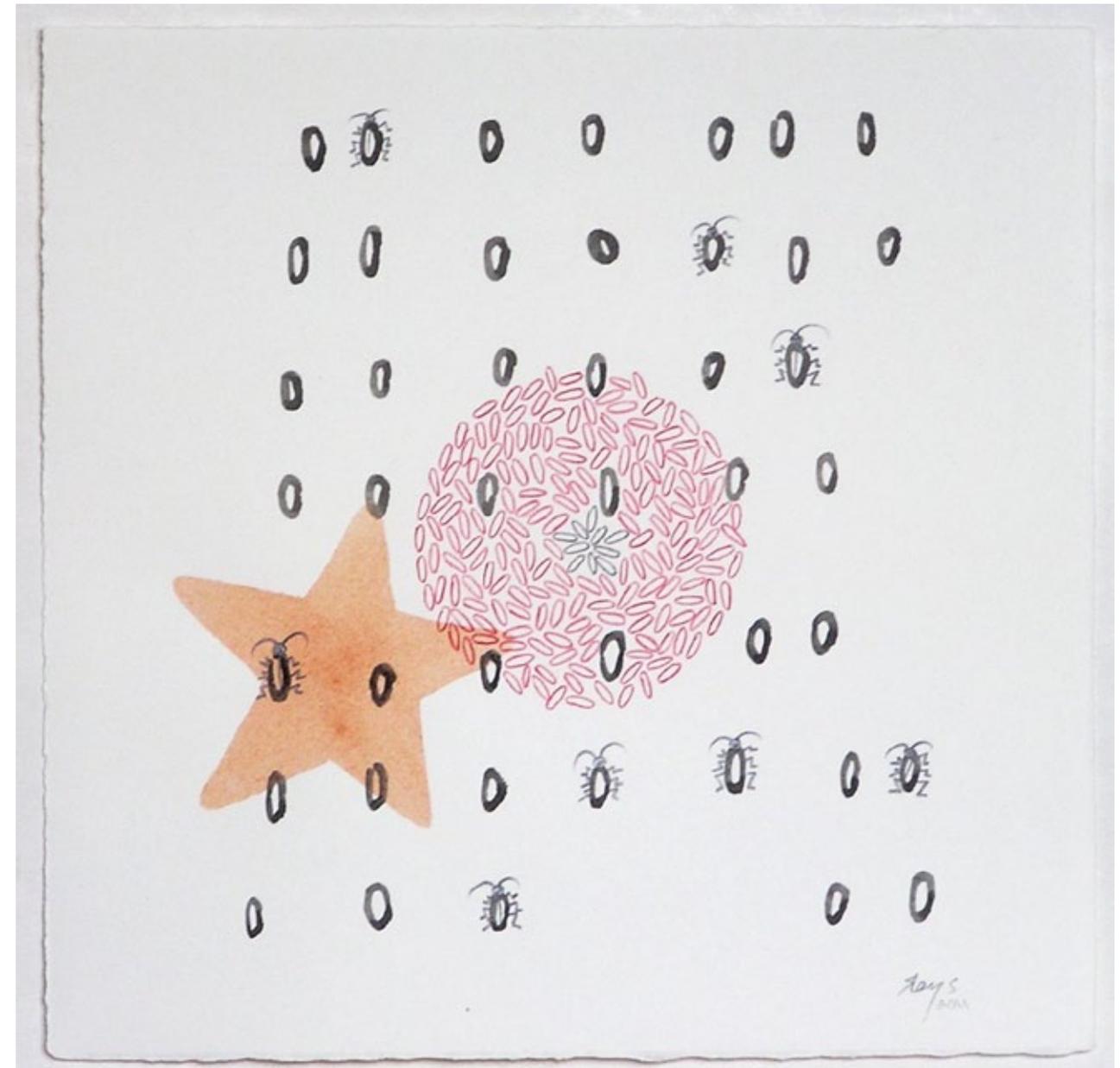


Vladimir Cybil Charlier  
*Dreamaker I*, 2006

female relatives narrating the experience of their first menstrual periods. The letters are transcribed in a book, but they are also presented as facsimiles inside individual envelopes. Both the book and letters are stored in a beautiful handmade box. Through her investigation, Lagunas broke a taboo for older generations who were discouraged from speaking openly about such matters and came to discover how differently Latin American and U.S. American cultures dealt with the subject of menstruation. The piece also succeeded in sparking a dialogue and creating a sense of community among women spectators, all of whom remembered how this rite of passage played out in their lives.

**Rejin Leys** is an accomplished printmaker and book artist who has embarked on a project to make one hundred drawings as a way to rethink her practice. A Haitian-American, her previous work has tackled such weighty subjects as the Middle Passage and sweatshops. Her drawings also carry a deep message, but on the surface they are much more playful. Hens, skeletons, batteries, bugs, grains of rice, stars, and plastic bags are a few of the recurring motifs in these drawings, executed on yellow notebook paper with frayed edges, recycled envelopes, more traditional drawing paper, and tracing paper. Combining papers and motifs, Leys creates sundry compositions that challenge a viewer to search for meaning. Formally, the drawings are lovingly executed, and they make a potent visual argument for finding beauty in the ordinary. The plastic window of a business envelope adds unexpected texture, and the patterns of the inside of the envelope, echo the grains of rice that recur all over the drawings. Leys began sketching rice during a period of food shortages, making note that rice is a staple for many cultures of the world. The beans function similarly, but the hen, appearing as a live bird and not as food stuff, seems to question whether eating animals is necessary. The outline of the hen in profile is present in many of the works and takes on a distinct personality that becomes endearing. Her chubby body stands in stark contrast to a human skeleton that also makes frequent appearances in the drawings. In the enigmatically titled *Darwin's (Other) Other Theory*, the hen looks on at the lower extremities of a skeleton surrounded by oversized beans, including one that substitutes for the upper body, as if to question whether humans really are smarter than animals. Overall, Leys' drawings critique our culture of consumption and lead us to reflect on the ethical implications of patterns of behavior that we take for granted.

**Sofía Maldonado** is primarily a painter of women, though she is also heavily invested in exploring the formal possibilities of abstraction and has recently begun a series of Caribbean seascapes that takes a clichéd subject into unprecedented visual territory. First and foremost, however, she is a street artist and



growing up in San Juan, Puerto Rico had plenty of walls in public space on which to leave her signature *chicas* (girls). Since she moved to New York, however, she has found opportunities for street art to be more limited as a result of the harsh punishments doled out onto “vandals” who leave marks without permission. Maldonado is happy to paint in public space whenever she is able, and in addition to high profile commissions in Hartford, Connecticut and Times Square, she agreed to create a mural for *Disillusions* at Middlesex County College in Edison, New Jersey. On a large circular column enclosing an elevator shaft, Maldonado painted two women—one blue skinned—of gargantuan proportions and also tagged the title of the exhibition onto the wall. One woman faced towards the door of the gallery, greeting the visitors, while the blue figure signaled her presence to the rest of the campus through the wall of glass marking the façade of the gallery building. Maldonado created the mural in an afternoon, and, despite the risqué nature of the image (the women’s bodies are shaped like pin-ups, and their clothing is scanty and ambiguous), a young woman wearing a veil spent almost the entire time watching the artist at work. These figures, like Maldonado’s other *chicas*, project self-confidence, assertiveness, and empowerment. Their defiance defines them, and though they are painted with permission, they remain true to the edgy, subversive nature of street art.

Ana Patricia Palacios has been exploring the expressive possibilities of drawing over the course of her career, even in the larger spaces of her painted canvases. She is a figurative artist who tends to position her characters against blank backgrounds, emphasizing psychic isolation and open-ended narratives. Many of her recent drawings and paintings are inspired by images and stories from the news media that she appropriates and adapts to suit her own visual language. In the tradition of the socially conscious art of her native Colombia, Palacios imbues her figures with ethical awareness and a critical edge. One theme that she has consistently returned to over the past few years is that of the amputated victims of landmines, a problem that affects people of Colombia and countless war zones around the world. *Faltantes 2* depicts an unlikely beauty pageant of three female amputees propped up by crutches modeling swimsuits. The artist here references the controversial “Miss Landmines” contest, initiated in Angola, whose grand prize is a golden prosthetic limb. Palacios’ image is haunting, featuring three dark-skinned women in looking in different directions. The pigments that describe their bodies are faded and unevenly applied, giving the impression of scarring and even disintegration. Each of the contestants wears a sash with the name of a region in Colombia that has been particularly affected by landmines, thus calling attention to this as a



Sofía Maldonado  
detail: *Untitled*, 2011

problem that is both local and global. Palacios is persistent in her condemnation of war. In her drawings of marching soldiers inspired by photographs of the North Korean army, she pokes fun at the pomp and pageantry through gender bending images that feminize the men and turn their march into can-can kicks. Other drawings argue for the inclusion of gays in the military and denounce the use of children as soldiers. In these stark works, Palacios forges a highly legible visual language that points to war and violence as a universal problem.

**Sandra Stephens** is a new media artist whose work explores issues of race and gender. Originally from Jamaica, she became aware of how differently race was constructed in the United States when she moved to this country as a teenager. Her videos *Hair* and *Snow White Remixed* respond to the limitations imposed on the black female body as a result of American social and racial categories. In *Hair*, the artist attempts to tame her unruly tresses through repeated brushing but ultimately is forced to use curlers and a hair dryer to smooth them out. Shots of Stephens in her bathroom are interspersed with footage of a black puppy and a white puppy playfully frolicking in a cage, oblivious to the desirability of one color over another. In *Snow White Remixed*, a little African-American girl in a Snow White costume talks about playing Snow White with her friends while behind her ominous shadows enact racist stereotypes, signaling that a fairy tale ending is not available to her. By contrast, other works by the artist that enter into dialogue with the Caribbean call attention to a different set of concerns. A video of women from the craft market in Kingston reveals class differences to be a more pressing issue in Jamaica than race. *Intangibility* a video projected into a tire is among the most elusive of Stephens' works. It depicts waves washing over the shadow of a woman reflected in the water. At times, the silhouette disappears, and the camera focuses on the movement of the water. Later, the mysterious presence returns, and the viewer continues to witness the rocking motion of the waves. Evocative sounds accompany the piece—the noise of the surf interspersed with music from an indistinct source. The tire may be read as a surrogate island—a space of diaspora, longing, and loss. It may also be interpreted as a vessel to move migrant populations across the sea, a makeshift boat for impoverished peoples.



Sandra Stephens, *Craft Market Women Workers*, 2007. Single-channel video, 00:19:24.



Ana Patricia Palacios, *Sleeping Soldiers*, 2011



The artists in *Disillusions* rebel against different illusory paradigms: a heteronormative world, Euro-American superiority, a linear and progressivist reading of history, among others. This refusal to accept a simplistic socially-imposed world view could be theorized in terms of creolization, as characterized by Stuart Hall. Following Glissant, Hall describes “creole” as a process of entanglement of “different cultures forced into cohabitation in the colonial context.”<sup>6</sup> He continues,

I would argue that the process of creolization...is what defines the distinctiveness of Caribbean cultures: their ‘mixed’ character, their creative vibrancy, their complex, troubled, unfinished relation to history, the prevalence in their narratives of the themes of voyaging, exile, and the unrequited trauma of violent expropriation and separation.<sup>7</sup>

Although each of the artists in the exhibition has a particular view of the Caribbean related to her own life experience, they share a common suspicion of overarching narratives, an embrace of heterogeneity, and an attitude of defiance towards conventions that would seek to contain them.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall, “Creolité and the Process of Creolization,” in Okwui Enwezor et al., *Creolité and Creolization* (Ostfildern-Ruit : Hatje Cantz, 2003), 30.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, 31.

# The Fantasy in Bits and Pieces: The Illusory Body of the Caribbean/Female Artist

By Michelle Stephens

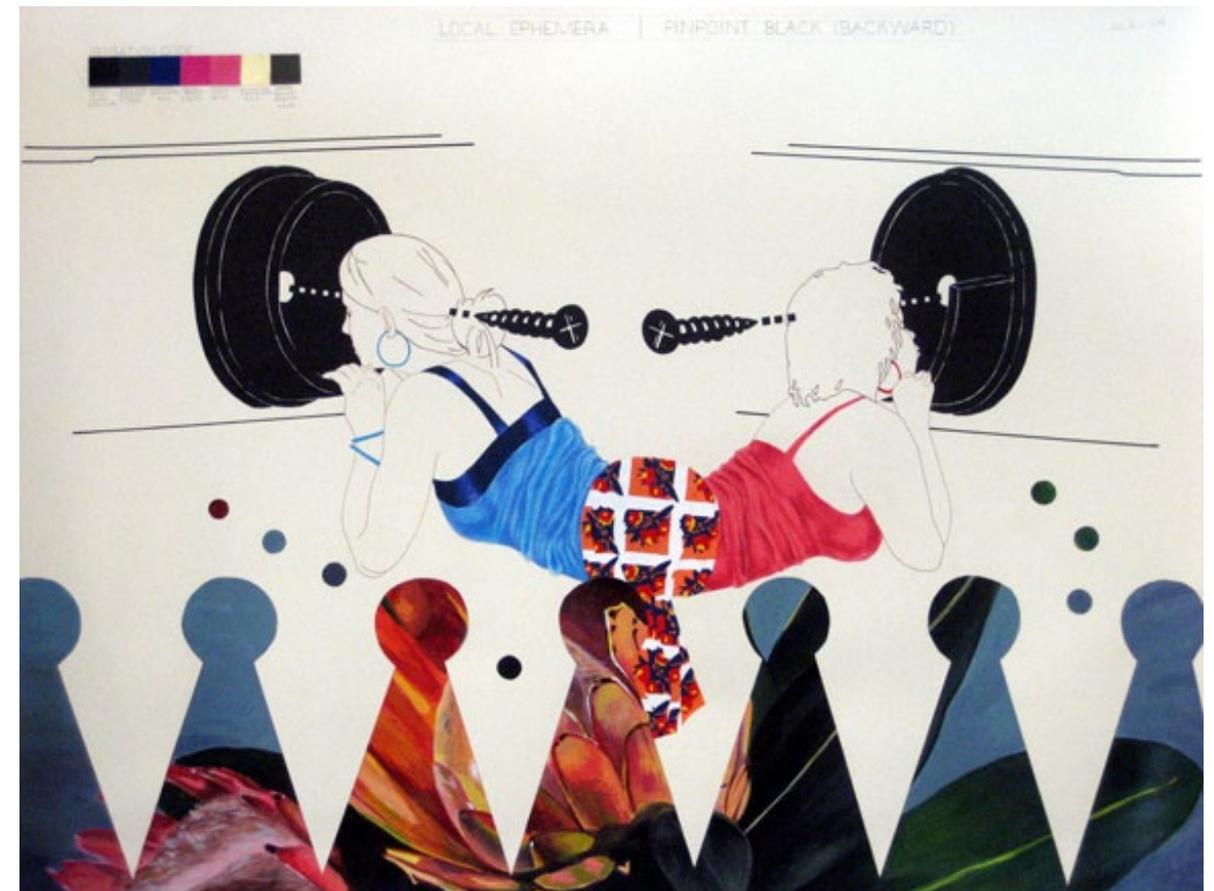
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What greater illusion of the self is there than the fantasy of bodily integrity? As we move in the world, the images of our bodies support our confidence that an identifiable person exists within the corporeal frame. In the early 1970s, John Berger argued that women in particular manipulate this image to appeal to the gaze of a white, male spectator-owner—woman surveys herself, “she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight” (*Ways of Seeing*, 46-47, 56). Just a few decades earlier, Jacques Lacan described this as the experience of being “*photographed*,” graphing oneself into the image required, desired, by the other, and for the Caribbean woman, the gaze of the Other has always had both sexualizing and racializing dimensions (*Four Fundamental Concepts*, 106).

In *Disillusions: Gendered Visions of the Caribbean and its Diasporas*, the artists are concerned less with the objectified female body than with the concomitant need to see that body as a perfectly contoured and closed image. Kaja Silverman argues that there is a “cultural premium placed on the

notion of a coherent bodily ego” and that it is the very “impossibility of approximating an ideal image,” aligned with values of “wholeness” and “unity,” that the subject apprehends through opposing fantasies of bodily disintegration (Threshold, 20-21). The images in *Disillusions* represent a striking consensus, the Caribbean woman artist’s intent to subject fantasies and fables of the feminine, and idealized constructions of the female body, to the creative forces of fracture, fragmentation, cutting, scratching, enlargement and augmentation.

The pinhole in Nicole Awai’s *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Pinpoint Black (Backward)*, 2007, could be the lens or hole of the photographing camera itself, as she imagines herself watching both herself and another woman in the process of being screwed into position in the image from behind (from the vanishing point of the viewer’s sightline). Surrounded by sharp angles and lines and bordered by a repetitive design motif, Awai’s female figures seem at first to be situated squarely within the geometrical eye-point of the Cartesian subject, secure in his belief that he maps fully the world of objects and



Nicole Awai *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Pinpoint Black (Backward)*, 2007

others with his sight. And yet, the conjoined women also reflect the way light functions in the field of vision, not as a straight line that pinpoints, identifying a unified self, but as a point of light that irradiates: "Light may travel in a straight line, but it is refracted, diffused, it floods, it fills—the eye is a sort of bowl—it flows over" (*Four Fundamental Concepts*, 94). If Berger's viewed female inhabits a body "split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself" (*Ways of Seeing*, 46), Awai's women are accompanied not by the fantasy-images of themselves but by the spectral image of the female Other.

The two conjoined women are evolutions from Awai's earlier pieces in which she worked with the conjoined mistress and plantation slave of a popular racist doll. Here that doubled woman has been updated to the contemporary moment, with the Trinidadian born, Afro-Asian artist now conjoined to a white female counterpart. In another image from the same series, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Pinpoint Black (Forward)*, 2007, each woman becomes the refracted reflection of the other, each struggling simultaneously to unscrew themselves from both the eye-point of the image and from each other. Like Alice in Wonderland whose body expands and contracts beyond her control as she falls through the rabbit hole, each woman's self-image is challenged by their doubling in the Other. In another of Awai's images from this series, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Castle Nut and Drama Queen*, 2007, it is as if the children's tale has been updated and the Red Queen (her androgynous torso now positioning her in the African diasporic role of an orisha), the Cheshire cat, and the tumbling, falling female figure, the artist as the "Castle Nut," have all found themselves locked into another kind of fantasy landscape. This scene reflects and refracts the conjoined architectures of colony and metropole, Third World and First World, that make up the lattice-work of a female subject flowing over her bodily and psychic borders, which constantly dissolve and recombine.



Nicole Awai, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Resistance with Black Ooze*, 2005.  
Graphite, acrylic paint, nail-polish and glitter on paper, 51 x 53"

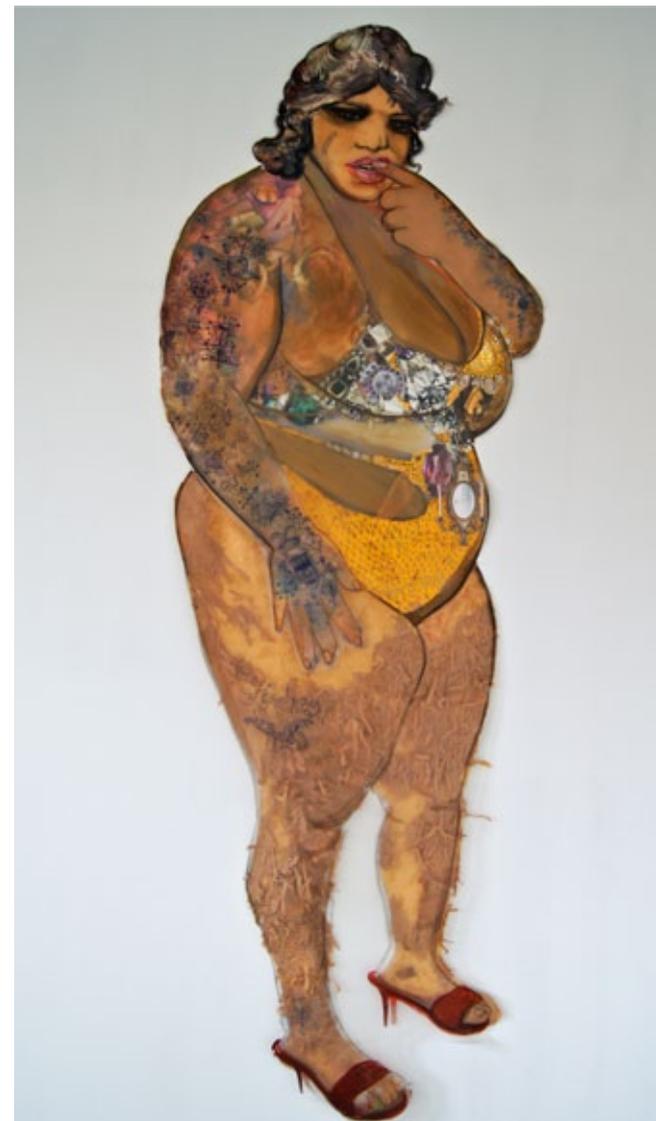
The focus on both fragmented female bodies and bodies that exceed their geometrical coordinates unites the work of the group of artists exhibited in *Disillusions*, whose life stories are scattered across the geographic coordinates of the Caribbean Americas (Venezuela, Trinidad, the Dominican Republic, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Guatemala, Colombia, Jamaica) and the United States. The show's curator, Tatiana Flores, an assistant professor of Art History and Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies at Rutgers, describes the Caribbean these women artists "represent" as "an expansive space that is not limited by national borders or island geographies." In *Disillusions* the female form in general, and that of the woman of color in particular, takes up an expansive, unbounded space. Both the Dominican artist, Firelei Báez, and Sofía Maldonado, from Puerto Rico, create larger than life, voluptuous, non-idealized, images of black and Latinā women as icons of precisely what cannot be assimilated into America's racialized standards of beauty, not without resorting to stereotypes and pornotropes of black and brown femininity.

The women figured in Maldonado's on site mural, created before the exhibit opened, are literally too big to be taken in. Large, floor to ceiling installations, they force an excorporative encounter with the Caribbean female body-shape, an encounter from outside ourselves, meeting the images where

Sofía Maldonado detail; *Untitled*, 2011  
Site-specific mural executed in New Jersey



they are at. Whereas ideal and idealized images encourage incorporation, a false, facile, identification with the Other, in Báez's *Untitled (Questions for Doig in Trinidad)*, 2010, the woman's finger, pressed coyly between red lips, evokes a fleshy eroticism that refuses the conventional viewer's easy assimilation of the image. When one's idealized image of the Other is threatened, a process of disidentification can occur which leaves one staring into the abyss of a femininity that has yet to be mythified.



Firelei Báez  
*Questions for Doig in Trinidad*, from the series  
*Geographic Delay*, 2011

If gargantuan female bodies are too big to be taken in, other artists included in *Disillusions* de-mythify or dis-illusion us of the fantasy-female body in the opposite way, portraying the female body in fragments, in bits and pieces that defy easy closure.

In *Faltantes 2/ Beauties*, 2009, the Colombian artist Ana Patricia Palacios makes it difficult for us to find a sublime sense of completion as we gaze upon the bodies of female land



mine victims affected physically by the gruesome history of war and militarization that spans the globe from Putumayo to Ghana and back. In her smaller pieces, *Sleeping Soldiers*, 2011 and *Red Army 2*, 2010, men and women together are “drawn into” the bodily language and codes of war.

Fragmented bodies also replicate the archipelago’s structure of ex-isled social

above: Ana Patricia Palacios, *Faltantes 2*, 2009

spaces and broken political histories. In her moving photographs of family members who were the victims of both political and social violence in Haiti, Vladimir Cybil Charlier points to the complete failure of communication and breakdown of community in the Caribbean. In *Map: Serenity and Punishment*, 2003, forms of social anomie on the island manifest as acts of violence that leave their scars on the body, the

body of her uncle, which she then marks with sequins as both a testimonial to and celebration of his humanity. Turning physical and emotional pain into a scopic and sensory pleasure, Charlier inscribes on the Caribbean male body the very dynamic of beauty and violence that makes the Caribbean an uncanny, bittersweet, emotionally and mentally jarring space. In *V for Victory* and *Red Cross* -- Tristan, her late male cousin’s delicate hands are boxed in, both emphasizing his skills as a DJ and feminizing the Caribbean male body as a site of affect, emotion, vulnerability, and love.

John Berger argued that in the traditional European oil painting of the female nude, onlooking “men act and women appear” solely for their gaze (*Ways of Seeing*, 47). From Nicole Awai’s use of creatively named Revlon nail polishes to create the color bars at the side of her images to Jessica Lagunas’s cut outs and collages of images of lips taken from women’s magazines in her series, *A flor de piel*, 2006, many of the artists in *Disillusions* comment on the micromanaging of the female body to fit the illusions of femininity required by the gazer. In “acting out” this role, however, “playing” themselves as women putting on a face to meet the world, the two video artists of the exhibit, Jessica Lagunas from Guatemala and Sandra Stephens from Jamaica, also use self-performance to go beyond the gaze.

top: Vladimir Cybil Charlier *Maps: Serenity and Punishment*, 2002

bottom: Vladimir Cybil Charlier *Red Cross Tristan*, 2009



In Stephens' *Hair* and in Lagunas' series of videos, both artists portray the creation of appearance as itself an act, performative, but also, manual, physical. Applying nail polish and lipstick so thickly that the acid seeps into one's nail beds and the wax bleeds outside of one's lip lines, combing out and styling one's hair, Lagunas and Stephens both solicit a haptic or tactile eye, pulling us into the materiality of the act of grooming the female self. Together, Stephens and Lagunas strive to shatter the illusion of female appearance by breaking up the image of beauty into its component parts and motions, thereby breaking up the gaze. Hands, eyes, lips—no amount of make-up turns these bits and pieces of bodies into coherent wholes. On the other hand, something of the sensory pleasure of these beautifying processes remains. Awa's color bars renamed as "sensation codes," the softness of Stephens' hair, the sticky texture of Lagunas's polish and lipstick, all of these textures take over from the gaze's predominant effect of distancing the viewer from the female body as a material and sensual subject-object in the world, the body of a subject with her own pleasures and

Jessica Lagunas  
*A flor de piel, #1, 2006*



Sandra Stephens  
*Hair, 2000*

Jessica Lagunas  
*Para verte mejor*  
(*The Better To See*  
*You With*), 2005

Jessica Lagunas  
*Para besarte mejor*  
(*The Better To Kiss*  
*You With*), 2003

Jessica Lagunas  
*Para acariciarte*  
*mejor (The Better*  
*To Caress You With)*,  
2003



desires.

Staying in the realm of pleasure and desire, fantasies and fables of femininity that rely on the visual for their support also recur in these video pieces. Lagunas titles her three videos,

*The Better To Kiss You With*, *The Better To See You With*, and *The Better to Caress You With*, in an evocation of Little Red Riding Hood off to meet the big, bad wolf. In a second piece, *Snow White Remixed*, a video and audio collaboration with Allie Tyre, Stephens also questions the narratives of identification that shape how we portray the black female self. As a very young Snow White fixes her hair, applies lipstick, and paints her nails with an air of insouciance, her attitude becomes an unconscious act of defiance against the racist silhouettes of the black female body parading, Kara Walker-like, behind her. Over the course of the video



Sandra Stephens & Allie Tyre *Snow White Remixed*, 2011

Snow White tells us she “really didn’t want to be in the mirror anymore” and proceeds to re-tell the tale more to her liking. Stephens culminates this re-enactment with Snow White throwing her apple at the viewer and literally shattering the mirror of the viewer’s gaze, breaking up the screen of cultural stereotypes hovering menacingly over the child as shadows.

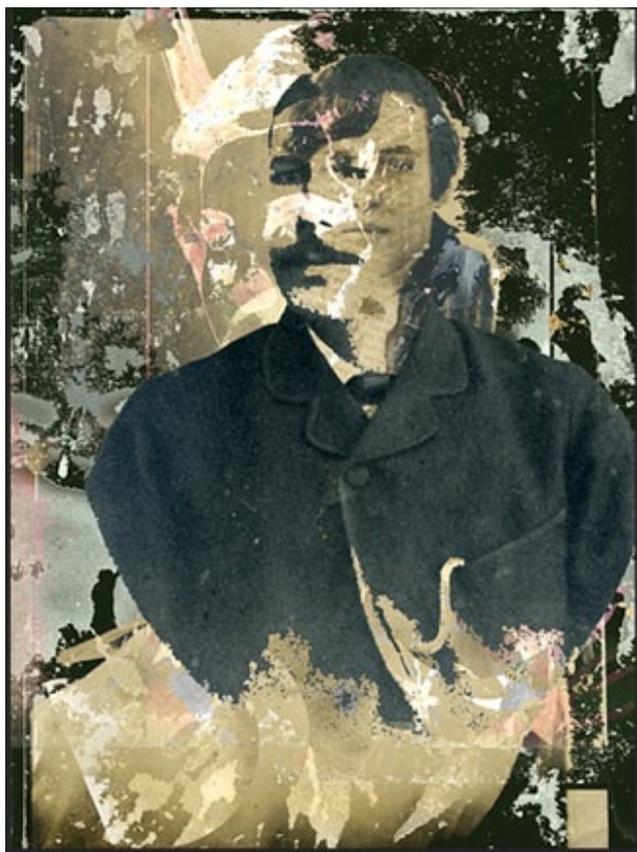
Frames, mirrors, screens, all depict the ways the social gaze can fix us as individuals onto prescribed grids, boxing us into domestic spaces, segmenting us in raced and gendered ways that deny our multiple and intersecting senses of self. In *Dormir en el sofá*, and *El lugar más calido* from 2009, the



Venezuelan artist María Elena Alvarez places her female figures within a grid with pages of writing further obscuring their identities. In these smaller pieces, the female faces and figures are mere silhouettes in the negative spaces of the grid, outlines of the female self depicted on and by the cultural screen. In a larger piece, however, *She, the Thinker*, 2011, one also gets the sense, that there is a certain kinetic freedom in this fragmentation.

Alvarez’s effaced drawings are strikingly similar in color and scale, if not in style, to Holly Bynoe’s defaced photographs, *DeSantos*, 2010, and *Generation Fight*, 2010, digitally photoshopped and manipulated to emphasize both processes of “remembering

Holly Bynoe  
*DeSantos*, 2010

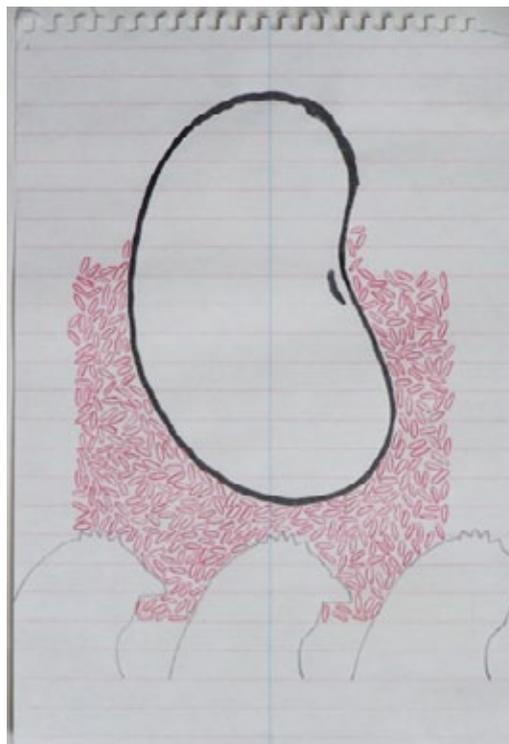


and inevitable erasure” (hollybynoe.com). Like the young woman whose dark and beautiful face hovers in the background of *Generation Fight*, Bynoe is interested in a Caribbean subject caught within the fictionality of her history. As she describes further, “Tangled lineages and migrations are dissected to expose figures and faces that are distorted, collapsed and veiled.” The fractured, shredded, layered, image defies the grid’s efforts to fix the self in signifiers of a limited, gendered or racialized self.

The very ephemerality of identity, and the subjective and contingent nature of the narratives we use to fix female identities, are captured both in form and in medium by a number of the artists who play with the tension between the fragility of paper—their scraps, their bits and pieces—and the solidity of objects. Awai’s “*local ephemera*” are reproduced on “field drawings”; in Palacio’s drawings the brutality and arbitrariness of war is captured in notebook pages with frayed, torn edges. Asha Ganpat, an American artist of Trinidadian descent, creates a “sculpture” from meticulous, trompe l’oeil renderings on paper of meaningful “family-objects.” The illusion of the three-dimensionality of these objects mirrors the tenuous nature of the artist’s family memories of, and connections to, distant, unfamiliar relatives with alien island ways. The USA/ Haitian artist Rejin Leys also uses paper drawings to tell stories. Images from Leys series of *100 drawings* lightly evoke themes of hunger and nutrition,



Firelei Báez  
*Untitled, from the series A Carib's Jhator*, 2011



Rejin Leys  
*100 Drawings, Including Secrets*, 2011

domesticity, feminine apparel and mother hens, but there is no fixed code the artist wishes to impose beyond the chain of associations and stories viewers bring to these delicate images. Making collages of everyday print forms, the patterns on the insides of the folds of envelopes, Leys’ drawings evoke the fleeting and fragile beauty of the quotidian, the scraps and bits and pieces of the everyday that are the very antithesis of fantasies of Caribbean femininity.

The “natural” fecundity of the Caribbean, often associated with femininity, also appears in *Disillusions* in a much changed form. In two works from Báez’s *Carib's Jhator series, flora*, fauna and riotous color erupt from canvases in which



Vladimir Cybil Charlier  
*Basket of Women*, 2008



Melissa A. Calderón  
*Linger*, 2011

female silhouettes, voluptuous in form and act, overwhelm the senses, overpower the eye and overthrow the static grid of the visual frame. In Stephens' *Intangibility*, it is the substantial, bulky presence of a tire that holds within it the sound and evocation of the Caribbean sea. The tire also becomes a more capacious, circular frame for the floor projection of a fluid, hidden, female self, both washed over and potentially washed away in the waves.

In Charlier's *Basket of Women*, the artist's younger self bears the heavy burden of scattered images of *The Birth of Venus* and the *Venus de Milo* from a European artistic tradition. They threaten to topple out of a basket made of someone else's words from stories such as Alice in Wonderland.

However, the delicate strokes of the drawings, the vintage style of the photograph and the book illustrations, the lightness of the paper canvas and the fragility of the artist tape holding them all together, all suggest also the fictionality of identity that Bynoe emphasizes, but oriented here toward a more whimsical

appreciation for the power of the child's imagination, that wide-eyed wonder that is also the true portrait of the artist as a young woman. Finally, in her performance piece and sculpture for the exhibit, *Linger*, the now grown-up female artist, Melissa A. Calderón, an American of Puerto Rican descent, literalizes the concepts of diaspora identity and home as an empty but fertile "nest," the nest of her art from which she nurtures herself, like many of her fellow female artists of the Caribbean and its diasporas.

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## María Elena Álvarez

Interview by Allison Harbin

AH: I would like to begin by asking you about your process and your artistic background, including your influences (artistic or otherwise). I am particularly interested in asking you about the way in which you approach making art and how that affects your work's meaning.

*MEA: I started studying art at Greenfield Community College, Massachusetts. The direction I took there was photography, although the foundation courses in drawing and design were of great interest and influence to me as well. I honestly think that since I wasn't able to draw or paint the ideas I had in mind, photography served as a stage for those ideas and compositions that I wanted to deliver.*

*Regarding my influences, I remember viewing books at the library about Robert Rauschenberg several times during the week. But my courses were all about painting, and I really wanted to photograph because I could place objects into a scene that I could not draw, let alone paint. While getting my BFA at the Hartford Art School, I got to know Ida Applebroog's work, and her work really caught me, along with the photographs of Lorna Simpson.*

*I have always been interested in mixing mediums, and placing visual elements in conjunction with others that create conflict or tension. So when I have an idea, I draw it on a piece of paper, or on the studio wall. I collect*

*these drawings and lists of ideas, and sometimes, I photograph the wall, and that photo becomes a relevant element in the composition of the piece. It is like the recording of the thought, I find this process very important, honest, and most of the time, more important than actually taking a photograph.*

AH: So for you, photography served as an immediate tool to express yourself, and as you have continued making works it has become a way to think through work, even if there are no photographic elements to the finished product?

*MEA: Yes, that's just it—photography is more of a way of thinking for me, I think through photography to the painting, or drawing,*

*whatever it may be. The photography that I have always made has been mostly preconceived and staged for the camera. So I make lots of preliminary drawings of ideas, and potential scenes.*

*One day, I decided that my drawings of these scenes and objects were actually photographs, and I still believe that they are; they are drawn photographs, and if the idea of an image is written in my notebook, that is also a photograph, it is a written photograph. So these days I photograph my drawings and notes, and they are also a part of my photographic production. Just like memories, they are photographs, but are not printed on paper.*

AH: The way you conceive of a photograph as a thought process rather than a medium is very interesting for me. In particular, the way you describe your desire to evoke a sound

in your work, a nonvisual element through a visual discourse. Could you speak more about that?

*ME: When I was in grad school my colleagues at NYU used to say “say no to metaphor” whenever I walked into the room. I was kind of known as this very symbolic metaphorical person, and I think a lot of that is translating from Spanish to English, but conceptually the idea remains in the work, rather than the language I use to speak about it. It is a very important challenge for me to try to portray that. The art works are already visual, it’s already there in front of your eyes, so the challenge is to try to transcend that and create something that is not visual, the sound of things is not visible so it is a bigger challenge.*

AH: I think your comment about meanings not translating perfectly from Spanish to English is apt,

and in many ways not really about language translation at all, but about the process of making visual art with meaning.

*ME: Yes, I think the wonderful thing about visual art that I realized as a native Spanish speaker in an American graduate school, where I had to speak in English, is that there are so many elements about a work of art that cannot be described in any language, so in a sense, there is no translation barrier between English or Spanish, or any language for that matter in visual art because the piece is always more than what can be described by language.*

*And I think the negotiation between the two is different for me now than it was when I was in school. I think when I thought in Spanish and worked in the context where English was the main language it worked as an advantage in*



María Elena Álvarez, *Solarium*, 2006. Mixed media on cotton, 11 3/4 x 15 in.



terms of art making. There is a point of no translation in either direction, there is never 100% communion of thinking, speaking, listening, and making in any language, so being aware of that mystery became a wonderful “empty zone” that is hoping to be filled. For instance, it takes many years to dream in

English when you are not a native English speaker and I think the same is true of my work.

You pointed out a good example in terms of language, which is that in my work I use drawings on books that are written in Spanish, sometimes in my collages there is a

character or object sitting who I depict as drawing on the page of a Spanish book. But the viewer doesn’t need to know or speak Spanish to know that the figure is sitting and working in a certain atmosphere in the drawing. At the same time, for those who do speak Spanish, I leave certain words that connect and

expand throughout the whole art work.

I hope you can sense the same thing without having to read what the piece of paper in my collages says. I do pick texts that I’m specifically interested in; I want to be conceptually honest to that little amount of context.

AH: That is a really beautiful way of putting it.

ME: For example, I take books by Virginia Woolf as a way of honoring the ideas she inspires in me, and if you recognize the Virginia Woolf quotes, then great, but if not, I hope the idea remains. I know it was definitely an important part of the process that produced the image, so for me, it feels right to leave a visual referent to it in the final product.

AH: That’s really interesting, I’ve always thought of Virginia Woolf’s work as very visual, like a “written

photograph” to borrow your term. I’m also interested in Lorna Simpson’s influence on your work

ME: To me, Simpson’s work is very clean, in a way that my work is not. I remember her photographs of women, very short but very clear statements. Of course it’s a very different discourse from the one I am trying to work with.

AH: What do you consider to be the final product?

ME: Once I have this bank of “images,” the need to create a context for them leads me to paper or canvas, so I find myself in search of a sort of final print. The canvas becomes the paper, but the canvas has the advantage to become a base that is an ample host to more meanings.

Since my of my images talk about interior spaces, both physical and personal, the canvas started to be a

grid in order to establish the ground, the floor, the principal stage for what I think are small visual narratives. So within this ample plane of the canvas, or paper, there is room.

AH: We’ve talked a lot about photography today, but your work has in many ways departed from photography as a medium. What led to your decision to steer your work towards more hand-drawn and gestural pieces?

ME: I still use photographs, or portions of them, in my paintings, so they become a part of the final painting as well. I think the decision of switching into painting and drawing, without completely leaving photography, was due to a need to be able to execute more manual content into the work. I always thought that one photograph wasn’t enough. The same way I think only painting or only drawing sometimes is not enough. The way my work is now the photographs

join the painting portions of the canvas in a way that is like painting onto painting, it is a layering process.

The other thing is that once I have all the elements on my plane of action, a previous conceptual process has already occurred: staged photography, drawing and writing, which could also have been taken from specific books I'm interested in, etc. Through all of these processes I somehow arrive at a guarantee for the ideas, and then the mark making, painting, and sometimes sewing completes, and expands the piece into new meanings.

So I've been interested in incorporating photography into/as painting, and lately, I've been using photographs as portions of the paintings. I don't know what to tell you about which influences the other. I am interested in making

photography a part of painting, and maybe I am pushing a bit too much on that, as well as of making photos of a painted reality.

AH: What is your relationship to craft, photography, and the way in which you fuse the two? Your work has a handmade feel to it that most people trained as photographers either completely avoid or are not interested in, do you see this as a tension in your work?

MEH: I think the biggest challenge has been, besides trying to paint, to set all the elements in a way that they not only coincide formally, but more importantly, in a way that they don't "speak" individually, but rather as part of a whole idea.

This is my struggle, to find a way to blend mediums together, I truly think of them as painted drawings, and drawn photographs. That is what they are,

because they are the possible drawings of a photograph I could one day take. The immediacy of the idea is drawn on paper-- that to me is a photograph, or at least the idea of a photograph. The only difference to me is that it's not on photo paper.

AH: While your recent works are definitely wrought and worked over in a way that is more like a collage or painting, I can't help but see these images through the framing of a photograph. Perhaps it's the grid-like quality of some of your recent pieces that reminds me of a contact sheet, or perhaps the grid of a darkroom enlarger.

I feel that photographers turned painters bring both chaos and reality to the canvas, which is really important. Usually you see painters turned photographers, and with them you see a lot of formal compositional elements, and a preoccupation with

negative space. In your work there is kind of the opposite effect, there is a layering additive process to it that is not quite photographic nor painterly. MEA: I completely agree, I have a lot of respect for what painters do with photography. I think the challenge is mixing concepts.

AH: So you see your practice as a mixing of concepts and ideas?

MEA: As I said, in my studio I have a wall that is my image bank. On it, I have all these faces and actions, all of these disparate elements are cut out and pasted onto the wall with masking tape. It begins very crudely, but next to this wall, I have the canvas. When I start working I then take a face or an action from my wall and put it on the canvas, and they go in and out. It's very fluid, things go on and off of the canvas. I judge between what's going on on the canvas and the

importance of what the drawings I've collected on my wall represent.

For example, in the image I sent you of the girl playing ping-pong you can see this juggling. I sent you that image because it speaks to what I was talking about, about how the creative process is invisible.

Photography speaks to the drawings as well as to the process of drawing and collecting. On the image, to the left of the figure is the edge of the canvas and immediately beyond that, my wall, and as I was working, I looked at it and I thought "this image is also something that needs to be imported into the work."

AH: Would you think of yourself as building a visual archive for your painting/ photographs?

MEA: Yes, definitely, a lot of my work is using the archive as the actual work; it shows the process. With what I'm developing now with

my new work, I'm trying to invert the traditional places or roles for each medium. For example, you see a photograph of a ping pong ball, on top of painting, then you see a photograph of a drawing of a painting. What's inside the photograph is a painting, but physically it's a photograph.

The picture I sent of my two recent pieces are based on drawings that I made while in grad school. I used the shape of a 35mm negative (really long and narrow) to draw story boards to one day photograph, but then I just took the drawings, which were photographic thoughts. The two paintings I finished yesterday are just that, negative strips, they are empty in that there is no figure. It's like abstraction but I'm not stepping into abstraction because of the formal terms and those political concerns that abstraction represents in Venezuela, but rather, I'm working

through the idea of the photographic negative.

I'm interested in things that are not visible, such as sound. When you see these new paintings, you will only see black, white, and gray rectangles, you will see no image, you have to put your own in. You cannot see memory, so you cannot see the content of these paintings. I'm calling these pieces "Image bank," so you confront these paintings, which look like drawings, and then you see all these rectangles that emulate the negative strip, it's up to you to put whatever you want in it. I was trained that it was the idea that was the important thing, and you had to find the medium that would be most effective for the idea. So right now this is what I'm working on. If I need the figure later, I will grab it from my wall, but if not, I will leave it there. For now, I don't need to use the figure in my works.

AH: 35mm rectangle contact sheets also strike me as part of the invisible process of photography, for example, only the photographer sees the contact sheet, and nowhere in the finished product of the photographic image is a suggestion that it was printed first in a contact sheet form. It's very interesting that you are making visible through the process of painting this photographic process that is usually only for the photographer. I think a lot of strict photographers and a lot of strict painters would shudder at the thought, which is always exciting.

MEA: I think we are at a time now that we have to explore more, and work on the diffusion of the creative process, of that which is not visible. With my own work, I want to make viewers want to go further than their first impression, which is why I throw hints, so that the viewer can be engaged in something that

is less immediate than the actual object that is there. So people can become more interested in how the work is made. I want the process to become the most beautiful part of art making, which is partly about honoring, but also about placing photography into the shape that I honestly use, in a way that photography works for me specifically. Photography for me is a sketchbook, a way of thinking more than a way of looking. The process of thinking is very broad, so to be honest with you, the most effective way for me to explain it is that both photography and drawing are my way of thinking out the work, to make it.

AH: Did you find it difficult to negotiate two different countries and languages while in graduate school, and how have these two sources of practice, from your United States education and your home and practice in Venezuela differed?



María Elena Álvarez, *Corazón se busca un corazón*, 2005. Black and white photograph, book pages, thread, and acrylic on cotton

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*MEA: I probably felt that more when I was in graduate school, but now that my life is here in Venezuela, I feel my art consists entirely of influences in this context, I see no division between the United States and Venezuelan practices in my work. However, I do think right now my biggest challenge is negotiating the two dominant schools of art making here in Venezuela, and trying to stay away from the debate between abstraction and figuration that is a very big concern for visual artists here. I was probably in the situation of negotiating that in art school, but right now it is not an issue because I am mostly working in Venezuela.*

*In Venezuela, abstraction means contemporary art. Someone recently asked me what this meant, and here in Venezuela we have both positions, one that states that we do have a well-known and*

*well-established abstract practice, and that this is inherited in our culture. However, there is also a smaller, or less popular, history of figuration and portraits that came from artists trained in Europe. So we have both positions: abstraction and figuration. In many ways, it seems almost genetic, this constructivism and abstraction is a part of us, and of course politically, we have a tendency towards this. You do not see more narrative works here, like with Mexican muralists, it is not as relevant here in Venezuela.*

*However, I don't want to enter this debate between figuration and abstraction, I do not think it is a fair fight. It is like a boxing match between a very large muscular man and a really thin meek man, so it's not a fair fight. I also use figuration and metaphor in my work, and this is a very important element of my work. My*

*work has never been about pure abstraction, so for this reason, I don't really fit well into either camp, I use both.*

*AH: I think that anxiety, or struggle, comes across in a really beautiful way in your work. On the one hand you have a very disciplined rigor that you apply through your process, but you also have these very fragile line drawings that oppose the abstract tradition in Venezuela you mentioned. .*

*MEA: Yes, exactly, the same issues are in my exploration about painting, though I prefer the term painted drawings. So I am drawn to both, visually and emotionally, both abstraction and figuration, I'm drawn in the same percentage to both. But, either I cannot go with only one.*

*It is problematic, which is why I cannot be in that fight. For example, I pursue the blending of those two things, and this might*

*sound very colloquial, but I find abstraction by itself very cold, but at the same time, there are some things in the formal aspects of it that fascinate me, and with figuration, I am not a good craft person in drawing and painting, I wish I could be better, so I do not want to develop these things about light, contrast, but I'm not interested at all in the formal issues of figure painting...*

*AH: Your comments have been very insightful. Thank you for talking to me about your work.*

*MEA: Thank you Allison, I really appreciate the opportunity to discuss the work and, in particular, the process. I really think that the process is what really contains the relevance of the artwork. But, see, the process is not visible; that is why I use its recording in those forms I have described. I think that ultimately, the trick is to build a bridge*



*that connects the invisible process with the invisible interpretation of the viewer. This, when it works, breaks down myths about the artist being isolated, and their art as a sort of soliloquy. Both places, the artist's work and the viewer's interpretation, are intimate, private somehow, but they can meet. We don't see it, but we work at least to sense it.*

María Elena Alvarez,  
*Viaje a Bélgica*, 2011.  
Digital photograph,  
acrylic on canvas, 30 x45"

# Nicole Awai

Interview by Allison Harbin

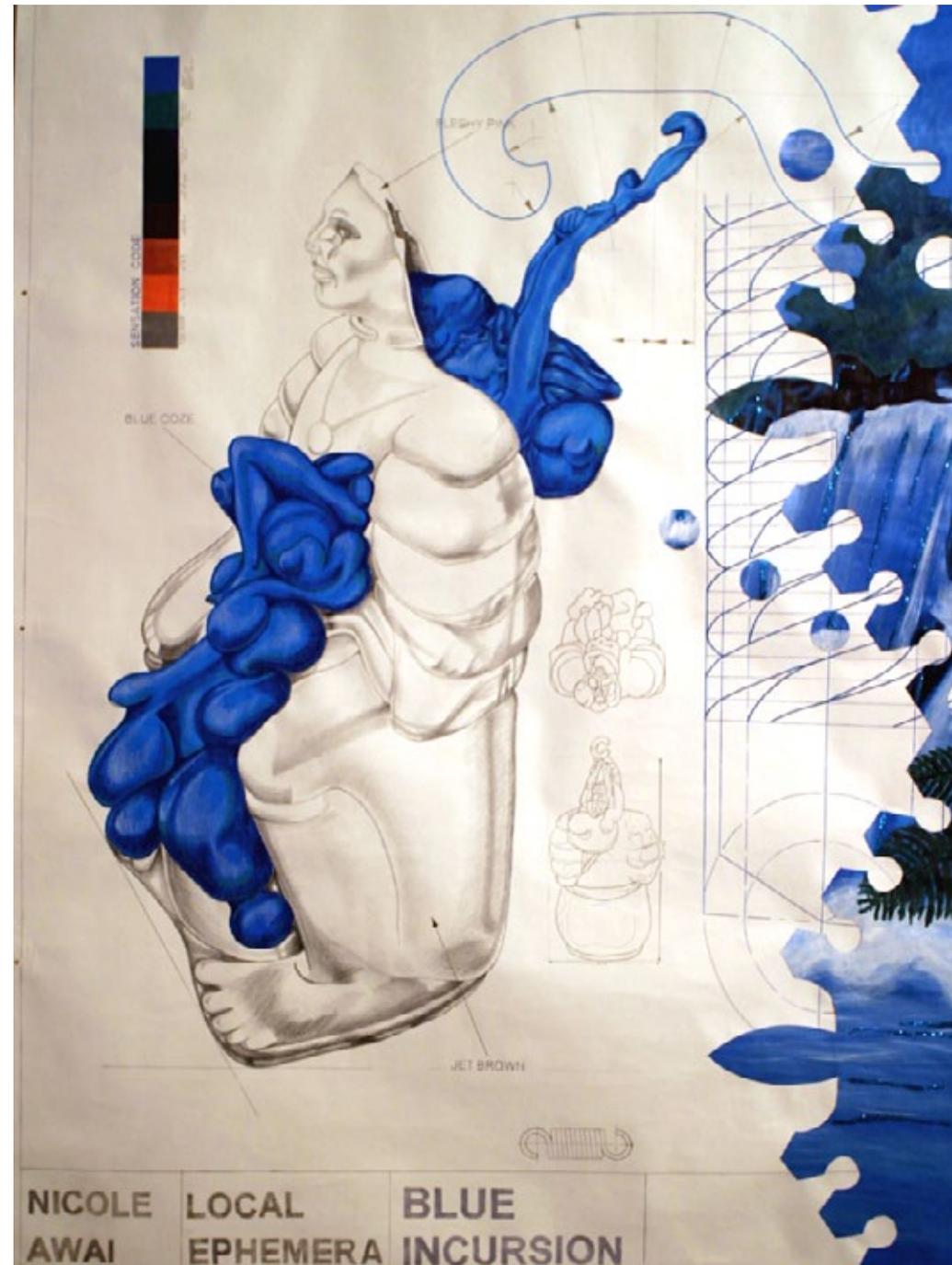
Allison Harbin: I'd like to begin with a comment you made during your presentation at the *Disillusions* symposium. You said that upon immigrating to the United States you found yourself an "object of expectations" of what it is to be Caribbean. How has your perception of your identity as an object of external expectations shifted, first from your move from Trinidad to Florida, and then from Florida to New York? How have you changed or challenged your work as a result of these experiences?

Nicole Awai: My practice has always been responsive. When I came to the US, the situation in the southern United States was something that I couldn't ignore; it affected me deeply. This was 20-something years ago in central Florida, around 1987. Things have changed there to some extent, but that particular landscape and the interactions that I was having with people there at the time were challenging for me. In Trinidad, issues of race and color were not the same. For the first time in my life I was really the "other," and the way that people interacted with me was something that I could not anticipate. It also had a lot do

with age; those who grew up in the 1950s had a certain expectation of people from the Caribbean, which was slightly different from younger people, who assumed we were all ganja smoking. While the reactions were varied, my experience of people's expectations of me as a Caribbean woman was often hyper-sexualized.

AH: Did you feel this need to deny or fulfill these expectations?

NA: No, I channeled this into the work. I'm a responsive artist and that was the time when a lot of crucial immigration issues in Florida were happening, so throughout the state there were these ongoing conversations about expectations and responsibilities. The work I made during this time responded to those issues. For instance, I was struck by the way people from here saw the Caribbean as a destination vacation spot and as a repository for sexual fantasies. You had white and black Americans who had a very specific history to each other, and, of course, you had me observing and responding to this relationship as well. That is a particular



Nicole Awai, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Blue Incursion*, 2002  
Graphite, acrylic paint, nail-polish and glitter on paper, 72 x 53"

culture that is different from, say; the way things are in New York. It's very interesting; African Americans in Central Florida at the time were often guarded and suspicious. And maybe they have a right to feel so, given the history of Florida and racism. One African-American person said to me regarding the whites there that "you can't trust them, they are recently renovated hicks." My work became both about the experience of being acted upon in this way in certain situations and also about observing. It was a very strange and interesting dynamic. And I was moving around and in it, and people were reacting and responding to me. I was paying attention to that, and, depending on whom I was interacting with, the expectation for me as a Caribbean woman would be different every time. And they wanted this expectation to be fulfilled. As human beings we all have these expectations.

AH: This amorphous and overwhelming aspect of being "an object of expectations" takes on interesting visual forms in your work, and I think your bringing together of painting, drawing, and mapping speaks to an attempt to resolve some of these exterior expectations on your own terms. Would you agree?

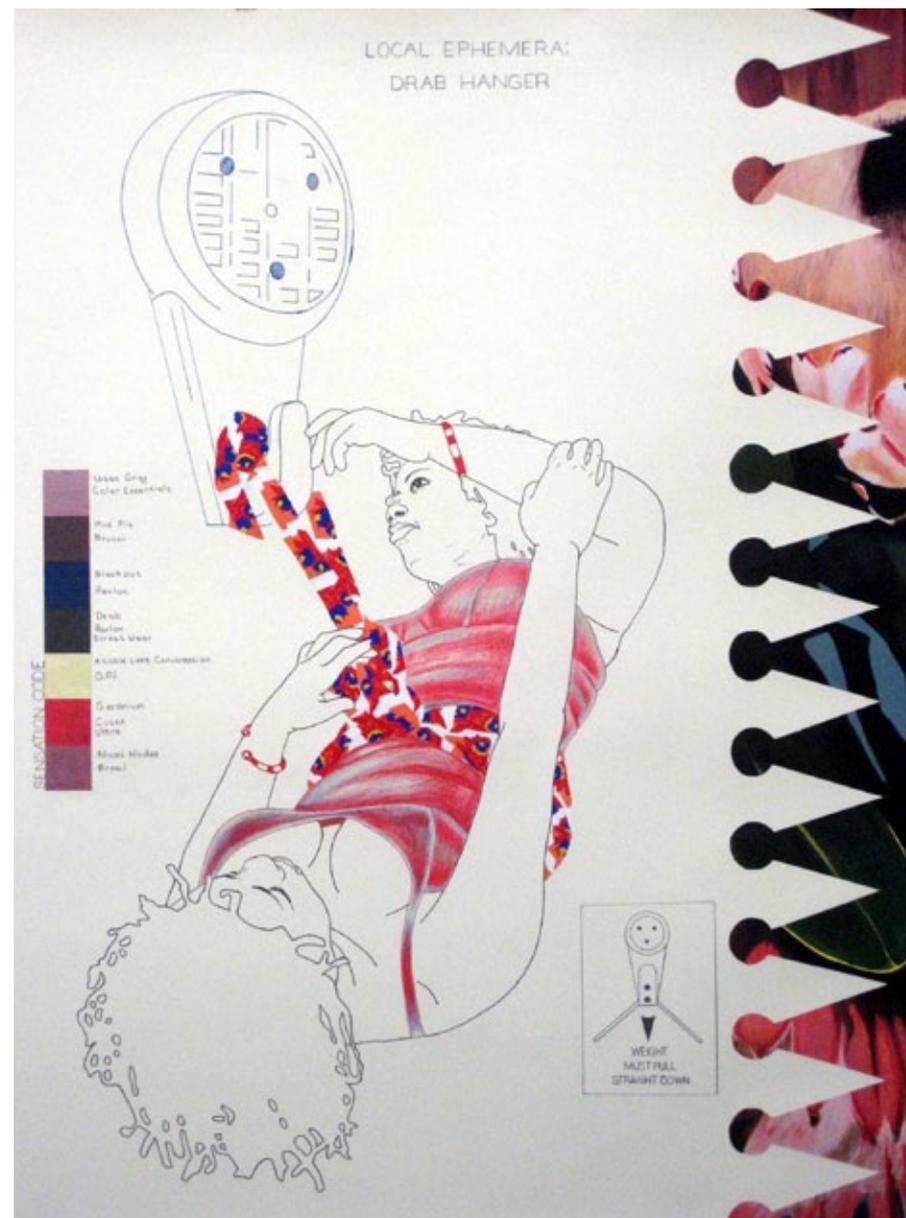
NA: The work that I showed in the panel discussion, I made in New York, but I was trying to give you a history of the effects of moving out of that space (central Florida) and that experience and how it informed an initial vision of things. I sometimes wonder if I had just come to New York directly, what my work would look like. Would it be different? I suspect it might have been, but I don't know how exactly. I'm aware that the work I made in Florida had an effect. Exterior places and experiences can really shape an artist's vision. Depending on where you are, interactions and experiences are going to shape things in you that you cannot anticipate.

Those drawings in the show are from a drawing series that I've been doing since 2003 called "Specimens from Local Ephemera," which is 'the world of in-between'. Those drawings are about the experience of being in that world and the occupants of that world. That drawing series started because I had to make some drawings for a sculpture installation that I wanted to do for the 2003 Biennial of Ceramic in Contemporary Art in Italy. When I did these drawings, I realized that nothing ever leaves you (my high school Technical Drawing classes), and that they seemed like blueprints, and I found those drawings fascinating. Then, I did a painting series, "Identifying Desire" that was actually my first foray into the idea of

this parallel world. When I look back on it now, what I think I was doing at the time was trying to find a device to move beyond an explicitly political critique of my work, which happened especially upon coming to New York, where people reacted to my work and classified it as "political" in the late 1990s and early 2000s. So I started wondering about ways to engage the viewer without being political, without letting them automatically negate the content as just political. I found that people bring their own history to things, and I know that as an artist, and I've always wanted to use that as a device, so I started using this more and more.

AH: Can you speak more about your conception of an audience, either specific or general, when you make your work?

NA: The one thing all artists want to do is to communicate and let everyone have an experience with the work. While as the artist you take ownership of what's going on in it, you also have to realize that the viewers bring their own histories to your work. So, I thought of this parallel world as a way to look at these same issues in a way that would not automatically impede these histories but, rather, let them be incorporated into the viewer's experience of my work.



AH: So you see this parallel world as a commonality, as a position between the viewer and artist, that we can all approach the work with our experience?

NA: Yes. I was using cultural artifacts, that were given to me or that I would find. People kept giving me decorative rum bottles from Trinidad that they thought I would want them because I was from Trinidad. I have about three or four that were given to me by American friends, so, therefore, if someone gives me something like this, I need to utilize it in my work. So initially, I used the Angostura Rum bottle and a Disney Tarzan action figure to create a physical and visual conversation between these objects. These characters were the occupants of this world but a referent to this world. They could come together as an amalgam that served as an investigation of a socio-political reality.

There was a conversation going on between these tropes in a 20th century context - Tarzan as this white dude who grows up in Africa and becomes leader of a tribe and the grinning Limbo Drummer Angostura Rum bottle. This can mean many things to many people depending on who and what you are. For example, in Trinidad we thought of the Angostura Rum bottle as something innocuous, but in the US there is the history of these

Nicole Awai, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Drab Hanger*, 2007  
Graphite, acrylic paint, nail-polish and glitter on paper, 50 x 38"

representations as being intentionally derogatory. I'm always fascinated by the multiple perspectives and interpretations of these cultural artifacts.

AH: In your series, "*Specimens from Local Ephemera*," of which there are two pieces in *Disillusions*, there seems to be the recurring trope of map legends and an attempt to locate oneself as well as one's identity externally. I have several questions about this, but to begin with, I'd like to ask you about your nail-polish legends. They seem to be an explicit set of feminine codes, as in only women are concerned with cosmetics or are aware of the titles. They themselves are playful phrases that you have taken very seriously in your work. Take, for instance "Drab," which is a Revlon nail color title, in your piece "*Specimen from Local Ephemera: Drab Hanger*."

NA: It's interesting you would say that, especially in relation to how men look at my work. I gave a talk at the Vilcek Foundation in New York during my solo exhibition there, and a male curator friend commented that he never noticed the naming of nail polish. It was something that men do not really pay attention to, and he was fascinated by it.

AH: Nail polish is a cultural object or something that only really women access or deal with. I see it as a very specific way into your work, so to speak.

NA: For all you know it might be men naming these things; that becomes another interesting thing as well. In more recent work, I've been very interested in OPI's nail color "Jade is the New Black," especially in the context of my work and its inference of the Afro-Asian experience in the Americas as my identity specifically. When I first came to New York, *The New Yorker* magazine did an issue called "Black in America" and there was article in there by Malcolm Gladwell in which Anglophone Caribbean folks were referred to as "the good blacks." I began thinking about the sociopolitical implications of that, but also as a way to look at what is a "good black" in art, in painting, in sculpture. I found many ways to look at this phrase. It's interesting because it's still very much an issue.

AH: The "model minority" phenomenon?

NA: Yes, and the nail polish color continued to re-inform my examination of that term.

I was never trying to be didactic in my use of common objects; I was aware of their accepted meanings, and I wanted to add to those meanings and further complicate them. Initially, I was physically using symbols from technical drawing, such as machine parts and other symbols for mechanical functions. For instance, there is an international symbol for a tension spring that I would incorporate. These symbols act as visual and linguistic



Nicole Awai, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Mix More Media!*, 2009  
Graphite, acrylic paint, and nail polish on paper, 30 x 50"

connectors. In my drawing *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Tension Springs* there is the rum bottle that looks like it's splitting in two, or mirrored, and there is this white ooze coming up, and from it several Tarzan action figures spring forth in such a way that it looks like something under pressure or tension. So there is the language of blueprints and the nail polish legends. These are both familiar canons. They don't really mean anything, but I know that viewers can draw a narrative of their own partly from my inclusion of these universal symbols or nail polish titles and colors.

AH: Do you see these legends with the nail polish colors as keys to beauty, especially since most cosmetics are made for white women, as an exterior prescription of identity? Since these colors you use as legends next to portraits of yourself weren't made for you, for your skin tone, it makes them very loaded and problematic, to say the least.

NA: I have worn just about all the nail polish colors that I used in the work. I've also used foundation, but I only used it in the "*Identifying Desire*" paintings because it was really hard to stabilize on the canvas, which is why I discontinued its use. The foundation didn't resonate long for me; I was more interested in the idea of false or implied narratives that the nail polish names provided, as well as how those colors

resonated with a palette I might use or relate to in the drawings.

AH: So it was technical, your switch to nail polish?

NA: Yes, it's not as transient as the foundation was, but I used the nail polish first with the makeup. I don't wear foundation now, but I did at the time, I did find one foundation color that wasn't too bad on me by Revlon, their "Color Stay" stuff, and the color was called "Toast," which always kind of amused me, that my skin was the color of toast. I think a lot has changed in this last decade, but, for me, 10 years ago things were very different. It's really poignant to see how we process these things. There was always the idea of the way things are codified. Eventually, the nail polish names became more interesting to me than the colors themselves, and what those names did when they were assembled into this cosmetic canon in terms of a legend or as something to guide you. I started referring to the legend as a "Sensation Code."

AH: It is so interesting to look at material culture and how it changes amongst socioeconomic pressures.

NA: Yes, absolutely.

AH: Are you critiquing this system of codes and representation, or are you embracing



Nicole Awai, *Go Go Gone*, 2011, Acrylic paint, polyurethane, nail polish, graphite, cotton lint fibers, wire form, wood, and construction foam, approximately 60 x 48 x 72 in.

them as a construct, as one would a legend for a map? Are they useful for you and your practice, or do you include them because they are problematic to you? I'm asking because they seemed removed, distant from and separate from the figuration of these pieces. They are off to the side, and often the colors in the legends don't reappear in the figures, at least not exactly. There seems to be a mismatch, as if the legend were arbitrarily placed and does not, or cannot, explain the figuration going on at the center of the image. But on the other hand, their relationship to each other spatially and visually is absolutely undeniable.

I'd also like to ask you more about the idea of the topsy-turvy doll that you embody by depicting yourself as doubled, as joined literally at your core. Yet, the traditional topsy-turvy doll, one of plantation mistress (wife) and the other of plantation 'mammy' (black slave servant that raised the mistress' children) are completely and diametrically opposed. Yet, in your works, they are the same person; in some cases, they are you. How do you resolve this in your work?

NA: *Just like the rum bottle, the topsy-turvy doll was given to me, it's already an amalgam of something, and it's just so messed up it screamed out to be in another world. Prior to that I was engineering conversations to create amalgams, but this was a ready-made amalgam for me. Implied in those dolls*

*is mirroring so I was quite aware of that in this as well, because that is the conversation that they're having.*

*For a short time I was using the two different sides of the configuration. This was part of the conversation that I wanted to imply and what slowly happened is that I realized I wanted to take it out of the antebellum dress. I knew its specific history, but beyond that I didn't want to have that history implied. I started to tear down that outfit so it didn't speak of that period. The doll began to transform itself in my work, and eventually, it was just about this mirroring, and the antebellum references associated with the original object were gone. And at that point I started to use myself on one end and another person at the other, so I changed the tops, they became simple tops or lingerie. Then I realized after a certain point, it was opposites or other sides of me. That it was really about the idea of duality within yourself, the aspects of female duality, the aspects of the troubled place of feminism at that time. Then, it moved out of that conversation because that was not the conversation I was trying to have anymore. It came to the simple place of being about the two sides of me. It is still the doubling, but it's unified. We all walk around with two sides of us.*

AH: There's also the element of the horrific past of the plantation that the topsy-turvy



Nicole Awai, *Tourist Dangle*, 2011. Wall drawing, size variable

doll embodies that is oppressive to both the racial body as well as the feminine body. There is no way outside of this oppression, but in engaging in these terrible dichotomies of the past, do you see a potential for overcoming them in your work, for moving beyond being “an object of expectations”?

NA: *It is so horrific it belongs in another world, which is why I placed it in Local Ephemera. This was already an amalgam; I didn't need to create one. It already part of a specific conversation, but then I was interested in continuing that conversation, for it to evolve into something else. And I think for me, the antebellum form only showed up in one or two drawings, in the one called “Specimen from Local Ephemera: Resistance with Black Ooze.” I wanted to amplify the connection to that title, this idea of a resistance, as elements being opposed to each other – the ooze coming out, the two Tarzan action figures emerging and bursting out of this thing. It was just a hot mess; it literally is what it was, a hot mess. I became more interested in the duality of the form, less specifically about that horrific past, just to move into a conversation of duality and to a lesser degree, the state of contemporary feminism. At that time I was often hearing about the shortfall of the feminist movement because, ultimately, it helped white women the most. It's interesting, this whole generation of young white women who resist*

*it, because really and truly the feminist movement helped them primarily. The same things are said about the civil rights movement in terms of women of color. For a short time, the topsy-turvy dolls referred to those conversations.*

AH: You also have described these pieces as “preparatory drawings”. Are they preparatory in that you see your work along a linear trajectory, and that you are in this state of becoming closer and closer to what it is you want to depict in your work? Or do you mean “preliminary drawings” in the sense that everything is preliminary, everything is in flux, in this state of becoming a future, of becoming a virtual reality that we cannot foresee?  
NA: *An artist is always evolving; an artist is always responding. I think of myself as a perceptual, rather than conceptual, artist, in terms of process, in being responsive, listening to the work and letting it tell you where it wants to go next. You must be open to that and see that; you become open through the process of it.*

AH: Can you speak more on that? Being a perceptual rather than conceptual artist?

NA: *I am not a conceptual artist. I am a perceptual artist. I am aware of what is going on around me in the process, of making and of thinking. I am always evolving as an artist. It's not that there aren't things in your experience*

*that won't come back, but rather things change. I definitely think of myself as being a far better artist than I was 10 years ago. I am synthesizing things better.*

AH: When I think about the process of becoming, I think of the question of how to utilize the past to reinvigorate or reconfigure the present. How do you see your past work as a Caribbean artist as informing your current practice, if at all?

NA: *What I'm working on now doesn't have anything to do with the Caribbean in particular, but only in the sense that it is a part of me. Right now, I consider myself as having a responsive practice to the American landscape/experience that I live in everyday, so that is what probably stays most consistent in my work. I am a little hesitant to be labeled singularly as Caribbean, I see myself as reacting to issues in the United States and New York, in particular. While I will always be from the Caribbean, I don't see the need to constantly define my work as being of the Caribbean in this sense.*

# Firelei Báez

Interview and introduction by Tashima Thomas

Firelei Báez is an artist of Haitian–Dominican descent who lives and works in New York. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Cooper Union and her Master of Fine Arts from Hunter College. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, and she was an artist-in-residence at The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Workspace Program. Her work has received many distinguished awards, including The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Award in Painting, the Bronx Recognizes Its Own Award (BRIO), and The Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Award. Báez was raised in Dajabón, Dominican Republic near the northeastern border with Haiti. Though the Dominican Republic has a historically contentious relationship with Haiti, Báez acknowledges the permeability of shared experiences between these two spaces. Her work blurs boundaries of shape and form, color and context, mythology and memory. She is exhibiting four works in *Disillusions: Questions for Doig in Trinidad* (2011); *Just Another Geographer, in Search of Space Which Will Fit His Poetic Design*, from the 'Carib's Jhator' series (2011); *Trading Twelves* (2011); and *Recalibration of the Real* (2011), both from the same series.

*Questions for Doig in Trinidad*, from the *Geographic Delay* series, is a mixed-media collage of a woman whose commanding size (120 x 36") spans over two levels of the gallery space. A network of tattooed signs and symbols is articulated on her expansive flesh and unshaved legs. She wears a multi-colored, jewel-encrusted swimsuit as she stands with a raised finger parting her lips in a gesture of prescribed seduction. However, this is not a seductive image but quite the contrary. It challenges the expectations of Caribbeanness, black female subjectivity, and the exploitation of hypersexualized bodies of color. The title references the Scottish-born blue chip painter Peter Doig who currently lives and works in Trinidad. The conceptual interrogation of Doig in Trinidad through this female body may be read as a reflection on the intellectual colonization of the Caribbean.



In *Just Another Geographer, in Search of Space* which Will Fit his Poetic Design, Báez creates an anthropomorphic body festooned with color and light, flora and fauna. The two-legged, high-heeled figure has a posterior of magenta blossoms in gold and green clouds. Her headdress is made of palm trees and sunshine. In contrast with *Questions for Doig in Trinidad*, the self-assuredness of the female stance connotes a powerful composure and a performative consciousness.

Báez's two smaller works from the *Carib's Jhator* series further her investigation of anthropomorphic female beings and verdant bodies, their whimsical protrusions or headdresses reminiscent of Carnival celebrations. Although I refer to these extensions of the body as "headdresses," these mythical bodies appear in a way that dissembles detailed descriptions of heads, torsos, and extremities. The almost silhouetted figures conceal their borders, encoding beginnings and endings and thereby allowing for a more ambiguous and fluid interpretation of the work.

TT: Firelei, I was wondering if you could talk about who have been some of your artistic influences and what inspires you.

FB: *I moved around a lot while growing up and changed schools repeatedly, which didn't allow for much of a formal art education. Among my earliest influences were the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci. I learned to draw from*

Firelei Báez  
*Untitled, from the Geographic Delay, 2010.*  
Gouache and ink on paper, 36 x 84 "

studying reproductions of his work. When I finally had the opportunity to take art as an elective while studying psychology at a local community college, I realized that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. My professor told me about Cooper Union's prestigious tuition-free program, and I was fortunate to be accepted. At this point in my formal art education, I had pretty much only been exposed to reproductions of classical European art.

TT: So your point of departure was the canon of art history basically in its most traditional sense.

FB: Yes, exactly. My first introduction to contemporary art was in Miami at the Rubell Family Collection, during that same community college elective art class. The collection is located in what used to be the main storage warehouse for Miami's Drug Enforcement Administration. It was there that I saw Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work and his series of posters, and I thought, "This is contemporary art!" After that, I started actively choosing things that I liked. I began looking at the work of artists like Ana Mendieta and Trenton Doyle Hancock. I was interested in their mythmaking. Then, I started looking at works by Kara Walker, Helen Gallagher, and Walton Ford. I became interested in presenting natively fluent personal cultural narratives that were neither ethnographic nor political

but globally informed reinterpretations of regional mythologies and traditions. My work became a convergence of interest in anthropology, science fiction, black female subjectivity and women's work.

TT: You talked a little about mythmaking and the appearance of the mythological body is definitely is a recurring subject in your work. Why do you think mythmaking is so important?

FB: I think it's important for me because growing up we moved around a lot, which kind of left me rudderless. Even as a young child, I would create these environments in my bedroom from whatever fabrics, shoeboxes, or other materials I had available. Beginning with a box and building from there, I would construct environments one on top of the other, and then, of course, I would always have to let them go. Within that process we have this building, building, and building going on, and, in the end, we have this letting go. The image creation process functions in an almost identical way, through accumulation. Building up is an anchoring. Culturally, it works the same way. How can we possibly identify with this land or that land when we don't belong to either one? What is it that makes us feel like we belong while we're there? And those are the kinds of things that you make up, both mentally and physically while you're

in there. The images I create may seem pastoral, as in *Ciguapa Habilis*, but they are visceral reactions to living in an urban environment. Here is this feral creature or houseplant, enclosed within a white space. People wanted to know how is it that I live in such an urban environment, and, yet, the city doesn't show up in my work, but it does. It's readily available in the year-long portrait series, *Can I Pass? Introducing the Paper Bag Test to the Fan Test*. Through the daily logging of the changes in my hair, skin, and gaze, this anonymous urban creature, a city inhabitant, emerges.

TT: I find mythology very important and one of the reasons is because it gives us a framework for understanding our environment. Mythology reveals the mysteries of where we are and why we are—as you stated, "anchoring" us and also serving as a lens through which we are able to understand ourselves, our motivations, destinations, and others. In that way it is sine qua non to our existence. In other words, we need mythologies. Let's go back to the mythologized figures, where we have beings that are difficult to decode, both because of the details of their physical framework and their borders. Where does one part of the anatomy start or stop?

FB: My formative years were spent in the mountains between Haiti and the Dominican Republic in a place called Dajabón, so from

an early age, I've been aware of borders. I've also been thinking about the female body as being this permeable thing and, especially, how the Caribbean body is often viewed or understood as being so fecund that, unless it's been exhausted, it's just going to replenish itself immediately. This thing that is at the point of rotting, that you have to prune so that it doesn't grow wild on you. I think this is in relation to agriculture in the Caribbean. There's been this excessive use of pesticides on the crops there. Women of African descent have the highest amount of ovarian cysts and ovarian tumors, creating these abnormal growths within the body. I know so many young women of African descent who have had to have surgery to remove ovarian cysts and tumors. The female body is affected by the pumping in of all of these pesticides, which distort and disease the body creating these abnormal growths. The making of mythologies is, in a way, also a process of relearning and re-contextualizing history.

TT: Let's move on to talk about process. How do you feel about the use of line in your work as it appears repeatedly in a way that is very dedicated and delicate? Do you find line meditative?

FB: Yes, I find both line and pattern to be meditative. It's almost like I have to leave myself and repeat the mark. I work more effortlessly when I'm in that meditative

state. Sometimes I come in and out of it. I find that when I come out of that state of concentration that it's harder going back to work on the piece so I prefer to stay in that place until I finish. I painted *Ciguapa Habilis* for instance, which is about ten feet tall, in about one day, while lost in the mark making.

TT: That is a very large intricate piece; lots and lots of really beautiful lines. The pieces included in *Disillusions* are from the *Carib's Jhator* and the *Geographic Delays* series. I was wondering if you could talk a little about the idea of the *Carib's Jhator* as a transformative entity. In other words, why do you think we carry within us this desire for transformation as a personal and universal experience?

FB: *A Jhator* is a Tibetan sky burial—where the body is placed on a mountaintop, exposing it to the elements and to birds of prey, releasing it from its earthly realm. I was drawn to this idea of actively releasing the body both physically and culturally. I wanted to bring that point of release to my work, to make room for these black bodies outside their heavy Caribbean histories. It's hard to leave your body behind though, especially when your body is always being thrown up in your face. The question is: How to remove weight, to move toward lightness? How to do this while still acknowledging the particular history of a body that has often

been used as the only cultural capital we had? Going beyond it as a kind of psychic release. It's a willful, stubborn hopefulness. The willfulness is expressed as being a part of a living thing with constant cycles, being aware of change and mentally preparing yourself to pull a rabbit out of a hat at a moment's need. (Robert Storr spoke about a similar release and lightness in David Hammons' work.) You have to believe that you will have a change or transformation. Nothing should be constant. Growing up as an urban nomad—willfully believing that change is going to happen and it's going to be positive—in a way, it just gives hope. The only way to keep one's agency is to have hope.

TT: I'm interested in the appearance of the tropically lush landscape/bodyscape. Could you talk about this some more?

FB: They are mostly reactions to historical texts on the Caribbean landscape which describe it, both in negative and positive terms, as particularly female; from Columbus' first descriptions of the New World, to Antonio S. Pedreira and Tomás Blanco in Puerto Rico, Édouard Glissant in Martinique, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott in the Anglophone Caribbean, José Lezama Lima and Antonio Benítez-Rojo in Cuba among many others. Their words, whether full of fond disdain or frustration constantly brought up the image of an



overly fecund, languid and passive female landscape that needed to be controlled. I entered this Caribbean discourse with a contemporary understanding that it's not just the landscape; it affects real bodies in real time. The female body is posited as a reflection of culturally conceptualized notions of place. In an urban environment, one finds a type of nostalgia for a remembered landscape. Growing up on the border of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, despite their tensions, the landscape still nurtured me. I was able to play freely within it. Once in an urban environment I almost had this eerie feeling of kinship between myself and a domesticated house plant. You have this domestication of the landscape/bodyscape in contained spaces in the city. The creation of my self seemed malleable while growing up in the Dominican Republic/Haiti, with their folklore and culture of endless slippery racial categorizations. In contrast the culture of the United States limited me to a single status — that of Afro Latina. In response, I tried to disrupt current systems of social categorization through the creation of characters that refused definition. In the *Carib's Jhator* Series I continue to formally decategorize the body through color and pattern. I believe that refracting the body allows the viewer to first process the work physically, body to body, much like the other larger works do.

Firelei Báez, *For the Memory of Having Been a Listener*, from the series *A Carib's Jhator*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 56 x 49.5"

72 TT: With the works from the Carib's Jhator series, the women have these extensions on their heads. I've been calling them head-dresses because they remind me of Carnival, but they could also be read as sites of resistance. I'm reminded of the sumptuary laws of 1786 in New Orleans under Spanish Rule, when the governor, Esteban Rodriguez Miró, enacted a law that required women of color (mulattas, quadroons, octaroons, etc.) to wear a head covering which served as a signal marking them as women of color. So, since they were required to wear head coverings or a tignon, they decided to wrap their heads in the most luxurious fabrics, silks, jewels, and elaborate designs inspired from the women of African descent in Martinique and other places. These extravagant, beautiful headdresses became sites of resistance, and the laws were eventually abolished. In a way, I see your figures as a kind of creative descendant of this tradition.

*FB: I love the breaking of those sumptuary laws. What a powerful point in history! They tried to pin them down by the headdress and couldn't. A mode of self-agency is just to be flexible enough to work around inalterable limitations. When such limitations are imposed, they are intended to lock you down. The women found a way of working around the system in what I call, "Smile them to death" – keeping up the expected veneer while working toward*

*your objective. Of course, the headdress became the fashion in Europe. There's an article called "Hiding within the Light" which is about truant teenage punk culture. The article discusses how when you're in the spotlight as a truant, under constant surveillance, you have to etch a Self that grows in your own terms, like the headdress. There are so many laws that try to make or specify oppressed groups of people*

TT: On one of the headdresses in the Carib's Jhator series, we find the embellishments of feet and shoes and the dominance of feet and shoes appear in other works. Could you talk about that?

*FB: At what point are objects like stilettos and oxfords things of nurture or nature? The ornamentation of the heel is just that, ornamentation, but it's also a thing of power. At what point is it something that is imposed on the female body, and when does it become a choice? The shoes and feet are a declaration of place. Going back to the historical conception of the female body as animalistic or as a sexual animal, I kept thinking about the cloven foot, and this, in turn, reminded me of satyrs as mythological creatures, revealing a culture's notions of sexuality and gender. I related them back to that Caribbean sexualized body. The first images to come out of these notions were the initial silhouettes of the Ciguapa Series. A ciguapa is a folkloric female creature that*

*inhabits the Dominican highland forests and preys on wayward men, like so many other mythical female creatures. She wreaks havoc but is untraceable because of her backward facing feet and subsequently misleading footsteps. These paintings, which are loose interpretations rather than literal descriptions, became the architecture for later series such as the work being shown in Disillusions.*

TT: How do you decide on the scale of a piece?

*FB: I want to provide a sublime experience, where you're experiencing it physically before being able to process it mentally. Even though it's two-dimensional, you still receive it as three-dimensional, and, therefore, it cannot be visually exploited because it occupies the mental space as a three-dimensional object. The physical presence of a large scale piece thwarts the viewing aggression. When you're painting bodies of color, it's that Xica da Silva appraisal happening all over again. There is a point in the classic Brazilian film Xica Da Silva, where Xica, a slave, is having her teeth appraised like property, and she bites the appraiser's fingers – hard. She's fighting that through self-assertion. For example, in the piece, Questions for Doig in Trinidad, the legs have these loose hair-like tendrils of paper, overlaid with vellum, which move when you move towards it. So, when the*

*viewer comes in closer, it's almost like she's reacting to your presence. She's a mixture of all of these different permutations – between acts, like a performance. She is Ochún and Erzili, who is Haitian and has about 15 different permutations. Sometimes she appears as a bird of prey or a vulture. Questions for Doig in Trinidad is performing this Caribbean body for this one guy, the artist Peter Doig. I'm thinking of the whole island as this performing body showing love, whether it's for its benefit or not.*

TT: Questions for Doig in Trinidad strikes a sexy pose but it is not read as a sexy image.

*FB: It's a pre-sexy image. She's like a performer between acts, ready to put on her show and just as she licks the finger on her lips she remembers, "Oh crap! I have all this stuff to take care of at home."*

# Holly Bynoe

Interview by Allison Harbin

AH: Let's begin with your background. How did you become engaged with art? What do you consider to be your formative moments in deciding to become an artist? How did your process evolve into what it is today?

HB: I did not study art as an undergraduate, but instead started working with photography in 2002 with some instruction from a beginner's course. It was mostly fooling around with the camera. Around this time I became very involved in collaborating with several online peers at deviantArt (dA). When I joined, it was just starting; it was a grassroots effort with a community focus. It was a really wonderful opportunity for me to start having my work critiqued by an online international community, and this was how I started building a portfolio and learning how to critique and motivate others to do work and converse about projects.

*I decided to go to graduate school when the state of my country was not secure, and I had to get out to be productive. The International Center of Photography in New York seemed like a good opportunity for me to have a new experience and produce*

*work formally. While in graduate school, I brought a more intuitive process to art making because I did not have an academic image-based background. I became very concerned with the contemporary essence of photography and how images and their physical presence are evolving and becoming ubiquitous.*

*In my second year of graduate school, I began reading a lot of Caribbean literatures, such as Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul, and Dionne Brand, and I began questioning my sense of place and space. Most of the time, graduate school felt like therapy with 13 other people; it's that sort of space, so psychological. You don't see how it is until you almost finish it and you are able to reflect on the very particular way the entire structure overlapped and cross-pollinated all the various fields. The program really made me see my vulnerable parts and this allowed me to get a visual sense of what those were.*

AH: That's very interesting that your introduction in photography began with collaborative projects, which is something that is usually only found in film programs where

so many hands are needed to help make a film--collaboration is a wonderful inevitability of it. Still photography is a little different; it is in many ways, a very solitary practice. Speaking of collaboration and film, your film works are beautiful, how did you approach making them?

HB: *Well, I've stopped making film currently because I've moved back home and launched a magazine, ARC, a platform for Caribbean culture, which takes up much of my time. Video has a special place in my heart for how it constructs timelines and tells a narrative that I can understand really easily, not because it's linear, but because of the way I can compile different scenes to abstract and complicate the field of reading. My video works seem to have this overwhelming sense of loss and desire and within that also an added complexity of ambivalence, in a way that photography does not have. Photography is not as immediate for me and is less spontaneous.*

*Videos themselves, as well as their subjects, were a way for me to explore spaces that are unfamiliar to me, such as Portrait of a Landscape, 2009. In this piece found here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-Vj1bHYVfg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-Vj1bHYVfg), I am exploring my bed as a foreign space. I lifted audio from Marlon Brando's film, Burn, a political allegory set on a fictitious Portuguese colonized island in the Antilles. It was transformed into an elegy to the islands*



Holly Bynoe, - *Crossbreed*, 2009. Digital collage, 30 x 40 in.

*and what remains tangled within them: sorrow-filled seagulls, wind, and water beating against sand, shores and docks. In many ways, my film was dealing with psychological traces and how they function to render oneself part of a large whole. The drama in Burn relates to telling someone that you're free, but you're not. I was trying to abstract this very familiar thing to me, this thing I sleep on every night.*

AH: I have a love of photographs with white on white that are all about shadow and texture, perhaps that's why I responded so strongly to that piece; the light in it is very striking. Have you seen the latest works of Laura Letinsky that were up at Yancey Richardson Gallery last fall? She has a piece printed very large on rag weave matte paper of a crumpled Styrofoam cup on a white table with a white background. What did you think of the matte paper it was printed on? I think it was fairly scandalous at the time. People wanted to see it on traditional photographic paper.

HB: I did see the show actually, and I've never been a fan of the plasticity of traditional photographic glossy/luster/ paper, so I like her removal of a very formal scene shot on a large format camera but then printed on a nontraditional paper. I think it reinforces the medium with something more intimate, tactile and tangible.

AH: I noticed that your works are also printed on matte paper. What kind do you use?

HB: *I use Duratone aged newsprint. Even though it's not archival, there's something both about its physical texture and presence; the reality that it will inevitably fade away infuses the photographs printed on it with something reminiscent of the image and its connection to memento mori – of all things having a shelf life. I am not interested in forever.*

AH: I think newsprint in photography is really interesting because it acknowledges the impermanence of the image, and how unstable it is to the forces of time.

HB: *Yes, one of the ways I think about photography is that it is here and textual, but if you look at it for a very long time, you see the fading passages, and you see the drops from heavy to dull to not muted to finally not there at all. I'm very interested in this disappearance and in putting things on a surface that will render it obsolete. Art now, will it be art forever?*

AH: I'm very interested in your use of text and narrative, both as a visual tool in your series "Compounds," but also in your titles and the prose that exists next to the visual work. Can you comment on how you



conceive of the relationship between image and text in your work?

HB: *I think my photographic practice starts with writing. I read. I collect things. When I sit down and start constructing a piece the piece is never a blank canvas. For me, it becomes a place where I'm able to express things very viscerally, where I'm able to embody a voice that is not mine. This is crucial*

*to my practice, to have the artist's voice but a voice that is not my own, one that is conflicting. When I use this unreliable voice next to my own in my work, I can explore the falsity of narrative and of photography.*

*I also don't come from a background that is embedded in truth, I don't think any of us do really. I suspect that a lot of things that I've been told growing up about my family and*

Holly Bynoe  
*On Deck*, 2009.  
Digital collage, 30 x 40 in.

its identity are not truth because of the extension and make up of my family structure. When a story is passed down and told to family members, it is full of fictive elements that are pieced together--bits from here and there, parts that shouldn't even belong. There's something about the passing down of stories that presents a very large element of the fictitious. I'm interested in how a society tries to present itself within this oral tradition without quite realizing the effect that this untruth has on their lives.

A lot of the things we feel about ourselves are based on myths that have been constructed. These myths function to keep families together, whether they be religion, folklore, or a general view of history and lineage. This oral tradition passes on and dilutes visceral traumatic events; in the end they are confided into a space of distortion. I am interested in living in the now with this distortion and how as a society we are dealing with repressed ideals, truths, etc. I wanted to take that distortion and reconfigure it and put it in a visual form I could understand.

Take, for example, my poem "The Grinners" (2009):

*Them change we uniforms it  
Was flesh versus the boiling  
Hot sun. Blows blows licks  
Like tunder till the white I  
Wearing tun red. We end up  
Malnutritious we brains  
Bulging form the emptiness  
But you and I stand like  
Mighty grinners*

*Grinning  
Grinding  
Grinning  
Grinding  
In we hot sun*

*Oblivious*

"The Grinners" came when I looked at a photograph of my mother and her brother when they were 5 and 9 years old. They were standing in the hot sun, in Port Elizabeth, Bequia in the 1950's when the port was just sand instead of the one way asphalt street it is now. The sun is the thing we are most accustomed to in the Caribbean; it is part of the environment, but it feels like a part of who we are--in some ways it becomes a very tangible element that promotes a sense of life and decay. The skin and wrinkles that we all wear are representative of this weathering, my weathering. I'm also engag-

ing with poetics and the fact that we go throughout our days very unaware, just doing and going through the motions. In my work, I want to express this feeling of not being able to do anything about the wrongs of society.

I think colloquial language of Bequia expresses a sense of hybridity and true revolution: how the French and British fought for these islands, and entrenched in this was the arrival of Africans and the fact that before them, the Amerindians, Taino and Arawak called these southern chains their home. At the root of us there are so many utterances buried in our soil. I fought hard to hold on to my voice, however sentimental it can be at times, to see how I could reconfigure speech and poetry and narration, to reflect this in my writing and work.

Through poetics, the language can easily become sentimental, which is why I try to juxtapose imagery that is textual and complex. You have to stay a while with the images and read them in order to understand all of their elements. In part, my images are straightforward, but they are also very layered with history and data. I want you to question that history and its multitude of stories and what it means to the viewer who confronts such an obfuscated image, an image that has a sense of its own power.

AH: I'm fascinated by how flat your images are. Physically, they are digital collages, and their surface is so smooth, yet the content is very rugged and systematically destroyed or weathered. It's a very interesting tension between obsolescence, nostalgia, modernity, and the digital reality of photography currently. How did you decide to compress them digitally in this way?

HB: Making photographs digitally comes naturally to me. I do not have resources or infrastructure here to have a traditional darkroom, nor do I want to. It used to excite me when I learned how to develop images, but now my practice is completely cameraless, minus my video camera. I collect a lot of objects and place them on a scanner and flatten them and start constructing digital canvases that make these things seem dimensional from afar, and I like that sort of intensification of flatness and reduction of dimensionality that happens when you get closer to the image. When I was in graduate school, I got a lot of criticism--people wanted to see me physically cut things out, but that's not what I'm after. I'm trying to make something that is complex and not easily rendered. Nothing about traditional collaging excites me; I don't have the patience or hand for it. Photoshop has become a tool of moving forward, in particular because I am interested in erasing most of the content that I am laying down. It is residual, much of what you see is the bare essentials needed to understand the piece.

AH: What do you do in Photoshop, exactly, if you don't mind sharing?

*HB: It has become fairly systematic in which I go in and remove a certain percentage of pixels, render things flat, or misplace areas of the image onto other areas. It's really about displacing the pixels, removing them from their original home and placing them somewhere new, where they don't quite belong.*

*I also use a lot of layering, I might start with one image, and I go in and select parts and I'm intentionally not careful when I do this. Sometimes it's just about scaling numbers, then I go about transplanting the parts and various planes. I think this is essential to how I build the foundation of a canvas. I lay out one photograph and numerous others, and I try to figure out composition and form. Nothing is random, but in a way everything is random. I don't have an outcome, so I work very much in the moment with what the canvas is presenting. I do a lot of thinking because I need to stretch and move certain things on another plane. Photoshop has now become this all-inclusive program that allows you to bend an image, and I'm really interested in what that bend does for the work. When I look at the canvas I do not see a flat plane, even though it is. I see it as a surface I can deposit a lot of things onto, and that surface is rarely flat as you can create dimensionality within a plane now even if it only an optical dimensionality.*

AH: That's fascinating that your physical process in Photoshop reflects your desire to construct a commentary on misplaced narratives, identities, and the flux of Caribbean being. It's wonderful how a calculated software program can be used to create something that reflects its meaning in the very process of how it is made.

It's also really interesting to think about the mathematical calculations that go into scaling and pixels in Photoshop, and your use of coordinates in your work, in particular you MFA thesis show title "40°N 74°W / 19°N 61°W." In a way, images are reduced to mathematical calculations, but in this process, they evoke so much more than that simplistic reality.

*HB: I think my work is shifting because I'm thinking of the relationships that are around me. I see how they are manifested daily and how they are ideologically placed, and how they are situated in a free zone of interpretation. In particular, I am now observing how Creole communities are very segregated and the gene pool is very small. I think that segregation extends to metropolitan spaces as well, and I think there is a lot of mixing that is happening now, but when you go to the islands and see how people isolate themselves and how they interact with their families, most of these interactions are a little too close for comfort. Growing up in such an insular community that exists in*



Holly Bynoe, *Oh Captain, My Captain*, 2010. Digital collage, 20 x 30 in.

the islands, I have always been privy to that sort of reality. I want to start studying inbred societies. As I proceed along in my practice, a lot of the imagery that is appealing to me has the same type of quality and presence to it. Most of the faces in my compound series...if you are able to untangle them, you see that a lot of faces that are very similar. Most of the images I am working with are my family photographs, and as I began working with them I was struck by how similar some of my ancestors looked to me, in a startling kind of way.

I seem to be surrounding myself with this idea; through my online culling I am looking through different Caribbean creole societies, and I find that I am now entering into the American South and Europe as well. I am interested in where this exploration will take me. Right now, I am just looking to see how the works will develop and whether there is credibility and truth in my wanting to navigate this terrain while finding a way to link to my ideas together visually. I'm very interested in opening up the narrative and not being so concerned about a traditional Caribbean space.

AH: Can you speak more about your relationship to your family images? It's very interesting that you are working with such a personal archive.



HB: I'm using family photographs and extended family photographs, so all of the images are intentional and personal. I'm also using three-dimensional objects in the compounds--a lot of scans, a lot of the texture that you can pick up on are sand, stone, grit, hair, etc., so I'm trying to figure out how to place these objects within the composition and have them dictate a foundation.

AH: How do you conceive of the virtual as a space in your work; that is, how do you negotiate your online presence of sharing, community, and interaction, with the real physical space of the Caribbean?

HB: I have always been interested in images and in sharing images through work that I have done, but more readily in work by peers and artists whom I admire. It is such a common and regular notion for me to navigate online spaces that I can barely think of it critically other than the fact that the interaction has changed my life forever. I was able to do my MFA degree because of my creative and adopted New Jersey family, whom I met online in 2006. I have maintained most of my relationships, creative and otherwise, for the past years because I was never really in one place for too long. Being a bit of a nomad, it is the way we have to put up house. Most of my attention before 2009 was in a different circle altogether; the last year of my degree cemented the fact that I could no longer ignore my calling to be a part

of something grounded in a geographical context, which is one reason why I moved back home.

So right now I'm focused on local and regional support rather than international. I'm depending on the internet, especially with what I'm doing now with ARC and all of the other opportunities that I am trying to pull together for my career and for the publication. Nadia Huggins, the creative director for ARC, and I have been in a collaborative online relationship for 9 years and we have always been talking about what we can do to infuse the space of the SIDS [Small Island Developing States] with a greater idea of visual art and its culture. We wanted to bring support in waves to informal networks throughout the Caribbean, and we wanted to make people aware that the Caribbean is not a barren space, that there is a lot of activity happening and that there is a lot of cross-pollination. If nothing, we have one of the more dynamic spaces of production in the world. I'm hoping right now to show this and to provide a platform for artists to do this within the Caribbean.

What I'm doing now is trying to navigate all of the different islands and figuring out the temper and personality of each. On a regular day I have numerous conversations via email and Skype to try to build relationships. We can't afford to be physically in these spaces every week or every month or even once a

year. When we return to our own islands, we have to figure out how to maintain the relationships and dialogues, and the internet allows this.

I also have to figure out a new way to discipline myself because it is so easy to become complacent in your practice. My own local network so small as to be practically non-existent. I can barely have conversations about photography--the only people I can have conversations with are the handful of contemporary artists who are working through similar questions of relevance, and they all have very different ideas about the contemporary landscape of Caribbean photography.

I'm not sure if I want to be a practicing artist, a curator, an editor, or a writer, (or all these things). I don't want to choose. I just have to figure out how to manage all these fields and interest that exist without proper infrastructure, so I am building a platform to decide how to navigate my space.

AH: There might be something very valuable in feeling disconnected to the New York art scene, and to its photography scene in particular. It's such an incestuous world, and there comes a point where the contemporary photography out there right now is starting to all look the same, very glossy, full color, very formal and stiff. It's refreshing to find an artist with a completely different approach on how to move forward with pho-

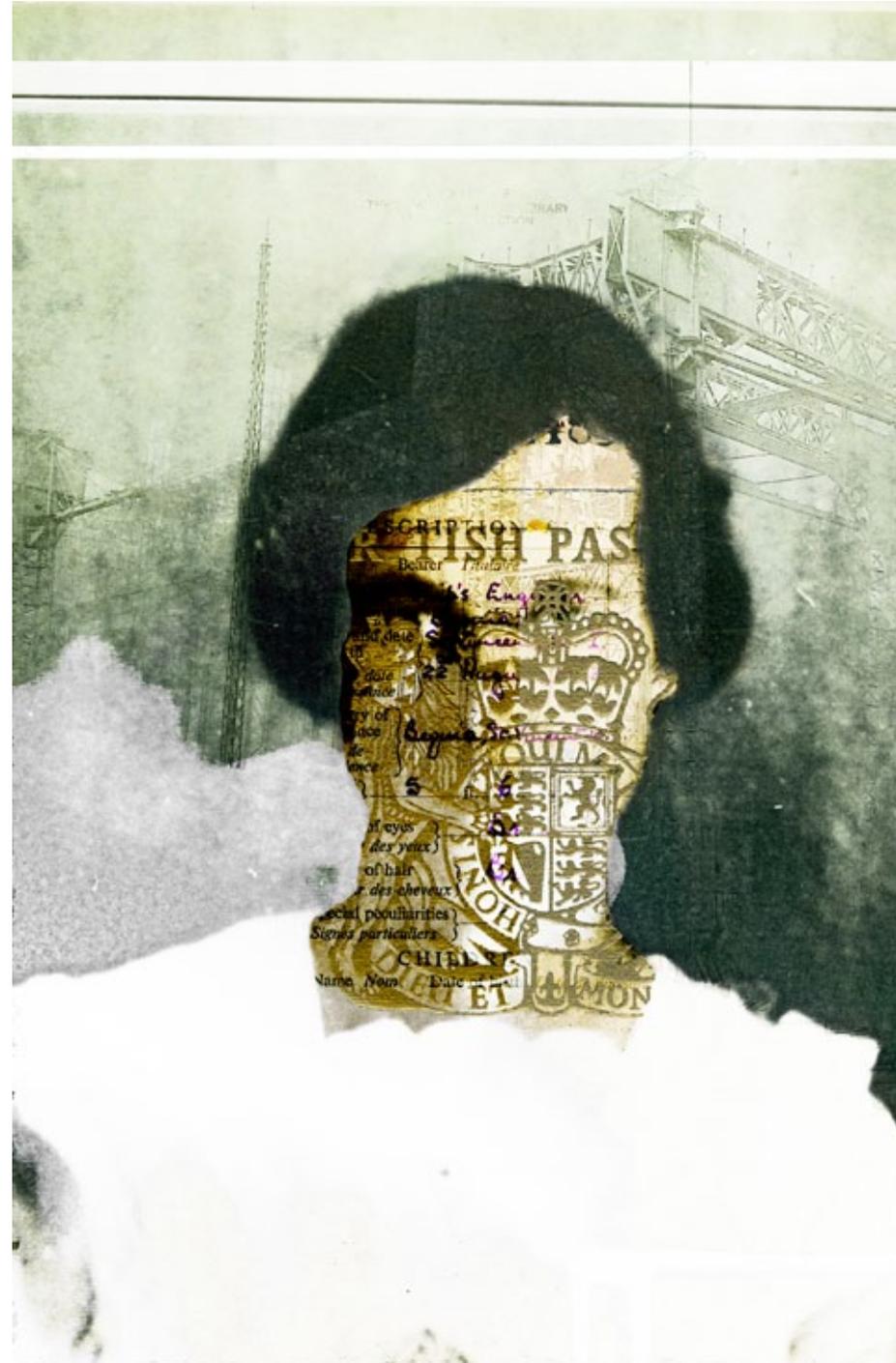
tography in the digital post-film age.

HB: Yes, the New York art scene is very hegemonic, and unless you are playing a certain game or unless you are in a particular network, it is very hard to make sense of your work or place there. It is very easy to get lost and disenchanting if you aren't disciplined and a warrior. Another obstacle is the stereotyping of being a Caribbean artist and a female artist.

AH: Yes, the nepotism of the art world is scary.

HB: It's part of why I moved back home. ARC can't serve the kind of purpose we want it to if it is based in New York, the diaspora is crucial but I feel in order to have a competitive start, we prefer for it to exist in a space that doesn't have any infrastructure and see what it can do. We're going through an economic recession here, and the small island states which I'm from have no structural, informal or formal support systems set up for the visual arts. I thought it would be a good idea to provide a network for artists in St. Vincent and St. Lucia, and in some way, it has extended itself to the entire region.

We're offering a space that is democratic, which is not to say that we don't have criteria. I think a lot of younger artists don't know how to place themselves; they are just learning how to create online portfolios



and figure out what sort of work they are interested in. We want to offer them virtual support, but we in turn are working from a position of no support from formal institutions, the private sector, etc. So we're trying to engage informal and formal networks and build partnerships with institutions that will allow us to exhibit work and potentially create cultural programming in the long run. That would be an ideal place for ARC to be in. Formal networks are harder to navigate because they are in institutions and very bureaucratic.

AH: When you were in graduate school in New York, were you at odds, in a sense, with your peers in terms of your desire for art as activism, to go back and create an artistic community on your island?

HB: I have always wanted something more from life. A lot of people think I'm a little too idealistic, and I probably am, but I'm also very cynical. I expressed the need to want to start something in that Caribbean many times in graduate school, and everyone looked at me like I was a little off, or expecting too much. They asked, "Why leave New York where you can make money? Why start something that would take you away from your practice?" But I really think this was my mission, what I had to do; it was the whole reason, in retrospect, why I ended up at ICP to obtain a degree--so that I could develop my voice and trust in it and really

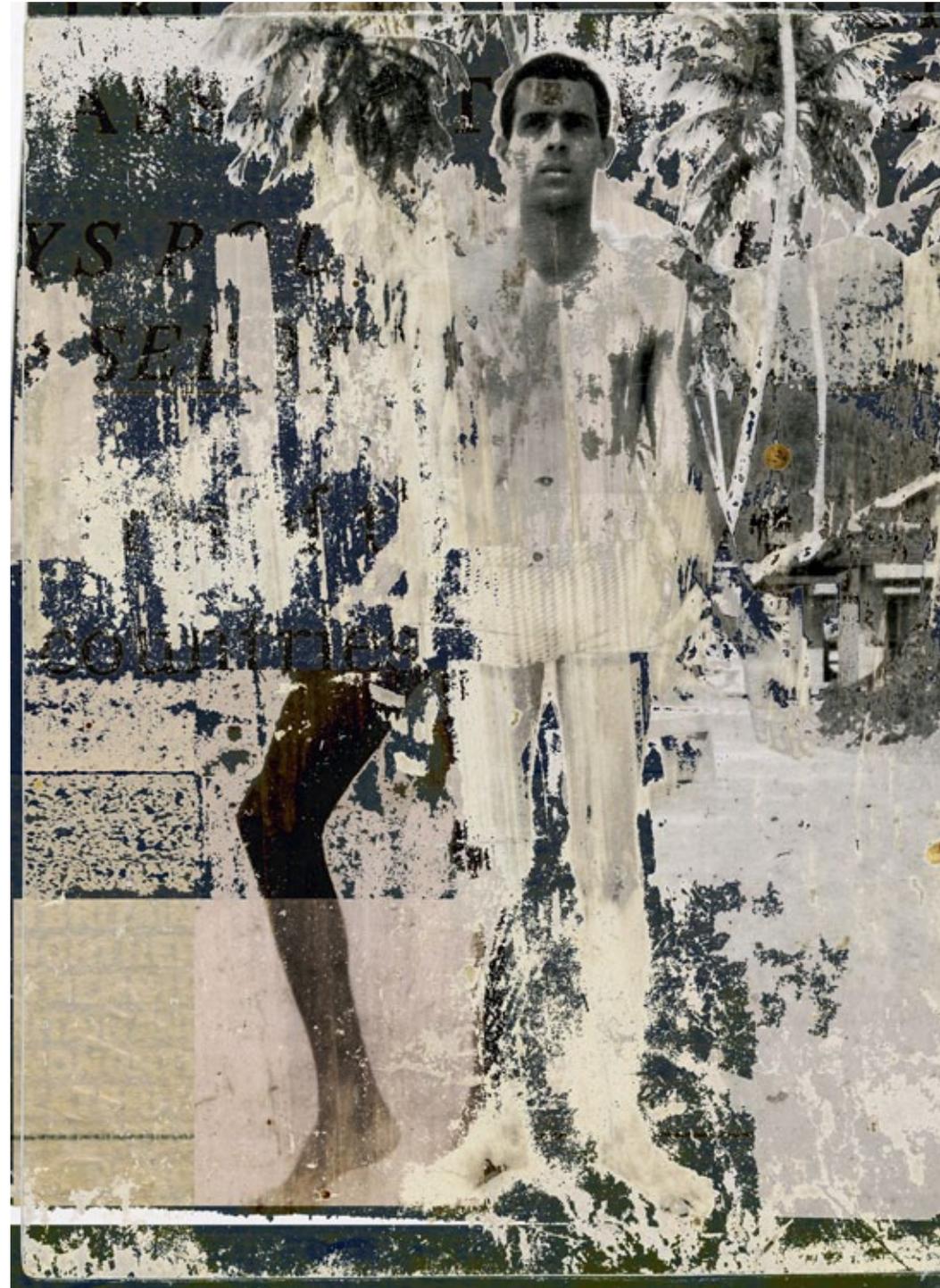
engage with it, and at the end of the day, staying in New York was not very practical. Unless an institution adopts you, what is your place? Can you be a practicing artist there and make art solely without living paycheck to paycheck? I don't think so, and if you are doing it, then you are one of the lucky few.

It's very hard to find the time to maintain a practice, but I know this is something I must do. I'd like to show you what I've been working on, *Yellow Skin Red Piss* (2010).

Here, I scanned a photo of my grandfather and inverted it – though it is not a simple inversion – it is interacting with various pieces, and there is also blending and coloring that is applied with a very slight hand. I'm thinking of presenting it on a light box. I think there is something about the darkness of it that surrounds his figure that speaks to the states of being and identity I'm thinking of right now, and I suspect I'll be using this image over and over in different contexts and ways. It is a little obsessive, but I have a couple images that I always return to – to give me that start.

AH: What is the text that is covering him? It has such a structural element to it, in that the text seems to be his very skeleton, and it makes sense that we would be able to see that since the image is very negative-like, especially in the glow of a light box, or even in the glow of my back-lit computer screen as I'm looking at it right now. It has the feel of an X-Ray.

HB: I'm looking into exploring text again, and how it can be much more visible. I think it does something to the image. The image is not enough – that belief has always been a limitation of photography for me – although some



photographers do swell without words. Text complicates the image a lot for me, and it is one of my motives and manners in the same way that using very strange colors and manipulating color balance in Photoshop does – speaking of which, I am heavily attracted to artificiality in color and how Photoshop lets you produce colors that don't exist in reality.

AH: As a sort of disorienting tactic? I think there is something specifically about the use of text next to photography that invalidates the accuracy of each, but that, with the combination of photo and text, the meaning is really pushed onto the viewer to negotiate, in a really interesting way.

HB: Yes, I think that's why I stopped taking photographs, because the representational image directly from the camera suddenly stopped making me think. I couldn't do anything with it; the images I constructed meant nothing, yet the pile of images that I have collected in my archive had so much meaning. The family photographs that I'm working with now are so full of history and meaning, even in their physicality of being aged by the sun. I also feel like those images I'm manipulating need more, or point to more, so I think it's only necessary and obvious that a poetic collision would occur in my work.

# Melissa A. Calderón

Interview by Allison Harbin

AH: You came to art relatively recently, so I'd like to start with your decision to become an artist. Was there a specific project or experience that made you decide to pursue art? When did you realize that you were an artist?

MAC: *I was very serious about art in high school and was even prepared to go to art school with a scholarship for college, but I lost my confidence completely and decided to pursue art history instead. I often wonder what if I had gone to art school and pursued art sooner, but I don't think I was ready to be an artist then. I'm glad I began when I did with the experiences I have had. I came back to my work in 2001; I had drawn sketches for this one piece a few years earlier but had no space to realize it until I was given the opportunity to execute it at Longwood Art Gallery. The project turned into the tissue piece titled Permanence of Pain. It was the first sculpture I had ever made, and I figured it out on the spot. Looking back on it, I see how I could have improved it sculpturally, but at the time I didn't even have a single sculpture class behind me, so everything came through the process*

*of actually building it in the gallery space. The piece got the attention of El Museo del Barrio, and it really started my career as an artist. I was learning as I was going, and curator Edwin Ramoran really encouraged me to push the piece and keep making.*

AH: It's amazing that the piece was never physically realized until it was for a formal exhibition. That's a lot of pressure. How did it end up working?

MAC: *Looking back on it now, I see the kinks in it, but it was a learning process. As soon as I made it and it looked beautiful, I was done, and I knew I was going to continue doing this. Seeing it finished in the gallery space was when I felt like an artist.*

AH: Can I ask you about the content of the piece, and what it means to you, and what you hope it means for the viewer?

MAC: *It was a very personal piece. It came from my experience of seeing a tissue box attached to a wall at an abortion clinic while I was waiting. I thought to myself, there is so much pain in this room that they*

*had to attach a tissue box to the wall, and then I began thinking about what that meant in terms of difficulty, sadness, or even relief. I began to imagine how many thousands of tissues had come out of that box on the wall, and from there, I conceptualized them pouring out of the wall. I actually drew the sketches for it during a blackout in New York City; it was something that I felt I had to make, something I felt that many, many people, especially those in the Latino community, had gone through but never talked about. Abortion is in many ways very common, but it is also very taboo. I wanted to be able to talk about it and allow people to register their pain when they looked at the piece in a way that was therapeutic for me as well as, hopefully, for the viewer.*

AH: That's such a powerful and politically loaded piece to tackle as your first project as an artist! It's very daring, and the intensely personal content has clearly carried you on to other projects and has had a very powerful resonance in viewers as well. Thinking back to your gallery talk for Disillusions, as you were speaking about your decision to not have a child and to allow your art to be your child, so to speak, I remember there was a hush across the room, which was filled predominantly with women. I think everyone reacted very strongly to that because it is something very personal that nearly every woman with a passionate career has thought about.

MAC: *Yes, it's one of those things that I never thought to conceptualize, but I'm so happy that I did. Permanence of Pain definitely feels like the next piece that I made for Disillusions. It was something that I had to make, that I had to do, not just for myself, but also to bring attention to things that aren't normally talked about but are so common.*

AH: I love what you said in your gallery talk for the Disillusions show, that "every woman can make this nest." You are touching on something that is very difficult for many women—this reality that we all have the capacity to become mothers, but that it is still something we can choose to do, or not to do. You made a conscious decision not to have children, yet your engagement with motherhood is very intimate and personal. This is such a beautiful connection to make between art, or creating, and children. It's a very empowering way to look at your position as a woman as well as an artist. Can you speak more about this?

MAC: *You see that struggle between career and children that happens all the time, and I really have always felt that the cards are stacked against the female artist. I have nothing but respect for women artists because it is so so difficult to become an artist and balance a family life. When I think about this, I'm always reminded of the work of Janine Antoni. I decided that, for me, it*

*was impossible for me to make as well as be a mother. I couldn't do both adequately, and this piece was about me working through that decision and becoming confident about it. It was a piece about affirmation as well as about the loss associated with the decision to not have a child.*

AH: I really like your conception about art being just as nurturing as having a child. Through your passion about your art, you demonstrate that it is OK to pick an unorthodox route in life. How do you negotiate the conception of a biological need to be a mother and channel it into your art?

MAC: *You know, I am always confronted with this desire to have a child. Whenever I see a cute child's toy or piece of clothing, there is this tug in my uterus, and I think "Oh! I want one!" And to an extent, there is always that part of me that hopes that in the most ideal situation imaginable I could have a child. As there are fewer and fewer of my friends without kids, I frequently feel that need. I think maybe if I had a very supportive husband and were wealthy, I could afford to devote myself fully to my art as well as to a child, but I know that right now, when I think of my reality, having a child just won't work for me. I take such pleasure in my art making and felt very lost without it in my 20's when I wasn't making, and I don't feel lost anymore. In a way, I feel addicted to*



making art, and I don't want to give up my art, even if that means not having children. It is about that fear and reality that as soon as you have kids it becomes all about them, which in many ways, it should. It's also so easy to abandon making; it's such a fight to keep doing it, and it's something that I feel very passionately about.

In my work, I try to talk about things that everyone feels and has experienced. I want to put it out there, such as talking about abortion with *Permanence of Pain*, and openly acknowledge that it's something many of us go through. The piece itself has been interpreted as something very stereotypically Latina, even though no one in the community wants to talk about it.

AH: What do you mean by stereotypical Latina?

MAC: The stereotype is that Latinas are very dramatic and emotional, and in popular tradition, there is this figure of the wailing woman who goes from village to village crying and scaring children in a folk tale. Drama and emotion are definitely there in the piece—I mean, thousands of tissues are pouring out of a tissue box on the wall! But I also think that there is an element of common pain in the piece, something about loss that we all experience and that, especially in the Latin community, no one wants to talk about or deal with.

AH: Going back to your nest piece, when you were speaking of the small embroidered eggs in the nest, you said that this nest was not about gestating, that the nest was as far as you went with it, as in, no child would be produced from this process. However, I feel that something does come out of this gestation, or rumination, that occurs within the nest and that the meaning of the piece is a result, your outcome, so to speak, of sewing those eggs within the nest. Can you speak more about this?

MAC: The first time I did the piece, I made eggs cast in tissue. Then, I would sew them together and place them outside the nest. I wanted to do something different with the next iteration of the piece. I thought I could sew, which is something I really love to do. A nest is a place where life is given; in order to hatch, the egg has to stay in the nest. By taking the egg out of the nest after I sewed it, by physically removing it, I emphasized that it would not gestate—the egg would always be in a suspended state and never go beyond that. I wanted to do that because that was how I felt about my life—I was treating my life this way, making my art in the way a mother would be nurturing her belly. It would be my art that would be there and not a child, and it would always be that way. No child would be produced in the nest, just art. In this way, the piece became an affirmation of me declaring that it was my choice not to have children.



Melissa A. Calderón, *Prone (My Unemployed Life series)*, 2011. Satin and cotton thread hand embroidery on linen, 11 x 14".

There is a lot of teenage pregnancy in the Latino community, and women without children are often seen as spinsters. I can't tell you how many family members have said something along these lines to me: that I'm the only one without children, that I'm a lesbian, etc. My relatives make up excuses for why I don't have children and never acknowledge that it is my choice, so I wanted to say that in that piece, that this was my choice and that I embraced it. I wanted to make this statement through this beautiful but thorny and unwelcoming nest. I love that it is prickly and not approachable, it hurts to sit in, and it's certainly not an environment that would be comforting for a child.

AH: Several of your pieces, such as your labor-intensive embroidery work and your piece *Nevermine*, in which you insert yourself into the landscape of Vieques in Puerto Rico, seem to be about your process of working through your memories and experiences. What do you consider your art in *Nevermine*, the process of you physically trying to become one with the land and water of Puerto Rico, or the film that resulted from it? Are we looking at documents of a performance or pieces in their own right?

MAC: I think it is the beach and my experience and performance that happened there, not the video that is my true art. I



Melissa A. Calderón, *Untitled (Nevermine series)*, 2010. C-Print, 20 x 30".

wish I had had 100 people there to watch me do it because it was a performance; the film is just a way of documenting that. For that piece, I thought, "What could be the closest way for me to get back to Puerto Rico?" The piece came about from some criticism I received from the Latino community about my big "Spic" earring from the Cultural Osmosis for the Native Gringa series—an artist in Spanish Harlem confronted me about it. It was very controversial because people saw it as an affirmation of negative connotations. For me, the piece was about confronting how we are seen negatively but offered an affirmation, an opportunity to deal with the stereotype directly. This was a very difficult period for me because I felt that my own people had rejected me, that I'm seen as a white girl and not Puerto Rican enough—which is reverse-racism and a way of excluding me as a legitimate part of the community.

My response was to show them how much I wanted to be Puerto Rican, how much I wanted to be a part of the community. I filmed it in Vieques, which has a long, difficult history of bombing ranges and US military occupation. Half of the island was divided by a big fence that the people of the island couldn't cross. However, it is such a beautiful, beautiful place, but it is a false-beauty. When I was there all I could think about was that I could live here; however, the reality of the island is

that 30% of the population has cancer from the contaminated water from the naval bombings. Even just being there dramatically increases your chances of developing cancer. It has this history of not being fully there, or not fully belonging to itself, which is how I felt about my own identity as a Puerto Rican raised in New York.

When I look at the video now, it is really hard to look at myself naked—I'm wrapped in Saran wrap at six in the morning. But I just love the video, even for the simple notion that I have this beautiful video of myself from my life making art.

AH: There is something about it that seems like you are re-emerging from your origins. It seems like it is this way you found of giving birth to or re-birthing yourself, your fractured identity, and embracing it. It's really beautiful.

MAC: I wanted to leave there feeling more Puerto Rican, I went on a two week trip with fellow artists, and we camped out. I just explored the island without visiting family. It was a very physically demanding trip that was full of a lot of technical hang-ups, but ultimately the challenges made me more resolved to do the piece, to work through what I had gone there to do. All of my camera equipment got destroyed the first time on the ferry going there; it all got soaking wet, and I lost my gorgeous HD

camera, so my performance was shot on a flip camera; it was all I could afford, but I was so happy I could do it.

After I did the performance on the beach, I did feel more Puerto Rican. When I showed the piece at the same gallery I showed the earring, I got a very warm welcome and also the acceptance I had been craving. Now I feel like I'm an artist every single day, more and more and more. I feel very happy about that; it's been 10 years since I've been working, and I'm just glad I can do it.

AH: You also speak about being in this "in-between" state of deciding what to do, or how to negotiate this heritage that is foreign to you, or your decision to not become a mother. I love that in your pieces there isn't necessarily a true resolution and that you demonstrate that exploring this duality, this indecision, can be just as satisfying. Would you agree?

MAC: I felt like I needed to do that for myself and to resolve this part of me that I felt very disconnected from. Other Puerto Ricans in the Bronx feel this way too; there are all these Americanized Puerto Ricans who feel very alienated from their identity. I appreciate where they are coming from, and I wanted to resolve it for them as well as for me. I feel like it's a chapter that I'm very glad I got to.

AH: I'd like to ask about your embroidery pieces. I know enough about embroidery

from my aunt to know how intricate and difficult they must have been to make. They also seem to me to be very much about the process of making them and the contemplation that comes from doing such a laborious and detailed activity. It's also a very feminine practice, a traditional skill set that is reserved only for women.

MAC: Oh my God, they're like my children now! I go to the gallery to visit them. I spent an entire year making four pieces. The embroidery of my remote control took me about five months; it was the first one I did. I embroidered every day. At the time I was on unemployment, and I didn't want to go out in order to save money, so I watched TV and embroidered. I had just gotten back from Puerto Rico and was completely broke and unsure of what to do next.

Embroidery is something my grandmother taught me to do, and the entire process reminded me of her and was a way of honoring her. When I was a girl, we had a business—she would make clothes for Cabbage Patch dolls, and I would sell them out of my backpack at school. I remembered that experience and how sewing was something that took up a lot of time, which I had quite a bit of. I wanted to do something meaningful. I was unemployed and had literally worn the numbers off my remote control I was watching so much television. I was uninspired, in a funk after coming

back from Puerto Rico. So, I decided to embroider my remote control and couch. I also do Lucky Number 7 scratch-offs all the time, just in case, whenever I have a spare dollar. I constantly wish I could get some money. Then, I thought about the booklets of food stamps and how I had been denied because I was single and without kids. So I embroidered those things. The couch was the last one that I did, and it is my favorite.

These pieces represent a period of my life when I was going through major life changes. I had moved out of the Bronx and got out of a relationship. The pieces allowed me to pass a year, to recover and collect myself. At first I didn't think much about the embroideries; I thought they were kind of tongue-in-cheek, but now I realize that they got me through something that was very difficult for me. Ultimately, it is all about my grandmother, who is no longer with me, and how she taught me to get me through it.

AH: I'd like to ask you about your decision to leave the couch unraveled, especially since it was the last piece you did. Did you feel you had reached an end to the project and didn't need to complete it, or was it a choice from the beginning?

MAC: I really wanted to have this idea that the couch was so worn just like the person who was making it and sitting on it, that it was just starting to come apart at the seams. I thought I had it all together, and

then things started to fall apart, which is exactly what happened to the couch. Once I completed it, I had total postpartum withdrawal, I was trying to embroider everything, but I had to stop because I had other projects to do, but it is something I plan on coming back to. I'm doing embroidered graffiti now, which is a lot of fun.

AH: Burning out is definitely a real threat to artists, especially in really intensive environments. Besides abandoning art making when you were in college, have you experienced it since? The New York art scene is so cutthroat and intense. I got one look at it as a studio-art major undergrad and had a complete change of heart. I didn't want to be a part of that world. How do you negotiate how difficult it is to be an artist in New York?

MAC: I know what you mean. I worked at Skowhegan in this really intense job. It was strange, because I was living alongside this elitist art community as a worker, not as a peer, and it was very hard to be there.

AH: Can you speak about your engagement to revitalize the arts in the South Bronx?

MAC: I call myself a Bronx artist in exile, and as soon as I can afford a studio, I'll be back. It's hard being away from there and I go back as much as possible. There was always a tightknit community there;

there aren't a lot of artists, but we stick together, and the ones that are there stay for 2 years, the length of a lease, or they stay a really long time. I lived there from 2002-2005 and we did a lot of stuff, we did some community organizing and loft events called conversions, and we did a bunch of things to let people know that there were things going on in the Bronx. We really wanted recognition that there were good artists there; however, it turned out to be a real double-edged sword. We were getting written about in real-estate sections, and the landlords were raising our rents. Eleven of us had to leave because the landlords jacked up the rent. So the community that was built ended up destroying itself. I moved to the northern Bronx but would still come down south and do studio tours. We were still keeping the community alive, and that's what we've continued to do. I also grant write for free for the local gallery Bronx Art Space. It's the only gallery in the South Bronx other than Longwood, so we all try to keep it afloat.

AH: That's really too bad, that recognition in this artistic community would in many ways challenge its viability. So much about art is about systems of exchange and communication, and it's always a problem when that collaborative aspect is so severely challenged.

MAC: Yes, at first we were so excited about being in the *New York Times*, and then all of a sudden, my landlord raised my rent 1,000 bucks! Because I was the person who was giving interviews, I wanted to shoot myself. I hadn't realized this would happen from our increased visibility. We all got together and agreed to do no interviews to real estate sections, but a reporter would find an artist who would do it regardless, just to get their name in the paper. Our community is always in movement now, as a result.

AH: I'd like to ask you about your Cock series. It is your decal of sorts when you first enter your website, and it also seems to stand apart conceptually as well as visually from the rest of your work. Do you see it as defining an important aspect of your identity as an artist? On the surface, it seems impersonal next to your other work, so I am curious about the story behind it.

MAC: After the tissue box piece I had this experience in Spanish Harlem, which happens all the time—so much so that you don't notice it after being there a while—but which was a very shaping experience when I noticed it anew. I went into a bodega, and there was this group of men standing around talking, and it got very quiet. This is typical when a woman walks in: she'll go to the back and get her drink, and the conversation resumes only when she's leaving. It's a very insular masculine

experience, which I felt very isolated from. I realized how foreign this was to me, how foreign these groups of men were to my reality.

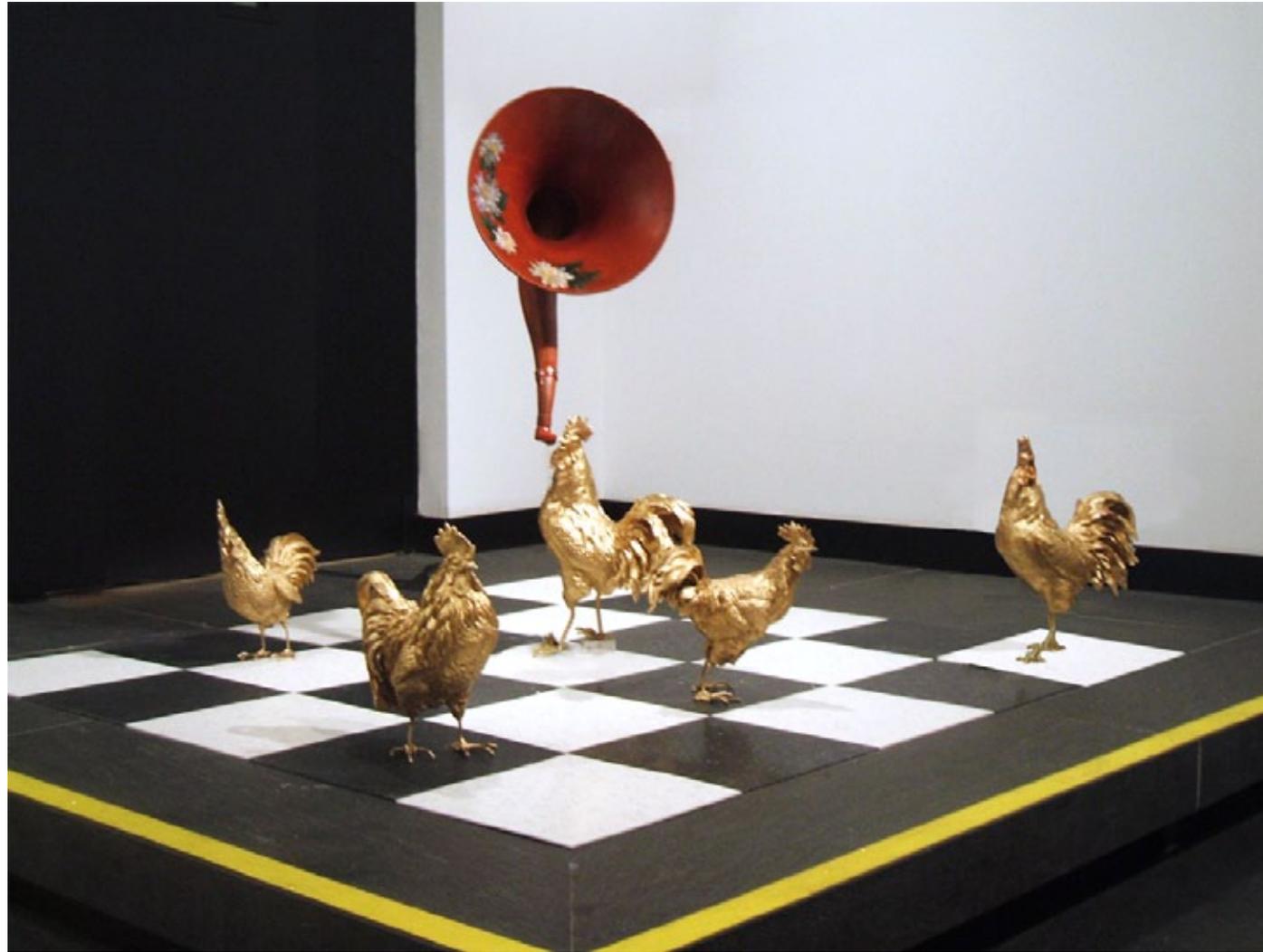
I thought about how this gendered action was very much about the dominance of a place and decided to place a golden cock in the very spots where these men marked their territory. It was my tongue-in-cheek response to this reaction I was getting from these Latino males and to masculine things that I don't understand. I always dream of proposing a 12-foot golden rooster for the middle of a Bronx park, which I think would be really great. I wanted to talk about how I just didn't understand or that I'm this observer of something that's happening that's beyond my knowledge in its masculinity and "bro-mance." I wanted to have this as opposite to the feminine in my tissue piece, which was criticized as womanly and emotional, and this cock was it, literally, ha-ha. And I thought to take the rooster to places where men seem to congregate, where guys naturally get together, and the cock is one of them, this perfect idealistic thing that tells them, "I'm making fun of you" and "I see you." In the photos, I always made sure guys were around, and a shadow of a man ended up in one of the photos, which was really great. I was exploring Puerto Rican stereotypes and making it obvious. I wanted to show them in the light that others would see you in.

AH: Would you consider your work to be an engagement with feminist art?

MC: Hmm...I don't know. I guess subconsciously the work that I've done has been about my experiences as a woman, and I guess I shouldn't have a problem saying that because I'm enjoying what I'm making, and I enjoy that other people understand what I'm trying to say. Having people come up to me and say "this piece really meant a lot to me" is important to me, and it's mostly women. If I get to do that with someone, then, I guess I'm a feminist artist.



Melissa A. Calderón, *Permanence of Pain*, 2009. Steel, cried on tissues, & silver tissue box. 14'x3'x9.5'.



Melissa A. Calderón, *Cock*, 2007. Resin, enamel paint, gold leaf, steel floor tiles, dirt, morning glory horn emitting sounds of a bodega, 5 x 5 x 3.5'.

*I especially admire Janine Antoni. I found her on my own, and I just couldn't look away. She always stays in my mind when I'm looking for inspiration because she keeps it simple and beautiful. I try to do that in my head, but there's always this tendency to overthink something or overdo it, and I need to rein it in. Going back to that tissue piece, because I wasn't taught as a maker I am learning in public, and it is nerve-racking. As I'm doing it, like with the nest, I keep telling myself that this is something that anyone can make. When I first opened the boxes of branches to make the nest, I thought I had bit off more than I could chew, but I recorded the whole process the first time and I learned on my way; it came to me. It is such a feminist piece. I'm proud of it, and I'm excited to do it again in the New York venue of Disillusions. I love performance, and really feel that it is a very important part of my work.*

# Vladimir Cybil Charlier

Interview and introduction by Tashima Thomas

Born in Queens, New York, Vladimir Cybil Charlier attended primary and secondary school in Haiti and spent her summers in New York City as a child. She received a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts from Queens College and a Master of Fine Arts Degree from the School of Visual Arts. She also attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, followed by a residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 1997.

Memories of Haiti permeate the work of Charlier. *Disillusions* showcased four pieces at the Studio Theater Gallery: *Red Cross Tristan*, 2009; *I Only have Eyes for You*, 2009; *Maps: Serenity and Punishment*, 2002; and *Basket of Women*, 2008. *Maps: Serenity and Punishment* is a black and white close-up shot of a rear end covered in a loose pattern of silver sequins. If the title gives the viewer a hint as to the meaning of the arrangement of sequins, then we may assume they are of a map – an abbreviated landmass with a few scattered outlying islands. Or is this a kind of corporeal cartography? In *I Only have Eyes for You*, a fractured face appears in

windows within the canvas that Charlier has cut away. The left eye, nose, mouth, and ear are in black and white, and the right eye is in color. The left eye appears in a close-up with a silver sequined-covered eyebrow and an eyeball with protruding gunmetal tendrils grounded by silver sequins. The right eye is manipulated in the same fashion with the exception that the photograph appears in color, and the sequins are now copper-colored. The nose is outlined with gunmetal sequins and has protruding sequined tendrils. The mouth, with its teeth bared, appears to be smiling; however, with sequins escaping from it and the canvas, it also would seem to be biting. *Red Cross Tristan* is a five window cross formation of close ups of hands of different complexions forming various signs. Some of the hands are outlined with red sequins, which also replace nail polish on one pair of the hands.

*Basket of Women* is a departure from the previous works in that it does not incorporate the use of sequins. A basket balances atop a young girl's head whose image is cut from a black and white photograph. An assemblage of appropriated



Vladimir Cybil Charlier, *V for Victory*, 2008 Acrylic, photographic print, beads, sequins, 30 x 30".

images and text is cut and pasted – collaged together amidst a background layered with pages from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, including the chapters: "Advice from a Caterpillar," "The Mock Turtle's Story," "The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill," and "A Caucus Race and a Long Table." The chapter closest to the heads of the women in the basket almost reads like a sentence of bodies and text. The basket is filled with images six different women of various backgrounds and references.

TT: I would like to talk first about the technical construction of *Red Cross Tristan*, *I Only Have Eyes for You*, and *Serenity and Punishment*. All three of these pieces play with the idea of the window –we have images recessed within a window and this kind of creates fractured bodies. Pieces of a body here, pieces of a body there, yet the image is read as a whole image, united, not necessarily a piecemeal body. Could you talk about this – the fractured body and the whole body?

VCC: *The images in the series are all based on appropriated photographs. The whole series depict male relatives who have died prematurely of violence or illness. The Maps series, from which Serenity and Punishment stems from, is the start of that body of work. The impetus to create this series was my coming across a few snapshots in a family photo album of an uncle who had been imprisoned in Haiti for two years because*

*of his political convictions. These snapshots document the burns inflicted on his body during repeated torture sessions. They were shown to a Canadian judge in the process of applying for political asylum for him.*

TT: This is such an amazingly powerful and personal story. Just from looking at the piece, I had no idea of its painful content. Is it okay with you that I share your personal story with an audience?

VCC: *I actually think that it's important to be open about those personal narratives. Those pieces were done in 2003. Although there is quite a focus on the dark years of the Papa Doc Duvalier regime in Haiti, people were also routinely imprisoned and tortured under the government of his son Baby Doc.*

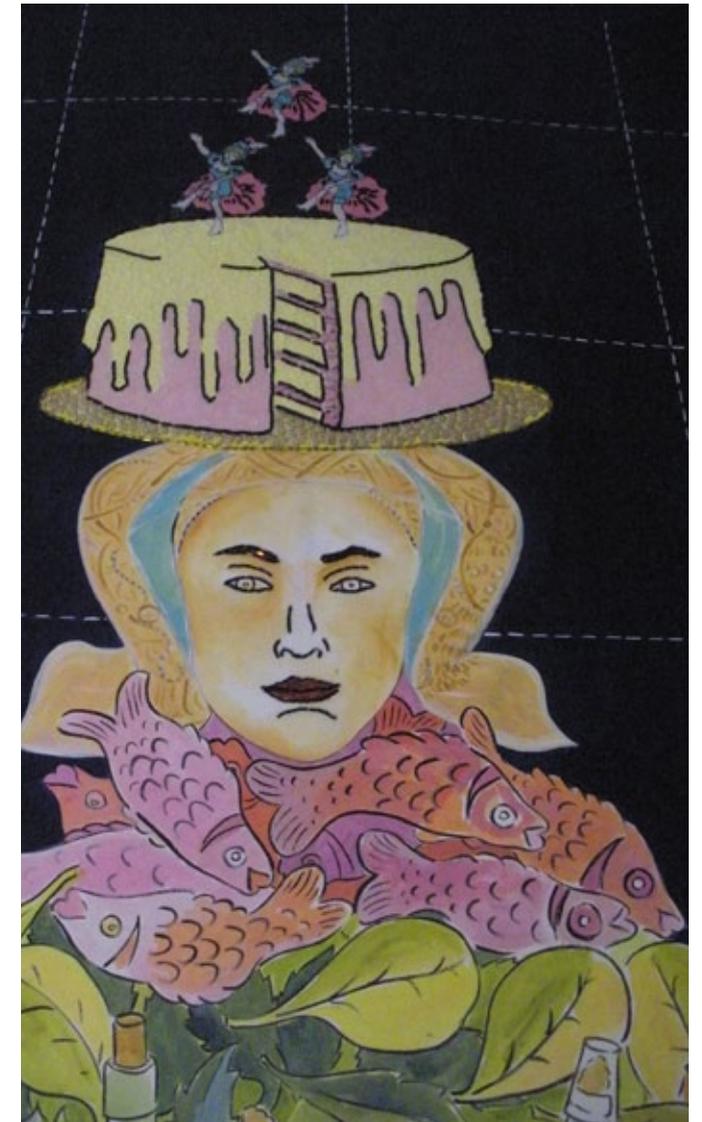
TT: The sequins can be somewhat ambiguous. For example, in *I Only Have Eyes for You*, the mouth with its teeth bared appears to be both smiling and biting. The ambiguity of the sign could be that of pleasure or of aggression.

VCC: *The subject of that piece is my first cousin who died at 26. He was an emerging composer, a rap artist, and quite talented. He was very popular, and, as I realized when I saw how many people from the music industry attended his funeral, was probably on the verge of making a breakthrough. He used a turntable in his work, which is why*

*there is an emphasis on his hands in some of the pieces I've done of him. I Only Have Eyes for You is the closest I could come to depicting his face and creating a portrait. That image was taken from a photograph that his mother had given me. I believe it was the same photograph that had been published in the newspaper. The ambiguity comes partly from a very spontaneous pose. But, I also think that meanings in hip hop culture are often subverted i.e "bad" doesn't necessarily mean bad but can mean "good." The piece was kind of an emulation of his persona.*

TT: In the works, *Red Cross of Tristan*, *I Only Have Eyes for You*, and *Serenity and Punishment* all contain a kind of playful use of sequins in silver, copper, gunmetal, and red. I was wondering if you could talk more about the sequins.

VCC: *I've been using sequins and beads for a long time in my work – blending craft and fine art traditions. The Haitian craftsmen are known for their sacred beaded flags. My use of sequins and beads is an allusion to that tradition, hiding and concealing, as well as beautifying those scars. I am interested in the juxtaposition of photography and beads as a mix of the modern and the old, craft and the fine art tradition.*



Vladimir Cybil Charlier, *Charlier, Dreamaker II*, detail, 2006. Acrylic, India ink, sequins, and beads on paper.

TT: So, for example, in *Serenity and Punishment*, the sequins beautify the scars by hiding and concealing the marks in a way that honors the craft tradition in Haiti while also commenting on the practices of torture and unlawful imprisonment.

VCC: Yes, the sequins in *Serenity and Punishment* are both covering and highlighting the burn.

TT: I like your creative mix of photography and the sequins. The depiction of Haiti is so often through photojournalism and its emphasis on poverty, suffering, or the exotic that it is refreshing to see such a different approach to photography and the Haitian body.

VCC: It was important for me to create a space where personal voices can emerge aside from those stereotypical images.

TT: Could you speak about your *Baskets* series? *Basket of Women* has a striking interaction of text and images, but other figures with baskets, such as the *Dream Makers* are much more pictorial. How do you account for the discrepancy between verbal language and visual language in those works?

VCC: I've been using baskets and bags in my work for quite a while. I worked for a good while on the idea of the "Boite La Mayotte,"

a kind of local portable theater in a box that often portrays the obscene and macabre. In a way these baskets are another take on that theme.

I do not see any discrepancy between the verbal and visual language. They are part of a whole. Or shall I say they are part indeed of two traditions that I have inherited and I feel I can weave into a whole.

TT: In a *Basket of Women*, you include one of the chapter headings from *Alice in Wonderland*: "A Caucus Race and a Long Table." The positioning of this script near the women's bodies reads a bit like a sentence, not of words, but of bodies and text and image combined. Could you talk about this arrangement and why you chose this particular book?

VCC: *Alice in Wonderland* is one of my favorite books. The text cues the viewer as to the fairy-tale character that people often associate with Haitian art and daily life.

TT: Would you consider the basket and sequins and beaded work to be part of the craft tradition that you are blending with a fine arts tradition?

VCC: There is certainly an attempt at blending those traditions. I have spent a lot of time looking at traditional images and have drawn from the work of self-taught Haitian masters, which is very codified.



Vladimir Cybil Charlier, *Bubblegum Haitiana*, 2005. Acrylic, paper, India ink, sequins, wood, metal, 78 x 81".

# Asha Ganpat

Interview and introductory text by Tashima Thomas

*I actually made a piece entitled Bubblegum Haitiana, which was an attempt to distill a visual alphabet from images created by various self-taught masters. Basket of Women contains women's heads and bodies drawn by Botticelli, Degas, Gauguin, a Chinese master, as well as an Egyptian head. It's a survey textbook's depiction of Western art on a four-year-old's head, which happens to be mine.*

TT: The chapters that were included in the work, "Advice from a Caterpillar," "The Mock Turtle's Story," "The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill," "A Caucus Race and a Long Table," were they deliberate as well?

VCC: *I tend to work in series. I must have made 10-15 drawings along with "Basket of Women." I also tend to make up imperfect systems. Thus, I started scanning the book from the beginning and proceeded systematically. The pages were then arranged in a grid pattern, but if one of them did not quite fit in, I left it out.*

TT: In *Disillusions*, there is a piece by Sandra Stephens entitled Snow White Remixed. Your Basket of Women piece, of course, addresses Alice in Wonderland. I've been thinking about the literary fantasy, the fairytale with a female protagonist, and our attraction to these stories. Could you discuss Alice in Wonderland and perhaps why you chose this particular work?

VCC: *I've been using Alice in Wonderland for many years in my work. I've done a whole series of drawings about the earthquake in Haiti using more political texts, but I've stuck with Alice over the years. The text in essence has come to symbolize my American childhood. I, of course, must be Alice.*

Asha Ganpat is a sculptor and mixed-media artist who was born in the West Indies in Trinidad and currently lives and works in New Jersey. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University and her Master of Fine Arts from Montclair State University. Ganpat is an Adjunct Professor of Sculpture at Montclair State University and Middlesex County College and is also an independent curator.

In *Things*, the artist explores representations of her family through everyday objects, including a cutlass, hairbrush, feather, coconut, toothbrush with cockroach perched atop, and other items. The piece is composed of flat cutouts on a three-dimensional linear display; they are inked in wistful washes of lavender, peach, and grey. Beneath each object is the name of one of Ganpat's family members. For example, under the bottle of pepper sauce, the label reads, "Chanaday, grandmother, bottle of pepper sauce." Ganpat's grandfather is referenced through a parrot feather and her brother, Sahadeo, through a pack of Du Maurier Cigarettes. These objects tethered to names

of the artist's relatives conjure memories, experiences, and personalities so that the everyday object becomes a substitute body. Under the shelf holding them is a shallow landscape drawing depicting the shoreline of her native Trinidad littered with debris and discarded automobile tires. Here, Ganpat challenges the fantasy of the Caribbean as a pristine paradise or tourist playground with illustrations of a shoreline spoiled by "everyday" objects of waste.

Tashima Thomas: Could you talk about your piece for the *Disillusions* exhibition? I'm interested in the creative process as it relates to production. Do you create works that later become part of an exhibition? Or are the works created as site specific?

*Asha Ganpat: This piece began with one specific connection. When I was 23 years old, during a trip home to Trinidad, my grandmother began to prepare food for me to take home. I've been fortunate to have two homes, one in each country. We always returned with recycled bottles and containers filled with her delicious food. We layered tape and bags and more tape and*



# Childhood Home



**Property Type: Single Family**  
**Bedrooms: 1**  
**Baths: 1/2**  
**Sqft: 150**  
**Lot Size: 30x30**  
**Year Built: 1979**  
**Area: Freeport**  
**Country: Trinidad**



**Description:** Charming one bedroom with eat-in kitchen that can also be used as livingroom. Space in bedroom for a crib hammock perfect for growing families. Cement flooring, local water well within walking distance. outhouse, tin roof, and windows, only two hours from the nearest hospital and much more!

*packed into a car, seeing my aunts and cousins sitting on hammocks and benches, waving goodbye to their brothers and uncles and me.*

TT: I'm interested in your use of props and the staging of these props. Are you interested in a kind of theatrical element to family life? I'm instantly reminded of the reality family shows that are so popular right now and how they are often staged with an exhibition-like quality.

AG: *I rarely hold anything as sacred or close to sacred. There's so little sentimentality in my approach to life. These objects are as close as I come. But instead of venerable I see these objects primarily as triggers for memories. There is no inherent meaningfulness to objects, only the psychic presence we assign them. The symbol of the menagerie on the shelf is akin to photographs on the wall. Although I don't have photographs in my home, I do have non-specific objects where each triggers a memory more strongly than a photograph could. For example, my aunt had braces as an adult. I don't remember her without them. I think of her and I think of dental care. Even after this connection, another incident occurred. I was staying over in her basement apartment in Queens, and in the morning I went to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I found a little cockroach sitting on the bristles of my toothbrush.*

*Also, I remember my parents telling me that my uncle Preman died from cracking his head falling out of a coconut tree. I have discovered that the story has changed, and no one knows the origin of my memory. Now, I am told that he had a brain tumor the size of a coconut. My first memory of my uncle Gewan is when he walked into my grandmother's kitchen, put down his cutlass, sat down and stared at me silently. I introduced myself as his niece and hoped my uneasiness was well hidden. He kept staring at me in silence. When my grandmother came back into the kitchen, she told me that he had been gone for a month, walking in the bush.*

TT: If you could choose a prop or everyday object to represent yourself what would you choose and why?

AG: *My own prop could change by the day, as I change. One prop I've become close to is Eris's golden apple. My connection to Eris evolved from my approach to making art. I enjoy playing with the viewer and her preconceived ideas of what is and is not, the things people too often mistake as fact when they are only opinions. As an artist, I see myself as the one who sets the stage, the one who provides the environment, the context. This leaves the viewer to bring with her the opinion and the content. Sometimes the narrow line between truth and falsehood is toyed with. I set up my*

Asha Ganpat,  
*Childhood Home*, 2007.  
C-Print, 18 x 12"

# Childhood Home



**Property Type: Single Family**

**Bedrooms: 4      Baths: 2**  
**Sqft: 2500      Lot Size: .5 acre**  
**Year Built: 1950**  
**Area: Livingston, NJ**  
**Country: U.S.A.**

**Description:** Charming four bedroom with eat-in kitchen, den, living room, dining room, two attics, finished basement, one car garage perfect for growing families. Hardwood floors, central air, two full baths. Elementary, middle, high schools within walking distance. Under two miles from top NJ hospital.

Asha Ganpat,  
*Childhood Home*,  
(New Jersey version) 2007.  
C-Print, 18 x 12"

*installations intentionally inviting the viewer to be the performance of the work. All Eris did was send an apple to the party, an apple inscribed with Kallisti, meaning "to the prettiest one." It was the ego and vanity of the goddesses which caused the Trojan War, not the apple itself. The reason I make art is to discover a deeper understanding of humanity than I presently have. There are so many things I don't understand about my own inclinations and others', and I want to know more.*

TT: Speaking of viewership and interaction with your work, what has been some of the feedback you have received for your piece in *Disillusions*?

AG: *There have been two sides to the response. There is a strip, below the shelf, on which I have drawn an ambiguous landscape. Some people see the shoreline, some see mountains in the distance, and some see low shrubs. This landscape is littered with debris, an old tire, discarded bottles and cans. There is a dog to represent the stray dogs whose numbers sometimes seem to rival New Jersey's squirrel population. I only ever speak about the areas outside the cities because those are the only places I have been. I have encountered resistance to my dissenting opinion about the present state of Trinidad as I have witnessed it. When I return home, the Trinidad I see is one I wish could be*

*better, exactly as I feel towards the United States. In my work I try to bring attention to the problems in Trinidad and hope to inspire others to work towards change for the betterment of the country. For example, in a piece called Indian Arrival Day, I took a picture of the beach packed with Trininis celebrating the 1845 arrival of Indians to the island. I didn't choose the dirtiest part of the beach to photograph and ignore pristine sections. What is important about the photograph is that I don't embellish or lie. The whole beach looked that way. I bring attention to the issue not to disrespect Trinidad but as a longing for its improvement. I can't pretend not to see what I see. I attribute resistance to my dissent to the problem of nationalism. We find this in the United States too, in the form of "Love it, or Leave it." I believe that to love your country is to want it to be better, the best country it can be: free of corruption, racism, sexism, and all other inequalities. On the other side, presenting the everyday objects as triggers has allowed me to connect strongly with the viewer. I don't expect that the viewer will align themselves with my objects and the memories tied to them, but I find that the viewer begins to consider the objects of their own menagerie and immediately discovers the tethers they have already created connecting objects to loved ones.*

TT: Could you talk a little about current or upcoming projects?

AG: I enjoyed returning to drawing so much that for my next visual arts project I'm going to sculpt from clay. It's been some time since I worked with traditional media. This project came from some drawings I made of fantastic sad monsters. The main character is tall and slender and hairless. He doesn't smile and has a stub where his right hand should be. He and the other characters will be exhibited under glass, caged as if part of an early 20th century collection.

I'm also returning to writing. From my early teens to my mid-twenties, thanks to the internet and proximity to New York City, I had the opportunity to live what felt like several lives. I had different groups of people I would spend time with from different places, groups who would never meet each other. The upkeep of so many relationships led me to a superficial schizophrenia. I was able to be many people almost simultaneously.

My first life is the one I lived in my town, a safe little suburbia, with relatively wealthy

sheltered kids and adults. That was my safest set of experiences. Overlapping with my first, I had a group of people online to create my second life. At age 12, in 1991, I convinced my mother that we needed a computer. I also convinced her that the computer needed to be in my room and connected to the internet. I started on bulletin boards. It was all there was. I would post something and 24 hours later it would show up on the bulletin boards and if someone wrote back immediately I was able to read their response 24 hours after that. Then, chat rooms came, and I began to connect with people all over the country. I was "speaking" with people of all ages, many of whom should've been jailed for suggesting inappropriate liaisons with a girl so young. I developed friendships and romantic relationships with both people I would never meet and many I did meet. I count myself lucky to have emerged from meeting so many strangers from the internet while escaping unharmed. My third life happened in New York City. At 14, I was permitted to go to Manhattan on my own. My mother bought me a pager and as long as I called her back as soon as she paged



Asha Ganpat, *My Collection*, 2006. Contracts for souls, wax, glass; 1 quart each.

# Jessica Lagunas

Interview by Allison Harbin

*me then I could keep my unreasonably limitless freedom. I had adult friends to visit. I went to clubs and bars and in my early teens lived more than many do in their early twenties. At 15, I would go to the Limelight on Tuesday nights, get comp'd in, and the bouncer would give me free drink passes, and I would stay out until 4 AM with enough time to make it home, eat some breakfast, and make it to school. Of course, I had finished my homework the day before. I spent my teenage years feeling sorry for my peers because they only slept on school nights while I was having adventures on the streets of New York.*

*The disconnect I experience while trying to piece my life together on a timeline inspired me to begin to write about it. At any single age I juggled the expectations of youth and adulthood simultaneously. So far, I've already completed 100 pages of my memory collecting. I'm writing in a micro-fiction style. I'm writing about my life, story by story, each only allowed a single paragraph. It's brutal and honest. I'm a protagonist and a villain, depending on which story you're reading. It's heavily indexed; the stories*

*are followed by lists of objects, people, and places with reference numbers so the story may be read in several ways. Together, they may be read like a conversation or a "choose your own adventure" tale or in alphabetical order by story title. Each of the characters has their own profile that is also micro-fiction. Although it might seem like an autobiography, it's not. I don't rely on my memories to provide truth and fact. I don't believe the human brain works that way.*

Allison Harbin: My first introduction to your work was at the 2011 College Art Association conference in New York this past year. You participated in a special session on feminism. What were your thoughts from that symposium, and on the current position of feminism and art?

*JL: I didn't grow up with feminism, I wasn't exposed to it as a concept at all until the late 1990s through a small feminist newspaper in Guatemala, and I remember I wasn't very interested in it. When I moved to New York in 2000 with my husband, I really immersed myself in the New York art scene and attended as many lectures as I could. In particular, I was really inspired by Gloria Steinem lectures. It's funny, where we are meeting right now in Union Square is right next door to ABC Carpet, which in 2004 hosted the "Love Your Tree" and the Red Tent project by Eve Ensler. I remember being amazed by that, firstly because only women were allowed to go in this tent. It was such a dramatic gesture. They hosted a series of events, and one of the speakers was Isabella Rossellini, who when she turned 40 began to be a critic of ageism in our culture, which*

*is something that I have thought a lot about in my own work. Also my learning about feminism came from reading books. I was very influenced by Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* and Rosalind Coward's *Female Desires*, among many others. So I guess for me, feminism was always an open-minded experience. In Guatemala, where I'm from, the oppression of women is very palpable. It is a very, very patriarchal society, very in your face, very macho or machista. Men dominate women on all levels of society, so for me, it was necessary to get away from it. Coming to New York provided a way for me to gain some distance, as well as to be able to engage with it in my work.*

AH: I'd like to ask you about your video pieces *Para Acariciarte Mejor [The Better to Caress You With]*, *Para Besarte Mejor [The Better to Kiss You With]*, *Para Verte Mejor [The Better to See You With]* and *Retorno a la Pubertad [Return to Puberty]*. In particular, *Para Acariciarte Mejor*, in which you film yourself in a time lapse obsessively applying nail polish over and over until the entire bottle was used up, and then the same with lipstick, and mascara.

JL: These video pieces came out of my desire to comment on the obsession with beauty in Latin American culture specifically and the rigorous treatments Latin American women subject themselves to in order to be socially accepted and seen as beautiful. Elaborately long nails, hair extensions, make up, plucking--all of this is very crucial to be seen as feminine. There is more diversity here in the United States; it is not as pressing because women here have more options to express themselves. Leaving Guatemala and coming here allowed me to become more conscious of this difference and to comment on it in my work.

The idea for this series came when I was sitting on a subway, with a Latino couple next to me and across from a woman with very long, very elaborate nails. The man turned to the woman and asked her why didn't she do something like that, why didn't she spend more time on her nails! I was so angry sitting there listening to him criticizing her, I remember thinking to myself, "I have to do something with this," and I came up with the idea of using an entire bottle of nail polish in one sitting.

AH: There is something very violent about the dripping and oozing of the polish in the video, it's disturbing, and as you watch it get piled on, it begins to look like blood dripping from claws. It's kind of terrifying actually.

Jessica Lagunas, *Untitled (Souvenirs from Governors' Island)*, 2010.  
Fabric, ink stamp, and pins, 52 x 60".



*JL: Yes precisely! I like how it becomes almost empowering again in pointing out how ridiculous and extreme beauty measures are. I'd also like these pieces to be seen as a way to see obsession with feminine beauty through a different cultural lens. One of the things that struck me when I first moved to NY was the embeddedness of consumerist culture here and how profoundly excessive everything is here. This is an important part of these pieces, to illustrate excess and the horror of excess in terms of women's beauty. I wanted to point out how extreme these pressures are on women, and allow the viewer to spend time and really question them.*

*I'd like these videos to be seen as a mirror, a way to question it, not against grooming, but against pressure and obsession. Also, these videos are a way for me to try to consciously resolve the issue on a personal level.*

AH: Let me ask you about the titles--they are clearly references to "Little Red Riding Hood," which for me brought up connotations of female innocence, sexual deviancy, and the need to be rescued by a heroic male from a villainous male. That entire story works to strip Little Red Riding Hood of any personal authority. She is an innocent victim, which makes her a sort of sexual ideal in many ways.

*JL: Yes, the story is the same in Guatemala as it is here, and I think the title does speak to the presumed innocence of women, and the presumed innocence of these beauty rituals we subject ourselves to. I wanted to take them to their extremes so they were not so innocent. It also seemed important for me to go through the process in one take, which is why you can see me sweating so much in the lipstick piece.*

*My experience growing up was that sexuality was an unremarked upon thing, no one mentioned it. It was very secretive and shameful. I also thought of Little Red Riding Hood as asking for continual affirmation from the wolf, and in my piece it was my way of giving Little Red Riding Hood back her affirmation; it is no longer about the wolf answering and instructing her but, rather, about her taking back her identity.*

AH: That's very interesting. In the original version of "Little Red Riding Hood," before the Grimm brothers wrote it down as a part of their construction of a German national ideal, Little Red Riding Hood is very much a free agent. She is the one who, after taking off all of her clothes and jumping into bed with the bad wolf of her own free will, kills the wolf with an axe once she realizes that he is bad. The original story is overtly sexual and gives much more agency to the role of women. The Grimm brother's version obviously took that out.

*JL: I didn't realize that. It is really interesting! In my pieces and I guess as well in the original story, there's a mockery of the male gaze, as if to say, "Go ahead and look. This is what you wanted, and I've done it to such an extreme it's uncomfortable to witness, so go ahead and look."*

AH: The video pieces themselves are very direct, the lighting is very even, the background is bare, and there is nothing to distract you from the activity going on. Why did you decide to frame the video like that?

*JL: I am originally trained in graphic design, and I think I approach art making through that lens. In graphic design you have a problem with a given set of variables, and you need to present it to the public in a visually approachable and understandable way. There is also a focus on working to find the most minimal way to express the most--it's about an economy of visual cues. In particular with these videos, I wanted the spectator to look at a very specific part of the body and not anything else that might distract him/her. It is a very conscious visual decision from my part, taken to a point that these videos are all silent so nothing can divert your attention.*

AH: The result is very shocking. The message is very clear and immediate to the viewer. I actually showed your work to some friends, neither of whom knows anything about art,

to see their reaction. My female friend and male friend actually reacted fairly similarly, with a kind of shock and then disgust. But they both got it immediately, and my male friend said he had never thought of makeup in that way, as oppressive. It was really interesting.

*JL: That's so funny that you say that. These videos were in a group show in London, and some American women were standing in front of them, talking, and all they could comment on was how I didn't know how to put the makeup on properly! It was crazy, like all they seemed to be able to do with the bluntness of the piece was to criticize it on a superficial level, rather than engaging with what the action in the piece might comment on. This showed me how truly engrained beauty rituals are, and how you cannot think outside of them, let alone question them, and in these works I'm asking, "why not?"*

AH: Personally, did you find it difficult to conform to prescribed Guatemalan expectations of beauty growing up?

*JL: Yes, my mother was very hard on me about my grooming and very insistent that I always present myself in the best way possible, which for her meant wearing makeup for going out. My art is a way for me to solve issues visually. For example, the piece *Por Siempre Joven (Forever Young)*,*

where I use my gray hair as embroidery threads, was very transformative for me. My first reaction to using my gray hairs to embroider each passing year was as a solution: to get rid of my gray hairs! Then of course, the project couldn't really work that way, because the gray hairs just kept coming. But the project taught me something else, solved a problem I didn't even know about, so to speak. The project became about accepting growing old and being proud of it.

AH: Do you count how many gray hairs it takes to embroider your age?

JL: Not at first, but it is why I grew my hair out, so I could have longer strands to work with. Now I've started counting, and it takes me around 35-40 strands of hair for each piece.

AH: Let's talk about your menstruation project, in which you collected the memories of the women in your family of when they got their first period. How did it come about? What was it like?

JL: My physical distance from my family--some of them are in Pennsylvania and the rest are in Guatemala and Chile--made me view my relationship with them differently, with a certain nostalgia. Separation is what made this possible, a desire to connect with my grandmother, who now lives in

Pennsylvania, while she is still alive. She was the first person I asked, and she was so embarrassed she couldn't speak about it, so I suggested she write it down in a letter. I didn't really expect her to do it, but she did and gave me this very beautiful letter describing her first period. It kind of grew from there into a letter-writing project, and seeing the varying responses from people was really wonderful. Even now, whenever I talk about this piece everyone wants to share this memory with me, it's like a gift. I also think it's amazing because it's not something women are asked to recall very often, but all of them remember it so vividly.

The project started as I was doing some research on the female body at the Medical Library on 5th Avenue. By chance, I found some images of biopsies of vaginal tissue from different days of the menstrual cycle. I began thinking how beautiful they were on a cellular level. It also demonstrated how little I knew about the scientific process of menstruation--what exactly was going on in my body during that time of the month.

I started printing these images on bed linens, an obvious tongue-in-cheek kind of play. Even the name "Special Days" is very coded and ironic. Those days aren't special at all, they're painful and annoying, and so it always struck me as funny when I heard people growing up referring to them as their "special time of the month." This led me to



Jessica Lagunas, *A flor de piel, #2*, 2006. Collage on paper, diptych, 5.5 x 14"



Jessica Lagunas, *Wildflowers series*, 2005 Collages on vintage botanical prints using images from women's magazines, approx. 8.5 x 5.5" each

*start the conversation with my grandmother about her first period.*

AH: How many letters did you end up collecting for this? Were there any special parameters you gave the women?

JL: *There were no parameters, just to write about their first time getting their period, how they knew about it, if they were prohibited from eating or doing anything, if they remembered any myths or old wives tales about menstruation, just basic story prompts like that. Other than that it was a free form letter, and it became this way of showing each woman's personality through the way they expressed themselves. I invited around 50 women in my family and at the end got 25 letters.*

AH: Can you tell me about your residency on Governors Island and what you worked on there?

JL: *I was inspired by Governors Island's military history so I decided to work with camouflage fabric. For some time now I have been noticing on the streets the camouflage fabric used in fashion, especially because I have negative feelings toward the military in particular Guatemala's past military regimes. But for my residency I wanted to work with the fabric in a different way, somewhat more positive than what I had previously worked on a couple of years ago, when I did*

*"120 Minutes of Silence," a two-hour video-performance where I cut the colored shapes of a green camouflage fabric to honor the disappeared victims during the 36-year civil war in Guatemala.*

*A very important aspect of the piece at Governors Island was the view from my studio, of the water, the vastness of New York City Bay, and also the daily ferry ride. As a result, I chose to work with blue camouflage fabric. I wanted this site-specific installation to be like a mirror of the view I had everyday there.*

*I did two installations based on the same fabric: I cut out the colored shapes and pinned them to the wall, piece by piece, in the same order as they were on the fabric. For our Open Studios in October 2010, I invited each visitor to take a piece with them as a "souvenir" of their visit. On the back of each piece I stamped the name of the residency – "Building 110: LMCC's Art Center at Governors Island" – my name, and the year. The piece became very interactive as each person not only chose his/her piece but also unpinned it. The idea was to have the piece disappear slowly through the 3 days of the Open Studios, one piece at a time.*

*During the second half of the residency, I did another version by continuing to cut out the colored shapes of the camouflage but*

*pinning them down on the wall this time as a very loose free form, with the pieces not touching, to resemble and play with the idea of "islands" (as in Governors Island), like an archipelago.*

AH: What are you working on currently, or if you don't have a project started, what is it that you feel the need to address with your work currently?

JL: *I am currently working on an installation piece about camouflage fabric where I'm unravelling by hand a yard of fabric thread by thread. The piece echoes my growing up in Guatemala and is titled *Deshilando el miedo (Unravelling Fear)*. It is my condemnation of the violence and repression by the military in Guatemala's 36 years civil war; through it, I attempt to symbolically take away the military's power by entirely unraveling the camouflage fabric. The military governments involved in this war were responsible for the genocide of entire villages and the disappearance of 40,000 people.*

*Through this project I'm also interested in working with textiles, which also relates to Guatemala's strong tradition of textiles hand-woven by Mayan women but doing exactly the opposite. I'm deconstructing by hand—which is a very intricate and time-consuming process—a fabric that was originally woven by a machine. By taking*

*apart the fabric until having the warp and the weft threads completely separate I will have at the end two pieces, like a diptych.*

*After I finish this piece, I want to continue working with fabrics and camouflage, maybe not so much with the military in Guatemala, but more in relation to the tension between feminine and masculine, by incorporating hand-stitched embroidery. Women's issues will always remain central to my work. On a personal level, this focus has helped me resolve my own preoccupations with my body and sense of worth and also helped me to accept growing old and to make peace with myself.*

# Rejin Leys

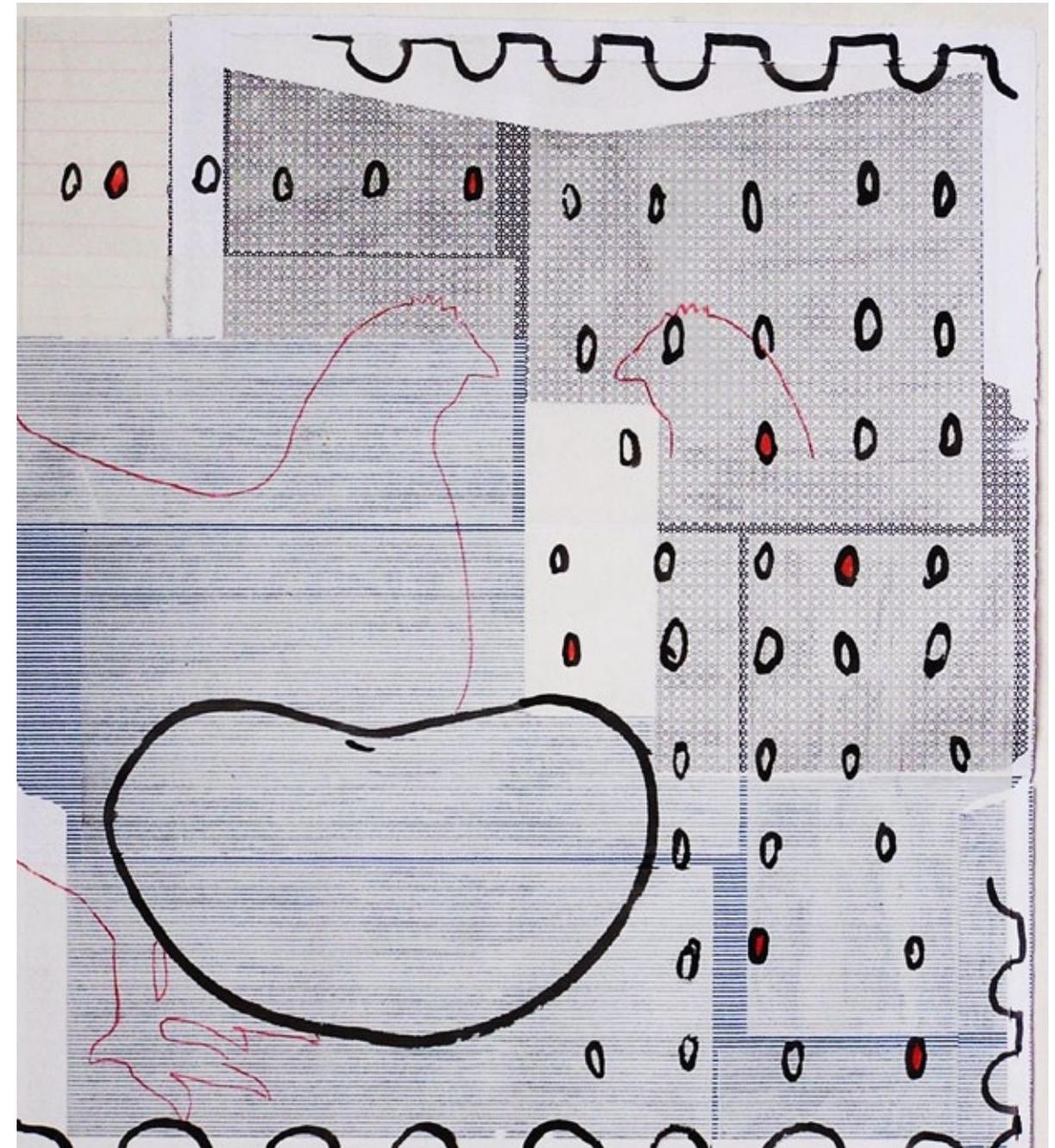
Interview and introduction by Tashima Thomas

Rejin Leys is a Brooklyn-born mixed-media book artist and art educator of Haitian descent, currently residing in New York. She has exhibited in museums and galleries internationally and has been featured in such publications as *Small Axe*, *Boutures*, and the *Bread & Roses Cultural Project Social Justice Calendar*. Her work encompasses fine art traditions and political themes.

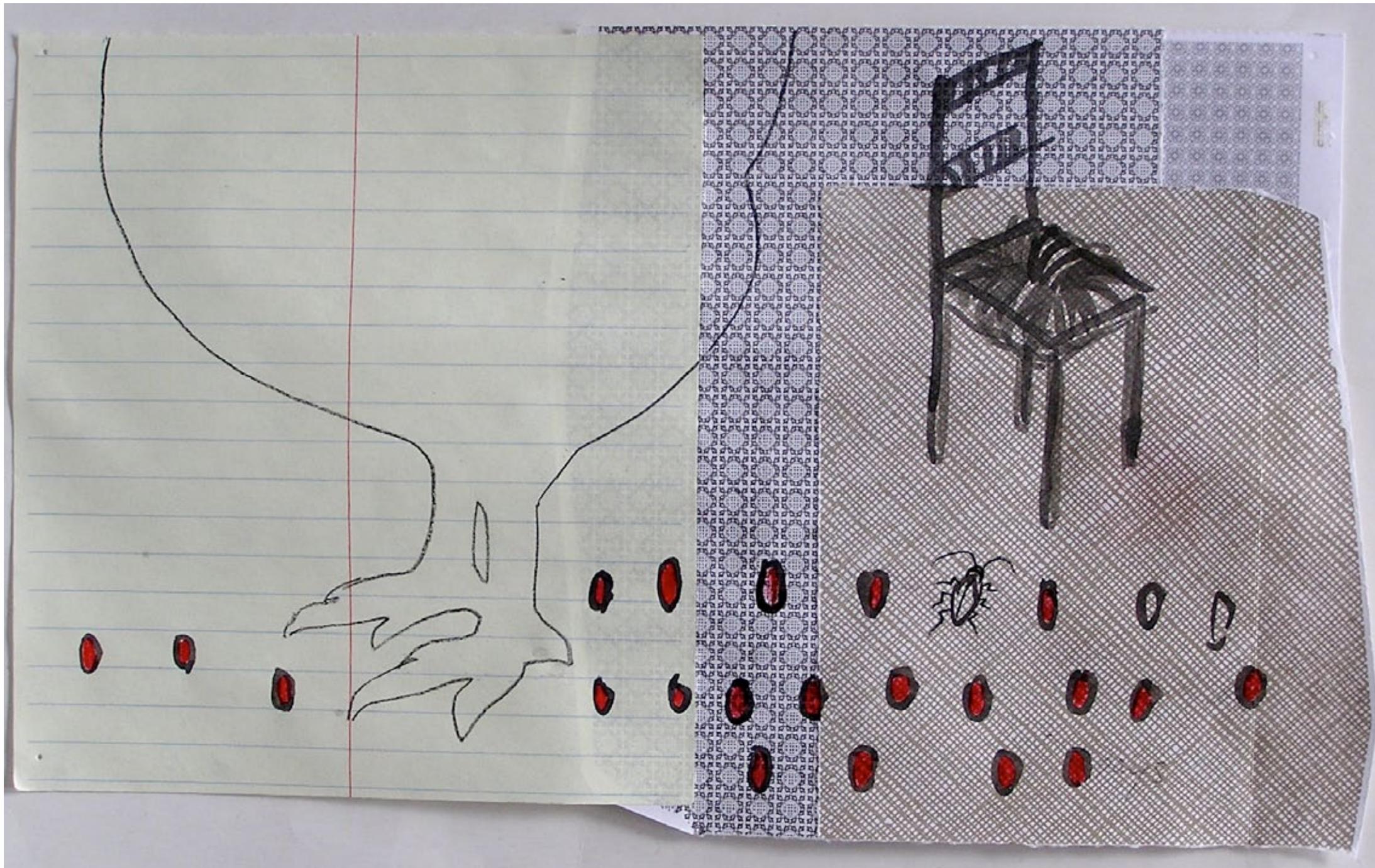
She is exhibiting 20 drawings from her “100 Drawings” series in *Disillusions*. These are executed on various types of paper, including ruled steno paper, heavy drawing pad paper, and the underside of mailing envelopes with the plastic return address window intact. A precedent for this body of work is the artist’s book, *Important Information Enclosed* (April 2011), which features drawings of rice, insects, a plastic grocery bag, and the silhouetted cameo of the head of a hen, such as those made popular in the early nineteenth-century by the physiognotrace machine and by artists like Moses Williams who cut profiles of middle class patrons. Similarly, Leys’ hen is endowed with a persona. Reiterations of these images are

duplicated to various degrees throughout the “100 Drawings” series. There are hens, stars (think chicken and stars soup), beans, insects, purses, bones, skeletons, and batteries as stock images. They are endowed with a malleability that transcends cultures, time, and space. Rather than a tautological summary of images, one finds in these drawings the delicacy of line and shape and a tender approach to the medium and to the act of drawing as meditation. In one composition of rice, insects, and beans, Leys layers the images with the actual paper from a fortune cookie that sagely states, “out of confusion comes new patterns.”

Leys informs me of the cognitive practice of systems thinking – that is, how everything affects everything. For example, she ruminates on how the sustenance on your plate is affected by NAFTA, global trade, diplomacy, oil, and other social and political interjections. She mentions the toxicity of foods contaminated with pesticides, herbicides, and hormones saying, “We are eating a cocktail of chemicals.”



Rejin Leys *100 Drawings, Including Secrets*, 2011 Mixed media Dimensions variable



Rejin Leys *100 Drawings, Including Secrets*, 2011 Mixed media Dimensions variable

This reflective consciousness streamlines into discussing other imagery from her “*100 Drawings*” series, especially the rice. In the interview, Leys discusses the physicality of drawing rice as a meditative act, slowing down the body and quieting the mind. Since these drawings were conducted almost daily, the drawing of rice became a daily meditation. The impetus to make the same mark thousands of times over, paired with the simplicity of the design of rice as mini-ellipses, creates the space for a transcendental experiment.

Tashima Thomas: Rejin, I really like the piece you wrote in your art journal on chicken and rice. Is it okay if I share those thoughts here?

*Rejin Leys: Of course. I had been drawing just rice and remembering the origin of this drawing project in the 2008 food shortages and protests. The idea grew when I began to think about what eats what, evolution, and the connections between all living things. Some of the imagery that went into the drawings was new material for me, and some was a reworking of old favorites. Was it just a coincidence that searching through my collection of collage materials yielded that page of pictures of different breeds of hens? Had I thought about hunger in past projects, or were the hens collected for a different reference?*

Until today I haven't cared for the idea that artists should keep all kinds of junk that we will one day use in our work. But now I have this image of myself traveling through life with an archive of paper. Bits and pieces come out that are coincidentally relevant. Periodically, I dip into the archive and whatever emerges will influence how I frame the issues of the day.

TT: You've made reference to your work before as being an internal dialogue. Would you mind sharing some of that dialogue? For example, I remember your mentioning the physicality of drawing rice as a meditative act, quieting the mind – could you share your thoughts on some of this kind of internal dialogue?

RL: I know that I've spent a year drawing rice as way to quiet my mind and settle myself down – it was very meditative. But it's also a symbolic contribution to world hunger and to focus on that issue and other people's needs. I drew a lot of rice last year.

TT: Did you connect with any world hunger organizations?

RL: Originally, the idea grew out of a project called "Seeds for Haiti." "Seeds for Haiti" is an organization which raises money in order to give farmers the amount of rice and beans that they would need to plant their crops, and from the harvest they would bank

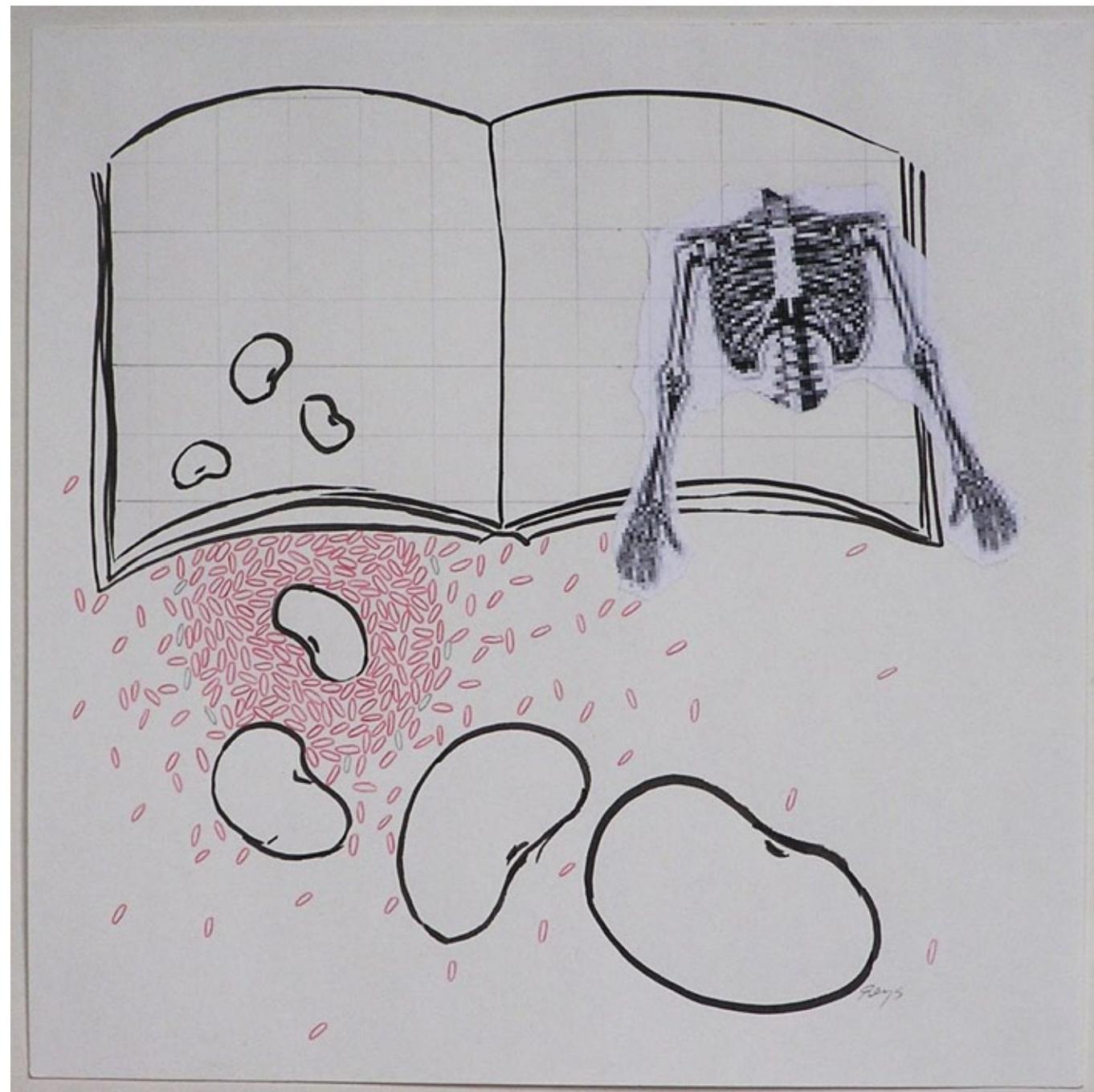
their seeds for themselves and for their neighbors. They were required to save their seeds in the group's food bank so the whole community would benefit. So many people in different parts of the world relate to rice – it is part of so many different cultures and communities.

TT: Because, as you say, rice is part of so many cultures and globally affecting so many lives, do you find that people often share their rice stories with you?

RL: Well, I find it just mainly in the way people immediately respond to the work. I have a friend whose family is Vietnamese who told me how much he relates to the work because rice is so much of a staple in their diet. I also know of an artist using mounds of rice in which each mound represents a statistic on world hunger like how many people go hungry in different countries. Rice is often represented as the food people grew up on and as their main sustenance, but it can also be used to tell stories.

TT: Would you consider yourself a storyteller?

RL: I never saw myself as a storyteller in a narrative way. I think my work is very ambiguous. I don't think it tells only one particular kind of story. It's open-ended enough so that people can bring their own stories to it. I don't know to what degree



*it's true, but I'd like to think that rather than dictating the story, I'm more of a facilitator. I like the idea of the viewer being active.*

TT: Speaking of viewers, what are some of the responses you've received to your work in *Disillusions*?

*RL: I had some good questions during the symposium. One of them was about the purse I used in the drawing because it appears in the earlier works where I was just focusing on food in the hunger series. Now I see that it is part of a different story. The hen is also telling her own story. Because I'm a vegetarian, I don't think of her as food but as a character in her own story.*

TT: You had mentioned before that you don't think of chicken as food—"It's a character." These characters in your work are related to what you referred to as systems thinking. Could you explain a little more about how these characters are connected? What do they have in common?

*RL: Most of the time our thinking on all kinds of issues assumes everything is separate, whether they're things that are personal or things that are happening way out there. We don't really think of the connections with and between things. We can't solve something unless we're thinking of the big picture. The way we think of hens as food creates a hierarchy, but we*

*think of other animals as pets because of the same hierarchy. We create hierarchies everywhere. Take for example how CEOs earn big salaries, and street sweepers don't. If we look at the way resources are allocated, the way some histories are marginalized, then everything we can look at and talk about we can look at in relation to hierarchies. What determines hunger shortages in one place and the way food is allocated in another? The farmers are part of a system that facilitates taking a surplus of food here and selling it to other countries. We want to have a positive trade balance so we turn other countries into markets for our trade products. We've manipulated their economies to become buyers. It's all about determining whose goals are important. We create this hierarchy so that we are the winner in our own game. There are winners, and there are losers.*

TT: So then, in a way, the hen is the loser as a commodity in the hierarchy?

*RL: I have one piece called "Emerging Superpowers." Politically, the term superpowers refers to countries with military and economic power. In "Emerging Superpowers," the hen is depicted surrounded by a force field. She is developing superpowers for herself. For once, she's going to be the winner – representing all of the people in the global narrative. She represents in this political moment, the 99% of the population*

*who are not in control of their destinies. The hen in the coop – she thinks it's her own life, but the outcome has already been decided for her. I'm not saying people are chickens, but there is a certain parallel.*

TT: What you have said resonates with this political moment and with movements like Occupy Wall Street and other global occupation demonstrations.

*RL: The manipulation of the 99% works best if the people being manipulated don't realize they are being manipulated. Then, when people find out, maybe something can be done about it.*

TT: We talked earlier about your appreciation for shapes. Could you share ideas about this appreciation?

*RL: I do find that if I draw a picture of a dog, it can only be a dog. If I draw an oval, it could be an oval, or a grain of rice, a bug, an eye, etc. There's something about a mutable form. By drawing a circle over and over again, I can tell so many stories simultaneously because it could be the sun, or the moon, or a hole in the ground. The shape can go from being a grain of rice to a bean. I appreciate the simplicity of shapes in that way. I've taught the visual arts and have heard for so many years from people how they wish they could draw. But, if you can draw an oval, you can tell so many*

*stories. And it's also very contemporary, now you can be a great artist without having to draw the dog.*

TT: Are you still working towards completing the "100 Drawings" series?

*RL: I have to get to a point where I feel I've done 100. When I began the project, the idea was to draw quickly to see what would happen. But I've become more conscious of the direction the drawings are going in now, which changes and slows down the process.*

TT: So, do you see the story going in a different direction?

*RL: The latest ones have less to do with the superpowers, although often the hen is telling the story. I've been interested in making more artists' books. I feel like I'm doing a book where the book is an image in the drawing. It's starting to look like a hen who is writing her own book.*

TT: Will the artist book be considered part of the "100 Drawings?"

*RL: So far the book is an image in the drawing itself. It's among the 100 drawings, but I would like to work on a book toward the end of the project. I believe it could sum up the project.*

TT: Many of your drawings are committed to



Rejin Leys *100 Drawings, Including Secrets*, 2011 Mixed media Dimensions variable

notebook paper, ripped from a steno. How did that happen? In other words, how did you decide to draw on steno paper? Did it happen organically?

*RL: It did. It began when I was working with the images from the archive. I was working with the material at hand and using what I already had as a resource. In actually making the drawings, I wanted to do the same. I didn't go out and buy paper; I used what I had on hand. My husband, who was an archivist and community organizer, passed away last year. He had dozens of steno notebooks, many of them with only the first few pages used. Before donating some of his papers to the Schomburg Center, I removed all of the blank pages from his notebooks, so I have all of this blank paper which I've been using in various ways. I also liked the idea of building a sheet of paper out of different papers. I like building or assembling the papers into a larger sheet. I'm very paper oriented. I've never painted on canvas or been attracted to painting on canvas. In fact, there's a whole series I made of handmade notebooks at some point where I was cutting and painting out of the handmade journals.*

TT: The medium, shapes, and images all have very purposeful components.

*RL: I have an artist friend whose work is beautiful—beautiful textures, colors and layering, beautiful images—and very political. He once suggested that if you want to talk about serious issues using images of a fist, blood, or violence, he said, you have to make the work beautiful to get the audience to actually look at it. It's organic too. It's not about how I am going to hide the issues. The issues are very clear, for example, like working on the "Seeds for Haiti" project. But once the images are chosen, once I have chosen the images from the archives, during the pre-production stage, once you have this vocabulary of images, I'm not constructing a story out of each piece. Art is about play as well. The drawings take on a life of their own and go in their own direction.*

# Sofía Maldonado

Interview and Introduction by Tashima Thomas

Sofía Maldonado is a muralist and mixed-media artist of Cuban and Puerto Rican descent. Born in Puerto Rico, she grew up in the San Juan metropolitan area. She majored in Art and Design at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas (EAP) in San Juan where she received her undergraduate degree in 2006. She was awarded her Master of Fine Arts degree in Painting at the Pratt Institute in 2008. Maldonado has collaborated in the development of public art projects with Real Art Ways in Hartford, CT; Graphopoli, an Urban Art Biennial at the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, San Juan; the Tenth Havana Biennial in Cuba; and the Times Square Alliance in New York City. The latter mural installation at 42nd street generated much debate and discussion and elicited strong sentiments regarding the representation of ethnic female bodies.

For *Disillusions*, Maldonado painted a site-specific work, a towering centerpiece of acrylic, measuring 11.5 by 17.5 feet, wrapped around a central column in the gallery. An arresting figuration of colors and forms characteristic of Maldonado's urban street aesthetic, the piece is a double portrait of

two women—ethereal beings, nude, covered in decorative flourishes, tattooed with wings, lightning bolts, flowers, fire, and smoke. The female figure on the right clutches a multicolored serpent in her right hand while in mid-stride. Her left foot kicks up a flame of yellow light.

A wispy belt trails off her waist and becomes an open cloud for the title of the exhibition, "*Disillusions*," written out in graffiti tags. Her eyes are closed in contentment, and feathers embellish her breasts in a useless attempt to camouflage a would-be nipple. The word "Harlem" is prominently tattooed on the figure's right calf. The artist harnesses the power of this word to conjure diverse associations: urbanity, blackness, 125th Street, defiance, and the struggle for life and liberty.

The second female, painted in blue, is cut off at the knees; nonetheless, she stands assuredly. She is covered with similar flourishes of wings and featherlike dainties. Bouquets of flowers emerge from her breasts, and a burst of yellow light ignites the image with a sexualized energy erupting from her body. Although her body

Sofía Maldonado, Beyonce, Rihanna, Lady GaGa, J Lo, MIA from the series Concrete *Jungle Divas*, 2010. Gold dusk, acrylic paint, urethane on canvas. 36 x 84 " each





Sofía Maldonado,  
*Fela Kuti Queens*, 2009.  
Acrylic, ink on cotton paper.  
13.25 x 14.25"  
each

is an active explosion of dripping paint and graphic flourishes, her face is serene. Mouth slightly open, right hand on her hip, she is pictured as if listening to an internal orchestra, oblivious to the viewer. Her counterpart, with eyes closed, is equally detached. Is this indifferent attitude an invitation for an assaulting male gaze? Does it complicate the question of female agency? This is the same provocative aesthetic that has divided viewers into two camps: those who actively support this brand of urban street art as representing empowered women versus those who read these images as inglorious recapitulations to an archaic master narrative that invokes the image of Latinas as hypersexualized, available, and disposable.

Tashima Thomas: You're in an area of artistic production that is traditionally dominated by men. Could you share your genesis as a muralist? How did you get started? Who were some of your earliest influences?

*Sofía Maldonado: I started getting interested in graffiti or street art when I was in high school. I was enrolled in a public art school in Puerto Rico. At the time, I used to listen to hip hop music from France and Spain. Hip hop got me interested in graffiti. My friends and I began to build a community. I followed up-and-coming street art movements, but at that time in Puerto Rico there was not really street art; you*

*could see more graffiti production like tags on walls. I became interested in painting in the street. I began "wheatpaste bombing" my chicas [girls]—meaning posting paper cutouts all over town—and it got to the point that these characters were recognized as my tag, "Sofía." People knew it was my work.*

*In high school, I especially looked up to two French female artists named Fafi and Miss Vaughn. When I enrolled in art college in Puerto Rico, my concentration was graphic design.*

*I didn't want to be a painter at that time; it never even crossed my mind, though I would go and paint walls every Sunday. For my BFA thesis, I proposed to my professor to do a huge mural that was 177 feet long by 12 feet high. While doing that mural I started to become more and more interested in the interaction of the public with my murals. After I completed the project, some friends of mine, Huck Risa and Pely Cuevas, videotaped skaters writing on it.*

*When I started to paint in Puerto Rico, I was working in latex because we only had access to spray paint (Krylon) from the hardware store. We didn't have all of the fancy brands like Montana, which are made to paint graffiti with lots of beautiful colors. I would get mixed colors from the hardware store that people didn't like and would leave behind. I could buy a gallon of mixed paint*

*for five dollars. I was able to paint cheaply and with lots of different colors, more than with a can. I restricted myself to latex paint even though my friends would paint with spray paint. With a brush I learned to paint as fast as they could with a can. This was during college. What I discovered when I came to New York City is that it's not as easy to paint on walls here. The first time I had a studio was at Pratt. For one semester, I didn't even know what to do with it. I would just go outside and paint every weekend. At Pratt, I eventually learned about studio practices.*

*My thesis show and first gallery show were on skateboarding culture. I was really into the skate scene and went to a lot of events; I started noticing a bunch of wasted skateboards. I would find piles of used and broken skateboards. I collected them, and they became the basis for Tropical Storm, my thesis show, which emphasized dilapidated surfaces, memories of the abandoned buildings I had painted, and used skateboards. I would take seven skateboards and put them next to each other, and then I would paint over that surface. That series was interesting because it gave birth to another project I did for the Havana Biennial. I would go looking for used skateboards and then give them to the kids in Cuba. I*



Sofía Maldonado, detail from 42nd St. & 7th Ave. Mural Project, NYC. Commissioned by Times Sq. Alliance, 2010. Acrylic on wood.

worked on a project painting a skate park in Cuba. Whereas in Puerto Rico I was more into murals, in New York it was a hybrid of skateboarding and murals. My chicas have always been with me – I've always drawn those girls as actors, even in Puerto Rico. They have changed through time. Once I moved to New York, they got more Latinized, like me, as part of the diaspora. If I don't speak up, then people just think I'm an American girl, and I used to hate that. I feel that my girls are the girls that I identify with and who are underrepresented in the arts and in commercial culture.

TT: I would love to talk about scale and audience. You're working in a very public

space and reaching an audience whose demographic may be very different than what you may find in a blue chip gallery in Chelsea. Could you talk about the connection of scale, space, and audience?

SM: When I was in Puerto Rico I used to paint more of those types of female characters on abandoned buildings. I would go to Santurce in Puerto Rico, which is an old, low-income neighborhood. I started painting there and in the projects. I drew inspiration from my surroundings. Little kids would come up to me and ask me, "What are you painting?" The older women would say, referring to the female characters, "She's not wearing enough clothes." I would improvise while I was in the site painting.

I moved from giving birth to those female characters to moving to the United States. For a while, I didn't paint murals in the US, only at graffiti events once in a while. I found that there was not that freedom to paint murals. Here, you need a permit. I can't just start painting in an abandoned building; there are all sorts of obstacles and impediments. That's how I started the skateboarding project because I felt a lot more freedom with that. This summer I painted more in the street, but I still don't feel enough freedom. My projects have been restricted to formal public art pieces. I was invited to do a project in Hartford, Connecticut through Real Art Ways. We found a building in the heart of

a Puerto Rican neighborhood, but I wasn't able to paint on it directly because it was a historical building, so I had to do the painting on wood cutouts. I wandered around the neighborhood, and folks would tell me, "You shouldn't walk around by yourself." I went to have a coffee in this place, and I got my nails done. I really got a sense of the community. The ladies from the nail salon were in their mid-20s, like me. It was awesome! They told me all about the neighborhood, about the gangs and female gangs. Funny thing is, all of the girls in the nail salon were armed. I told them about my project one block away from the salon. I was working on the female cutouts. Since I like to go with the flow, I took the cutouts to

Sofía Maldonado, *Mar Caribe, un desastre de emociones*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 78 "

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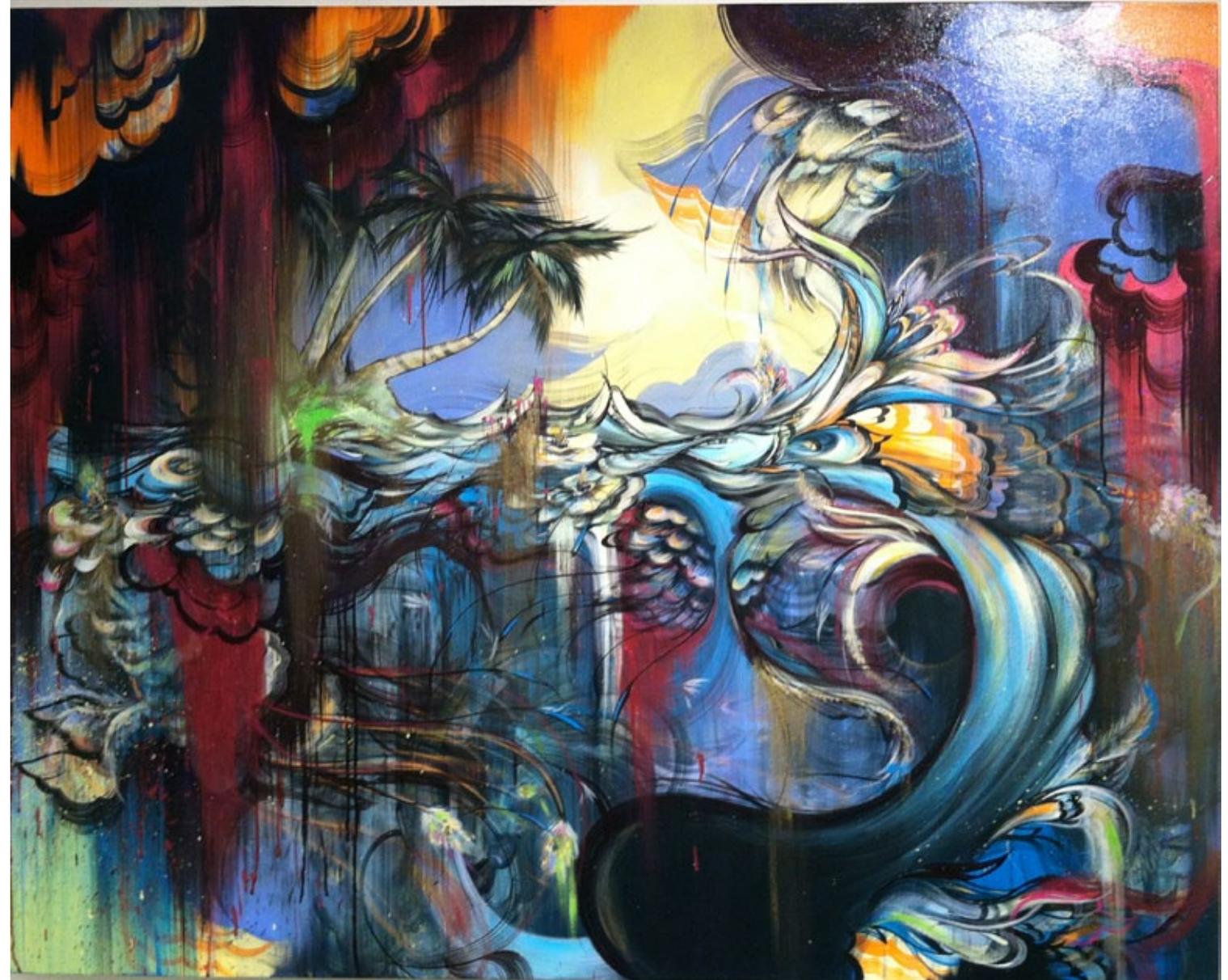
*the nail salon, and my new friends painted the nails and did the tattoos for the six wood cutouts. The next day I installed the murals. It was a community mural, a true collaboration. They were on the news and super happy about it. It was a really successful project, and one year later I did the 42nd Street project.*

*The 42nd Street project generated a lot of controversy. When I took the characters and put them in a more gentrified place then people don't identify, the mural had to come down. You've got to understand that I come from a generation that wants to break the mold of the typical Puerto Rican community mural. For example, I hate murals with Puerto Rican flags. We want to create murals that don't necessarily have to have a flag. We are into breaking the stereotypes. Other countries have their art and don't need to depict their flag so much, but with Puerto Rico you have a colonial mentality of representation and identity issues. My generation needs to break that tradition. We are all Puerto Ricans but in a different way.*

TT: Could you talk more about the reception of some of these works and the responses and criticisms you may have received? Are some of the audience's responses or criticisms something you receive in a way that would affect future works? Do you carry it with you when working on new murals? Also, the two females of the

Disillusions show are in the tradition of the female figures you've done before. Would you consider these images as empowered beings, as a kind of urban feminist subjectivity?

SM: *They're always empowered females, but I kind of mix that with underground cultures – skateboarding, hip hop, the pin up, rockabilly, punk rock. I kind of do this merge of the pinup, hip hop and the video girl. So you see her and so you see this tattooed girl, she has more of a Latin flow, maybe she's dancing reggaeton or dancehall. Remember it's also kind of improvised. It was like a really delicate sketch, but I pretty much improvised with the site and whatever paints I have as a background; I like to respect the surface and background that I'm painting on. It has a concept, but it also has a technical and site-specific component, and I like to think about whatever I encounter that day when I'm painting. Like, say, the blue girl: her body is blue, dripping, I was painting and seeing how the drips were so beautiful on the background and I decided to let the drips go. So if I don't go with the flow, then you miss the beauty of the drips, the beauty of a half-finished painting, an incomplete form. Sometimes it's more beautiful than a complete form. I like to leave the paint process exposed. I don't use projection. They are not hand traced with pencil. I paint directly on the wall.*



Sofía Maldonado, *Youkali 1*, 2011 Acrylic, glitter and varnish on canvas, 48 x 60 "

TT: It takes a really good knowledge of proportion to be able to paint at that scale without projection or hand tracing with pencil and to still render the figures proportionately accurate.

SM: *Graffiti is repetitious. I've been doing these girls since I was in the 11th grade. You have to be able to do that with no pencil, no projection. I can give thanks to having been exposed to graffiti culture. I wanted to discover painting myself, but having a base in graffiti or street art where you repeat this character in different poses, there's always this sense of the female character that represents you. The men would see the work I did freehand and they would give me mad respect and say, "Wow! She did that mad quick...what?!" I was showing that, hey, I've got skills too. That's the pressure that you have, and it's not easy to achieve recognition. If you have a solid work, what they call skills in that culture, then you get respect.*

TT: The figures' faces are in a serene kind of repose, relaxed visages with their eyes closed and mouths slightly open in the kind of typical seductive ploy used by advertisers when they use sex to sell their products. One of the most shocking things about Manet's Olympia and Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe is that the central female figure is looking directly at the viewer and engaging the male

gaze. Yet, in the female figures in your work, quite often the female figure has her eyes closed, not engaging, with their mouths open in a way that could be read as an invitation for visual assault or objectification. Could you talk about how you feel these figures engage with the audience?

SM: *I think of these women as being empowered. They are sexy images and seductive. They are super huge. They're like the women in hip hop or dancehall videos; they're sexy, doing sexy movements. I like to dance reggaeton, and I kill the dance floor. I prefer to dance with a Caribbean guy because other guys would think I'm a slut. An American guy will think I want to sleep with him, but it's just a dance; this is only a dance. My characters stand for the super sexual female that chases the man, but that's it. She's sexual but not in a degrading way. You have to be able to deal with her being a sexy woman and keep walking. I think that sounds more like the comparison between the characters I paint and the role of women dancing reggaeton or dancehall. I can compare it to dancing, like how they dance all the way to the floor, but you're still a woman and deserve respect.*

TT: Where do you think the future of representation of an urban Latina identity is going? What are some of the challenges you face in your work when addressing this?

SM: *Right now I'm concentrating on doing more canvas work, although I have a few other projects. Currently, I'm working on the nostalgia of the Caribbean, through abstraction, organic forms. Every female artist has a different path. I would say that in my experience it's always good to be part of art shows specific to a Latin public and it's also good to get yourself out of that zone. You want to try to get more into shows that are not only of Latin artists and not be afraid to break that barrier that I believe sometimes exists.*

TT: What are some of the challenges you face in the art market, in the business, or with exhibiting?

SM: *I remember being in Puerto Rico and telling myself that the first barrier I have to break is the male-dominated art scene, for not only is graffiti male dominated, but the art market is too. I also thought that to be a successful woman in Puerto Rican art, I would need to break with society standards – getting married, having kids, and working 9 to 5. Once you break through those barriers, then you face the challenge of breaking the bubble of always being labeled just a "Latina" artist.*

*As a young emerging Puerto Rican female artist, I would say that we don't have that many role models, and the female artists*

*we do have go through a lot. As a female artist, it's good to try to see what's going on by reading the bios of Latina female artists and American female artists. If you are concerned and know what other female artists have been through, then you have a better idea of what you can do or not do and what you should avoid. To help make decisions that kind of rule your life you have to decide, "What do I want? Do I want a family or lovers? Do I want to sacrifice?" Women have to make these choices. I think it's good to be part of female group shows, but I also think it's important to push to be in other group shows*

TT: Since much of your work deals with the depiction of ethnic bodies, what are your thoughts on the representation of such bodies, both historically as caricatured, hypersexualized images and as you define them in your own practice?

SM: *Well, after the 42nd street mural, I started to question myself more because of all of the feedback and the different points of view. Some people were not happy with it. That question of representing black and brown bodies came to the table for the first time for me. My audience has been mostly a Puerto Rican or Cuban audience. In the US, people look at me like I'm a white girl and want to know, "Why are you painting black and brown girls?" In Puerto Rico and Cuba, there's not that question of race because*

all of us are so mixed. There's not that racial argument. That got me thinking a lot because this is an interesting question. I would say when I paint light or dark skinned characters that I'm thinking of these people as being just like me. I'm not so conscious about them being different. In Puerto Rico I didn't feel there was that segregation, but in the States I'm more conscious of it. When I put more skin color to my girls, I never questioned myself. I feel part of the community. I live in Harlem. Maybe my approach is naïve. I don't get too deep into racial politics.

The only work I've done while being really conscious of the bodies that I was painting was a series of Fela Kuti's wives where I did 27 drawings in gouache. It was a month long process of listening to Fela all day long. I kind of had to submerge myself in that culture and do more research on who these women were. What did it mean to be a Nigerian woman in that time? What did it mean to be Fela's wife? It could be a good experience and difficult at the same time. They were persecuted by the police. If I'm going to draw or paint these women then I have to know about them and the situation. But my girls, these are the girls I see in my community.

TT: So then it's more of a connection that you may find, as if looking in a mirror.

SM: I have black friends, Puerto Rican friends, light skinned, dark skinned. I can go to a salsa party and dance pretty well. I carry the blackness inside, but not in my skin. I can dance just like a Jamaican girl. People look at me and wonder, "Who is this white chick dancing like that?" In my interior I don't feel different from a dark skinned Puerto Rican.



# Ana Patricia Palacios

Interview with Allison Harbin

AH: Thank you for inviting me into your studio, Ana Patricia. I'd like to start with your most recent works, *Combatant 1-10*, that are currently hanging stacked on top of one another in a grid on your wall. Having seen these only individually, the effect is quite different when I see them all together. Is it important that they be seen as a group?

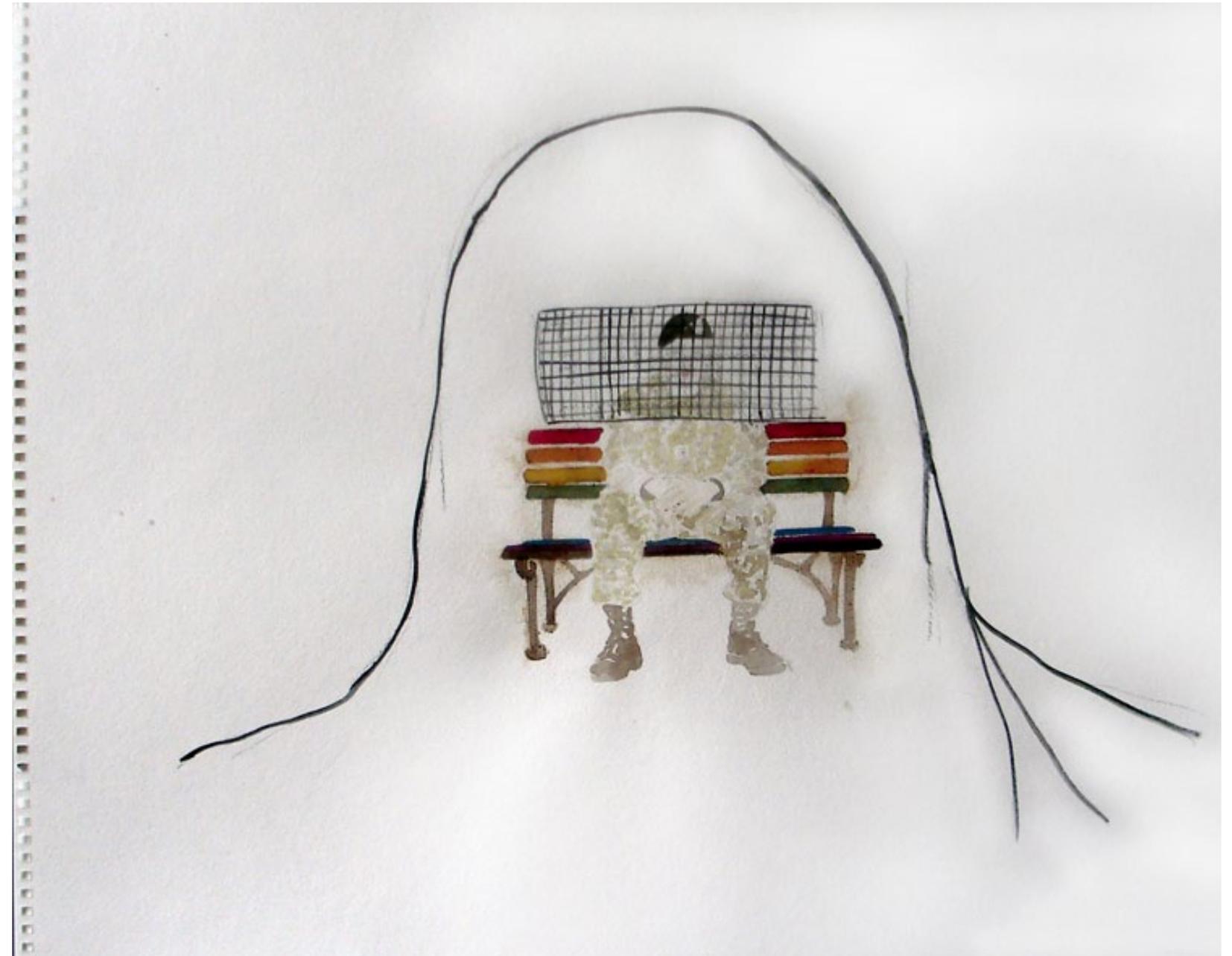
APP: Yes. Even though each painting varies in subject, they are all ultimately about children of war. In many of the images, these children are soldiers or are painted with war instruments around them. They are witnesses and innocent participants, ignorant of the reasons for war. This series started by examining my home country Colombia, where there has been an armed conflict for more than 50 years. I am interested in working on minorities, in this case, children who live through similar experiences throughout different conflicts around the world and their living conditions. The situations are the same no matter what kind of conflict it is.

In my work, I walk through time, taking characters or symbols that have influenced or participated directly or indirectly in political or social conflicts throughout history.

For these reasons, I paint women in burkas along with figures of Napoleon, the Statue of Liberty, and children soldiers. Many of the paintings from this series are also about immigration and the reality of mixing cultures and the negotiation of finding oneself in a new country. This is something that I experienced personally when I first moved to France, and then later to the United States

AH: So, in a sense, by looking at your home country and dealing with the effects of war locally, you realized that this horror is a global phenomenon and that only particular circumstances of war change, while the devastating effects are the same?

Ana Patricia Palacios *Segregated*, 2011 Gouache on paper 18 x 24"





AH: That's a great way of putting it. Building from that, I am haunted by the white spaces in your paintings and drawings. There seems to be this terrifying void that overwhelms the figures in the center of the work. Why do you choose to leave these backgrounds so stark?

APP: *I think my motivation for this comes from my desire to evoke the viewer's imagination as well as my own. I strive to make much of my work very delicate and subtle, and for me the characters that I create are so central and so important that a background isn't necessary. Also, the white space of the background allows the viewer to take these figures and place them in a reality or setting of their choosing. It lets the viewer use their imagination and their own experiences to contextualize the figures in my paintings on a personal level.*

AH: Can you tell me a little bit about your piece that was used for the postcard for *Disillusions, Faltantes 2* (2009)? Can you talk about the tension between subtlety and delicacy in detail and your desire to send a very political message through your drawings?



Ana Patricia Palacios *Faltantes 2*, 2009 Pigments on canvas 46 x 44"

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*APP: Faltantes 2 has its origin in a real event that takes place in the African nation of Ghana, which has many anti-personnel landmines planted in the ground. There is a contest there for amputees, and the grand prize is a prosthetic limb. I appropriated the image from a press photograph and related it to my own country, Colombia, which suffers the same consequences of war. That is why the women in my painting are wearing bands around their torsos identifying different regions of Colombia—Putumayo, Bojayá, Meta—that have deeply affected by the problem of landmines. This piece relates to my earlier works on children from landmines. In that series, it was very important for me to make these drawings about subtlety. In one, you do not immediately notice that a girl does not have her hand tucked into her pants, but rather, her hand is missing. In another, a boy is playing soccer with a prosthetic limb that is the same color as his flesh. At first, this is not evident. I wanted them to seem almost normal, almost healthy at first glance, as if everything was almost right, but not quite. I also wanted them to be subtle as a way of respecting the depictions of these children; I did not want them to be exploitative.*

AH: Thank you so much for meeting with me today and showing me your studio. Your work is beautiful, and I'm glad I was able to see into a part of your process.



Ana Patricia Palacios *Parade IV*, 2010 Gouache on paper 24 x 18"

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# Sandra Stephens

Interview and introduction by  
Tashima Thomas

Sandra Stephens is an artist and art educator of Jamaican descent specializing in interactive video, multimedia, and installation art. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Studio Art from SUNY Stony Brook and the Master of Fine Arts in Computer Art from the School of Visual Arts, New York. Stephens has exhibited nationally and internationally at the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid, Centre de Cultura Contemporania in Barcelona, and Triennale di Milano. She is Assistant Professor in 4D, Time and Motion Arts at PrattMWP in Utica, NY.

Stephens contributes three video pieces to *Disillusions*: *Hair* (2000), *Intangibility* (2009), and *Snow White Remixed* (2011). *Hair* is inspired by the essay "Black Hair/Style Politics" by Kobena Mercer. In it, a woman is shown standing in front of a bathroom mirror, first arranging her hair with barrettes, then wetting it completely while a plastic tapestry of styling products and gels appears in the background. After two and a half minutes of silence, voices speak on the politics of hair, saying in duplicate, "The question of hair straightening...as organic matter...symbolic intervention..."



Sandra Stephens and Allie Tyre. *Snow White Remixed*, 2011. Video installation. Production still taken by Allie Tyre.

ideologies of race.” The narrator talks about the tensions, expectations, and anxieties regarding the aesthetic value of a dichotomized hair system – beautiful/ugly, black/white. Stephens also explores the theme of reflection in *Intangibility*, a video projected within an automobile tire on the floor. Peering inside, the viewer witnesses a seascape of waves and a shadowy figure standing in the place of self. The melodic motion of waves crashing onto the shore and an evocative soundtrack accompany the experience.

*Snow White Remixed* is a collaboration with Allie Tyre. Within an oval gilt frame, a young African-American girl in a Snow White costume appears; seated, she puts on makeup and paints her fingernails. The viewer sits in a chair directly across from the video and listens to a soundtrack with headphones. The sound matrix is layered with dialogue from the Disney film *Snow White*, such as the phrase, “Once there was a princess. Was the princess you?” Meanwhile, the girl narrates her own stories. She recounts the time when she spent the night at a friend’s house during a sleepover, and they reenacted *Snow White*. Specters of racist caricatures start appearing in the background: the pickaninny, Venus Hottentot, a couple dancing a jig, and a jolly mammy character. These shadowing figures function as aides-mémoires of the recycled stratagems of domination through

the visual and performative production of the stereotype, pathologizing a mythical black body. As the shadowy caricatures promenade in the background we hear the narrator exclaim, “Are you kidding me?” Though the girl appears oblivious throughout, in the end, she rebels against these stereotypes, shattering the virtual mirror by tossing *Snow White*’s apple at the glass.

TT: In *Snow White Remixed*, the audience is asked to participate by becoming involved in the piece—wearing the headphones, sitting in an elevated chair, focusing on the mirror. Does this implicate the audience in a way that creates a meta-performance of the piece? In other words, by the audience’s active participation how does this differentiate the experience as compared with a more passive one?

SS: *Well, I’m very interested in desire and creating a work that involves an active, not so much a passive viewer. As part of active participation, I encourage the viewer to think about how these images are portrayed and to consider what they think of the performance. What is the person saying? I seek to get them thinking and rethinking about constructed images of the Other that they set up in their minds.*

TT: During the opening of *Disillusions*, I noticed a line forming of people waiting



Sandra Stephens & Allie Tyre *Snow White Remixed*, 2011  
Photo of Video Installation taken by Sandra Stephens

to view the piece *Snow White Remixed*. A video still from the piece is on the exhibition poster and it may have been a combination of the familiarity of the poster or the image of Snow White “remixed” as a young girl of African descent, but I noticed a very active/proactive participation. The viewers each wanted to sit in the chair, wear the headphones, and listen to the entire piece, not just a few minutes of it, which can be unusual in a gallery space where most viewers may listen to a few seconds, but not the entire piece. There’s something about the physical act of stepping up on the platform to sit in the chair that places the viewer almost “on stage” with Snow White. I had to wait in line. It was great.

SS: *Wow! That’s great! I didn’t know there was a line that people were waiting in. I wasn’t able to make it to the opening. That’s amazing. I hope you didn’t have to wait long.*

TT: It wasn’t a long wait, but I did make full use of that time to take in many of the other really wonderful works in the gallery. I noticed the desire of the audience to want to be interactive and to have that experience by patiently waiting. I don’t think they were disappointed. Is this an audience reaction you would have anticipated?

SS: *I am a little surprised. Sometimes, in the past, anticipating a reaction has been*

*problematic for me. I would be rethinking pieces, holding myself back, because I wanted to impact an audience. This is actually the first time that I installed the piece with headphones. In times past when I have exhibited this work I would just attach the piece to speakers. But, when I did that then some of the intimacy was lost. Also, I don’t think people realize how important the audio is to the piece – it is a key component. The problem with exhibiting the piece with just the speakers is that I’m always concerned with how it interferes with other artwork in the space. But, I didn’t quite expect a whole line. It’s very exciting to know that people were waiting in line for it.*

*My niece is the actor in the piece. I also want to emphasize that this piece is a collaboration with Allie Tyre, who edited all of the sound and engineered the flow of it. We came up with the concept together as a full collaboration, and we shot the visuals together. We positioned my niece on a green screen; then, I extracted the green screen and inserted the images behind her. That’s why on the poster you see her on the green screen because that video still was a production shot. Whenever you do time-based pieces you want to get the best documentation. It was important that we were working in stills and video for documentation. Process is really important to me so capturing good production stills has become more and more important.*

TT: The audio for the piece is really critical because the layers of sound are so nuanced and important to the visual images. How did Allie come up with the audio for the piece?

SS: *While we were shooting, I had my niece watch the Snow White movie again to refresh her memory. The costume she wore was an actual Snow White costume that she had worn from a previous Halloween. While she was watching Snow White she started to talk about an experience she had during a sleepover at a friend’s house. She went through a recreation of those events. As for the actual clips, Allie and I found sources online. Allie then used these to edit the soundtrack as a single continual piece. I would consider my niece as the third collaborator because it’s her voice that you hear narrating and because she was the one coming up with the story. You can hear in that story the fluid construction of gender, sexuality, and race. When she and her friends were assigning the parts of who would play whom, her friend chooses the Prince, so it’s really interesting to see how gender roles become more entrenched as we get older. One of the reasons I really like the piece is because it has so much of my niece’s voice in it. It was originally made for a show entitled “Snow.”*

TT: How was the piece received at the “Snow” show?

SS: *I think very well; they invited me to do a gallery talk. Mine was one of the few pieces that dealt directly with race.*

TT: There is a strong beauty component in Snow White Remixed. The viewer sees the girl beautifying herself, primping and painting her nails. I was wondering if you could talk about the beauty aspect?

SS: *I’m thinking beauty probably is a part of it. I teach and have this project for students to create videos that incorporate themes and issues that they’re dealing with. They consistently come up with body image and beauty issues. The students are in the 18-19 years old range. It’s more prevalent among the female students than the male students. I can definitely see where my niece is playing with taking on these attributes of beauty but then denying them, and that is the whole idea behind the broken mirror at the end. It’s important too that the video is cyclical and therefore acknowledges continually having to deal with these cyclical issues of racial stereotyping and beauty politics. So she’s addressing it, but also denying it.*

TT: You use racially stereotypical images – gross caricatures like the Hottentot Venus, the pickaninny, and others. Traditionally these are images with a negatively charged history and they are kind of haunting in the background of the video like ghouls and



goblins. Given that your niece is wearing a previous year's Halloween costume – it's almost like a micro-Halloween theatre complete with haunting ghouls from our collective social history. There's a play with performance and reality as performance. Could you talk about the incorporation of these images and the notion of performance?

*SS: The Hottentot image is something that I really feel vaguely connected to. I came to this country when I was 13 years old. I don't ever remember hearing about the Hottentot Venus in Jamaica. I was familiar with the Coco Fusco piece, the idea of the exoticized woman of color. So, I thought about what that means in relation to a younger generation. My niece is a young, impressionable girl, and I asked myself questions about that. How are these stereotypical images going to affect her? Does she even know about them? And where is she taking it? When we were editing the sound you can hear my niece saying, "Are you kidding me?" This is kind of how I felt when I came to this country and became conscious of all of these stereotypical images of the exoticized woman of color. I was thinking, "Are you kidding me?" That's not to say that we didn't have this influence in Jamaica, but it didn't hit me until I came to the United States. It just hit me differently. Snow White Remixed came from that. I was just remembering how I felt when I came to this country.*

TT: Can you elaborate on the differences between your experiences of Jamaica and the United States? How else have they been manifested in your work?

*SS: Looking back, I definitely feel that growing up in Jamaica, I had much more privilege as a light-skinned Jamaican with "good" hair. My "Hair" piece speaks to this, as it relates to my bringing up questions about how we build constructs to differentiate good and bad and how those constructs relate to power dynamics connected to race. In another piece, Art, Craft, Soul DATE, I am able to use my outsider view of the Jamaican Art World to explore more deeply how class operates in this world. I look at what is defined as art, the distinctions between mainstream art, intuitive art, and tourist art and how they relate to power dynamics and class. Often in Jamaica, the "super curator," who tends to be middle to upper class, light-skinned, white or an expatriate, gets to make these distinctions. This piece also made me begin to realize some of the insidious ways race operates in the United States, something that wasn't as obvious to me until after doing research in Jamaica and making the piece. I also did a second piece, Craft Market Women DATE, which reveals how I saw the curatorial roles of the women workers as they decide which craft market pieces/artists to include in their stalls.*

*Both pieces have inspired the idea behind, Conversation Exchange, a yearly series of two person exhibitions I am initiating with the purpose of providing a space for cultural exchange between an artist based out of the Caribbean and one within the diaspora. The inaugural show is scheduled for March 2012 at the School of Art Gallery at PrattMWP. I will be exhibiting with Oneika Russell, a drawer, animator and installation artist working in Jamaica and currently doing research in Japan. The primary goal of the series is to create conversations between the artists through the work and through the viewer's experience of the work. The exhibitions also provide spaces for a growing Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic population to look at issues that may not be as welcomed or appreciated on the islands. The artists can speak to questions connected to sexuality and gender in much more complex ways. Also, artists from the islands bring refreshing new ways of thinking about race and class that move beyond some of the simplifications and generalizations that can happen in the United States. Thus, the two-person shows will provide refreshing new ways of thinking about race, class, gender, and sexuality.*

TT: You have mentioned that one of your earliest artistic influences is the artist Adrian Piper. The similarities with the video essay and explorations of a politically constituted self definitely appear in your work. Could

you talk a little more about the creative legacy of artists like Piper and any other possible influences on your work?

SS: *During graduate school, two books by Adrian Piper had a great impact on me, Out of Order, Out of Sight, Vol. I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992 and Out of Order, Out of Sight, Vol. II: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992. My work in some ways relates to her writing and her ideas on conceptual art, meta art, and meta language. In an interview, she speaks about how the politics of the time really got to her, what was happening, all of the things surrounding her. There is a really interesting dynamic in her work between the political and the transcendental or the spiritual. I relate to that dynamic; it has influenced my interest in identity and conceptual art. In another text, Piper reveals that to be taken more seriously as a conceptual artist, she decided not to refer to herself as Adrienne—the feminine version and original spelling of her name. She further mentions that during studio visits as soon as people realized she was a woman of color they became disinterested in her work.*

TT: Do you feel as an artist who is also a woman of color that you have had to deal with similar issues?

SS: *They're not present in my mind. But I did have to seek out these artists like Adrian*

*Piper, Coco Fusco, and others. They weren't part of my studies in graduate school. I was in a computer art program, and the artists were not mentioned within the curriculum. So, I had to actively seek them out. My studio visit experiences have been different in that I've been very supported. Another influence I have to mention is Carrie Mae Weems. Allie and I saw the young boy in her "Ain't Jokin" series after making Snow White Remixed; however Weems's Snow White photo was a source of inspiration for our piece.*

TT: The use of the mirror appears in *Snow White Remixed*, *Hair*, and previous works. Even the idea of reflection appears in another of your works in the *Disillusions* show, *Intangibility*. I was wondering if you could talk about the mirror and the idea of reflection as a repetitive element. In other words, why is the mirror important?

SS: *I guess it's connected to this idea of trying to move away from these boxes that we put ourselves in. The mirror and the shadow both appear repetitively. It refers to this feeling of needing a singular core identity that can limit how we look at other people. The mirror is also definitely a way of connecting to other people.*

TT: Your play with repetitive elements like the mirror and the shadow can both affect how we see ourselves and others. The mirror kind of reflects the present, but when you incorporate the shadows it recalls the past. So you have this dialogue between mirror and shadow or present and past that is really interesting. Are there other ways in which your works meditate on the past?

SS: *Yes, definitely. One example is Purity, Sanctity and Corporeality DATE, a collaboration with photographer, David Sansone and performer, Andrew Shoffner. In it, I project video "paintings" into three Renaissance-like frames. The actor portrays Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary within various racial configurations. Here, my collaborators and I play with the interaction between "old" and new media and various ways of presenting the image through the ages. With this piece I am interested in the idea of "purity" and how people are questioning its relationship to whiteness and the white body. I was also interested in exploring the artist Christian Boltanski's idea of paintings and images displayed in museums as 'holy relics'. My more recent work is definitely meditating on the past as I become increasingly interested in looking critically at visual culture of the past within the art world and beyond.*

## About the Studio Theatre Gallery

The Studio Theatre Gallery was founded upon my arrival, three and a half years ago, at Middlesex County College. When I first envisioned using this space in a new way, my goal was to create a venue for contemporary art and offer students the opportunity to view art within their own community. College administration has been very supportive of gallery programming. I continue to strive to provide exhibition opportunities for artists from around the country and abroad to exhibit in the Central New Jersey area. Providing access to the visual arts is an important part of the gallery's mission. We have worked with independent curators and have also engaged in collaborations with the Indo-American Arts Council, the Center for Emerging Visual Artists, and Rutgers University to exhibit a range of work. Our students are encouraged to attend openings, and the gallery is an educational resource on campus as well as a cultural resource to the surrounding community. I am happy to review proposals for upcoming exhibitions.

--Nadine Heller, Gallery Director and Chairperson of the Visual, Performing, and Media Arts Department, Middlesex County College



**When I first envisioned using this space in a new way, my goal was to create a venue for contemporary art and offer students the opportunity to view art within their own community.**  
-Nadine Heller

# Exhibition Checklist

Maria Elena Alvarez  
*Dormir en el sofá (To Sleep on the Sofa)*, 2009  
Mixed media on cotton  
10.5 x 10.5"

Maria Elena Alvarez  
*El lado más calido (The Warmest Side)*, 2009  
Mixed media on cotton  
11.5 x 11.5"

Maria Elena Alvarez  
*Equipaje (Baggage)*, 2011  
Mixed media on cotton  
25 x 45"

Maria Elena Alvarez  
*She, the Thinker*, 2011  
Mixed media on cotton  
41.5 x 29.5"

Nicole Awai  
*Specimen from Local Ephemera: Pinpoint Black (Forward)*, 2007  
Mixed media on paper  
38 x 50"

Nicole Awai  
*Specimen from Local Ephemera: Castle Nut and Drama Queen*, 2007  
Mixed media on paper  
38 x 50"

Firelei Báez  
*Just Another Geographer, in Search of Space Which Will Fit His Poetic Design, from the series A Carib's Jhator*, 2011  
Acrylic on canvas  
60 x 40"

Firelei Báez  
*Questions for Doig in Trinidad, from the series Geographic Delay*, 2011  
Mixed media collage  
120 x 36"

Firelei Báez  
*Untitled, from the series A Carib's Jhator*, 2011  
Acrylic on canvas  
16 x 20"

Firelei Báez  
*Untitled, from the series A Carib's Jhator*, 2011  
Acrylic on canvas  
16 x 20"

Holly Bynoe  
*On Deck*, 2009  
Burn on Khadi paper  
31 x 42"

Holly Bynoe  
*DeSantos*, 2010  
Digital collage on aged duratone newsprint  
31 x 42"

Holly Bynoe  
*Generation Fight*, 2010  
Digital collage on aged duratone newsprint  
28 x 28"

Melissa A. Calderón  
*Linger*, 2011  
Installation/performance  
Mixed media

Vladimir Cybil Charlier  
*Basket of Women*, 2008  
India ink, vellum artist tape and inkjet on rice paper  
57 ¼ x 34"

Vladimir Cybil Charlier  
*Dreamaker I*, 2006  
Acrylic, india ink, sequins and beads on paper  
36 x 108"  
Exhibited in New York only

Vladimir Cybil Charlier  
*Dreamaker II*, 2006  
Acrylic, india ink, sequins and beads on paper  
36 x 108"  
Exhibited in New York only

Vladimir Cybil Charlier  
*Red Cross Tristan*, 2009  
Sequins and beads on inkjet and acrylic, canvas and wood  
36.25 x 34"  
Exhibited in New Jersey only

Vladimir Cybil Charlier  
*I Only Have Eyes for You*, 2009  
Sequins and beads on inkjet and acrylic, canvas and wood  
48 x 29"  
Exhibited in New Jersey only

Vladimir Cybil Charlier  
*Maps: Serenity and Punishment*, 2002  
Sequins and photograph and acrylic on canvas and wood  
27 x 21"  
Exhibited in New Jersey only

Asha Ganpat  
*Things*, 2011  
Ink on paper on wood  
24 x 46 x 4"

Jessica Lagunas  
*Para verte mejor (The Better To See You With)*, 2005  
Video-Performance  
00:57:37

Jessica Lagunas  
*Para besarte mejor (The Better To Kiss You With)*, 2003  
Video-Performance  
00:57:48

Jessica Lagunas  
*Para acariciarte mejor (The Better To Caress You With)*, 2003  
Video-Performance  
01:49:36

Jessica Lagunas  
*A flor de piel, #1*, 2006  
Collage on paper  
14 x 11"

Jessica Lagunas  
*A flor de piel, #2*, 2006  
Collage on paper  
Diptych, 5.5 x 14"

Jessica Lagunas  
*Bubiferous Coral-Root*, from the series *Wildflowers*, 2005  
Collage on paper  
8.25 x 5.25 "

Jessica Lagunas  
*Common Ladies' Smock, from the series Wildflowers*, 2005  
Collage on paper  
8.75 x 5.25

Jessica Lagunas  
*Water Lily, from the series Wildflowers*, 2005  
Collage on paper  
8.25 x 5.25

Jessica Lagunas  
*White Mullein, from the series Wildflowers*, 2005  
Collage on paper  
10 x 6.5"

Jessica Lagunas  
*Historias íntimas (Intimate Stories)*, 2009-2011  
Book, letters, clamshell box  
Exhibited in New York only

Rejin Leys  
*100 Drawings, Including Secrets*, 2011  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

Sofía Maldonado  
*Untitled*, 2011  
Acrylic  
138 x 210"  
Site-specific mural executed in New Jersey

Sofía Maldonado  
*Untitled*, 2007  
Acrylic on paper  
108 x 36"  
Exhibited in New York only

Ana Patricia Palacios  
*Faltantes 2*, 2009  
Pigments on canvas  
46 x 44"

Ana Patricia Palacios  
*Two Girls*, 2010  
Gouache on paper  
18 x 24"

Ana Patricia Palacios  
*Marcha I*, 2010  
Gouache on paper  
18 x 24"

Ana Patricia Palacios  
*Sleeping Soldiers*, 2011  
Gouache on paper  
16 x 12"

Ana Patricia Palacios  
*Segregated*, 2011  
Gouache on paper  
18 x 24"

Ana Patricia Palacios  
*PS II*, 2010  
Gouache on paper  
24 x 18"

Ana Patricia Palacios  
*Parade IV*, 2010  
Gouache on paper  
24 x 18"

Ana Patricia Palacios  
*Parade V*, 2010  
Gouache on paper  
24 x 18"

Ana Patricia Palacios  
*Red Army*, 2010  
Gouache on paper  
18 x 24"

Sandra Stephens & Allie Tyre  
*Snow White Remixed, 2011*  
Video installation  
Dimensions variable  
00:04:47

Sandra Stephens  
*Intangibility, 2009*  
Single-channel video, tire  
00:09:56

Sandra Stephens  
*Hair, 2000*  
Single-channel video  
00:05:02

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## EXHIBITION CURATOR

Tatiana Flores – Assistant Professor of Art History and Latino and Caribbean Studies, Rutgers University

## CURATORIAL ADVISOR

Michelle Stephens – Associate Professor of English and Caribbean Studies, Rutgers University

## CATALOGUE CONTRIBUTORS

Allison Harbin – Graduate Fellow, Department of Art History, Rutgers University  
Tashima Thomas – Ford Foundation Fellow, Department of Art History, Rutgers University

## MIDDLESEX COUNTY COLLEGE

Nadine Heller – Assistant Professor, Gallery Director, and Chairperson of the Visual, Performing and Media Arts Department  
Bryan Weitz – Exhibition Designer  
Marvetta Troop – Assistant Director, Marketing Production  
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## SYLVIA WALD AND PO KIM GALLERY

Po Kim – President/Founder  
Yeshi Choden – Vice President  
Jeffrey Wechsler – Consulting Curator  
Kim Woosun Chung – Business Manager  
Sam Cho – Business Manager  
Taesun Yang – Gallery Intern  
Yasuaki Okamoto – Gallery Intern  
Jiwon Choi – Gallery Intern  
Soomin Hong – Gallery Intern  
Chungrim Cho – Gallery Intern

## CATALOGUE DESIGNER

Richard Mark Rawlins  
<http://www.artzpub.com>

## ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION

María Elena Alvarez  
Nicole Awai  
Firelei Báez  
Holly Bynoe  
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Vladimir Cybil Charlier  
Asha Ganpat  
Jessica Lagunas  
Rejin Leys  
Sofía Maldonado  
Ana Patricia Palacios  
Sandra Stephens  
Firelei Báez

## SYMPOSIUM SPEAKERS

Rocío Aranda-Alvarado – Curator, El Museo del Barrio  
Christopher Cozier – Artist and Independent Curator  
Jerry Philogene – Assistant Professor of American Studies, Dickinson College

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Michael Monahan  
Evan Brownstein  
Jeff Tamburri  
Paúl I. Romero  
Louis Prisock  
Alexandria Stephens Prisock  
Roni Mocán

## ARTISTS WEBSITES

Firelei Báez.  
<http://www.fireleibaez.com/>

Holly Bynoe  
<http://www.hollybynoe.com/>

Melissa A. Calderón  
<http://melissacalderon.com/>

Asha Ganpat  
<http://ashaganpat.com/>

Jessica Lagunas  
<http://www.jessicalagunas.com/>

Rejin Leys  
<http://rejinleys.com/>

Sofía Maldonado  
<http://sofiamaldonado.com/>

Ana Patricia Palacios  
<http://www.anapalacios.com/>

Sandra Stephens  
<http://www.sandrastephens.com/>

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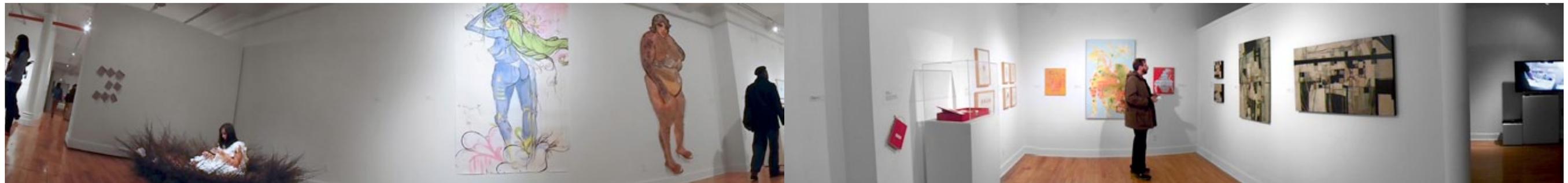
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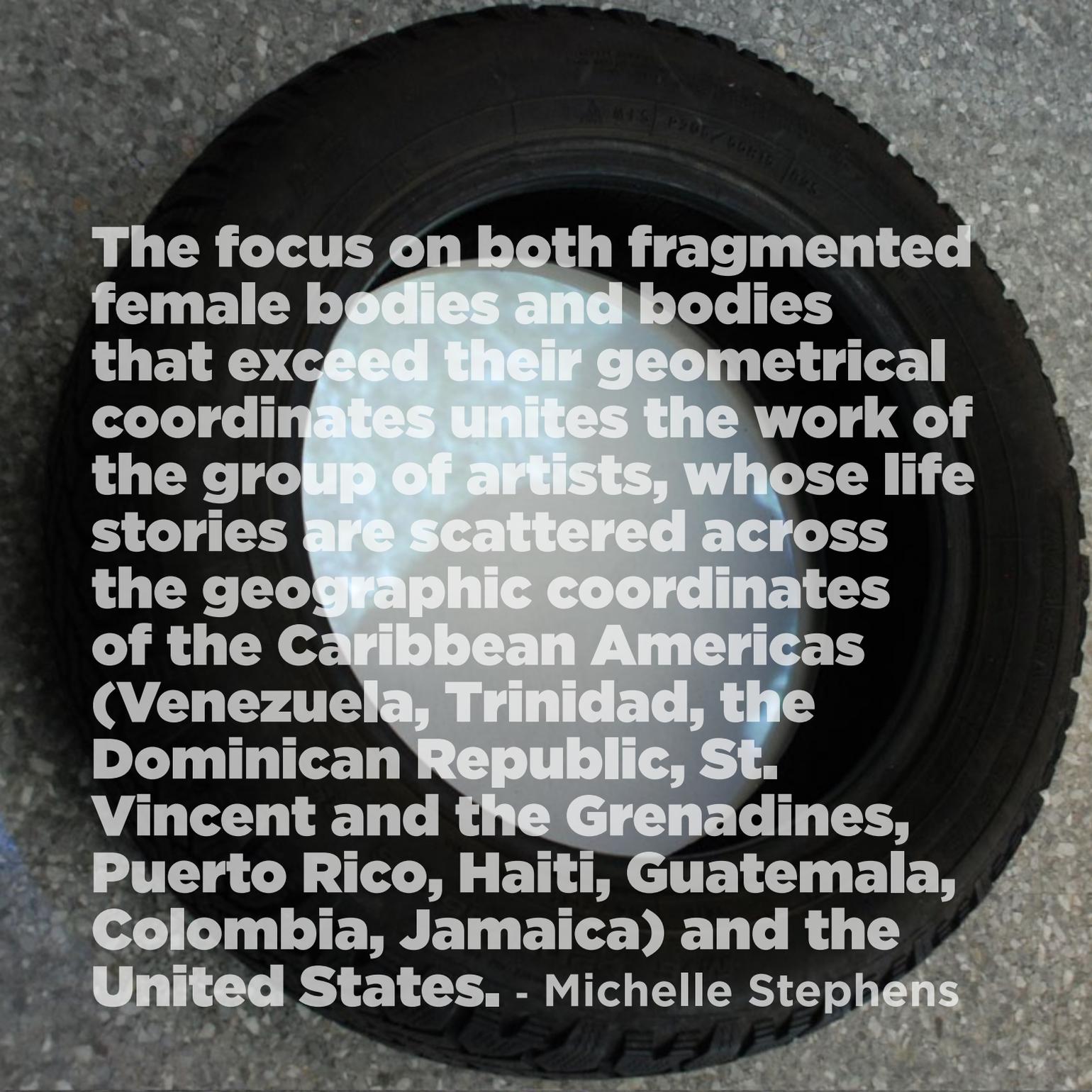
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# Disillusions Opening at the Wald & Kim Gallery, NYC

Photos by Roni Mocán



A black tire is shown from a top-down perspective, lying on a grey asphalt surface. In the center of the tire's tread, a white globe of the Earth is visible, showing the Americas. The text is overlaid on the left side of the tire.

**The focus on both fragmented female bodies and bodies that exceed their geometrical coordinates unites the work of the group of artists, whose life stories are scattered across the geographic coordinates of the Caribbean Americas (Venezuela, Trinidad, the Dominican Republic, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Guatemala, Colombia, Jamaica) and the United States. - Michelle Stephens**