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Love Acts: Miami Arts of Black Re-semblance

The exhibition really embodies our experience in Miami: the intersection of diasporic lives. There are 17 countries represented, 25 artists and 2 guest artists.... I wanted to show how the lives of folks living away from their homes intersect with the fabric, landscape and issues of femininity, gender, race and culture in Miami. —Rosie Gordon-Wallace

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole...This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.

—Derek Walcott

Inter/sectionality: Diaspora Art from the Creole City opened in our nation's capital in November 2019 and will travel to four other art venues around the United States.¹ The exhibition comes out of a specific social history of alternative artmaking in Miami. A decisive part of that history began in 1996 when Rosie Gordon-Wallace, a Black Jamaican-immigrant, opened Diaspora Vibes Gallery in the Bakehouse Art Complex, and then later relocated to stand alone storefront locations in the pre-gentrified Design District.² Foundational to the creative landscape of Wynwood, Diaspora Vibes provided vital infrastructure for local Miami artists who were invisible to established galleries. In founding Diaspora Vibes, Gordon-Wallace sought both to support and to expand the networks of such marginalized young talent whose identities often sat at the intersections of black, immigrant, people of color, women and queer. From its inception, the gallery's mission prioritized the dialogic: through international exchanges between contemporary artists and regional institutions it placed Miami in conversation with the region and vice versa. In 2012, the gallery refashioned its name to Diaspora Vibes Cultural Arts Incubator, closing its physical space, but continuing its work as an alternative, decolonial arts organization—developing talent, hosting national and international artists in Miami as well as taking Miami artists to international locations. Today works by many of the artistic talent nurtured by Diaspora Vibes are a part of permanent collections in national museums as well as

¹ These institutions include: Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts & Culture in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida.

² 3939 N. Miami Avenue and 139 NE 39th Street, Miami, Florida.

the city's flagship Perez Art Museum Miami.³ The story of *Diaspora Vibes* coincides with and chronicles the displacement of the city's black and brown residents through gentrification and development. Yet, its story also documents the persistent creative, life-affirming acts of reinvention against market forces. Such acts of remaking infrastructure to sustain artistic community against flows of capital are *love acts* central to the story of this *othered* Miami and the artists in this exhibition.

Extending Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott's characterization of Antillean art to this northernmost Antillean city, or to position it another way—this southernmost U.S. imperial crossroads, diasporic artmaking in Miami is “restoration[s and re-assemblances] of shattered histories.” This sensibility of “care and pain” expressed in the words of Gordon-Wallace in the opening epigraph maps the city's diasporic cartography. Collectively, the artists in the *Inter/sectionality* exhibit are migrants from places in the U.S., across the Americas dating from 1969 to the present, or are born in Miami to immigrant parents. Fifteen of the seventeen countries represented dot the hemispheric archipelagic chain connecting Miami to Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Guadeloupe, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Uruguay, among others. Miami's relationship to these places as well as to South Africa captures the city's overlapping zones of the U.S. South, the Global South, the greater Caribbean and Latin America. The city's multicultural composition tilts toward its hemispheric and Hispanic population, where 93% of the current foreign-born population are from the Americas; 63% percent of the county's residents are Hispanic, 18% are non-Hispanic whites, 15% are Black; and 71% of its residents speak a language other than English at home.⁴ Situating Miami's hemispheric orientation underscores that since its 1896 incorporation it has been a continuous destination for migrants and artists across the U.S. and the Americas as they respond to economic and political challenges in their places of origin. By the end of the 1980s, the above recent demographic trends collided with the hemispheric convergence of peoples, practices, and prejudices in Miami, and produced a city wherein a white Latinness eclipsed and then toppled extant Anglo-American power by making claims to the city's financial, political and cultural institutions. The city's late twentieth-century creolization process means white supremacy sits in concert with both white Latin hegemony and black and brown precarity as the underbelly of the Creole City of the exhibition's name.⁵ Given the city's social history, to center this other Miami in the national story we tell of artmaking in the U.S. is to confront a *black hemispheric imaginary*.

Black cultural practices and aesthetics are central to the artistic imagination of this other Miami. Arguably, it is this insistence to create alternative spaces for the ecosystem of contemporary art

³ Hank Willis Thomas, Juana Valdes, Erman Gonzalez and Esperanzo Cortes. Hank Willis Thomas as well as Asser St. Val are in the private collection of Don and Mera Rubell. Erman Gonzalez's work was held by collector Craig Robinson, who has gifted them to the Perez Art Museum.

⁴ A further breakdown of the foreign-born population reveals 47.3% Cuba; 7% Colombia; 6.2% Nicaragua; 6% Haiti; 3.3% Honduras; 3.2% Venezuela; 2.9% Dominican Republic; 2.6% Peru; 2.1% Jamaica; 2.1% Mexican. 2015 Statistical Atlas for Miami Dade County.

⁵ Elsewhere, I describe this as the process of *hemispheric creole whiteness*. See Francis, “Juxtaposing Creoles: Miami in the Plays of Tarell Alvin McCraney.” *Tarell Alvin McCraney: Theater, Performance, and Collaboration*, edited by Sharrell D. Lockett, David Román, and Isaiah Matthew Wooden. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020.

that sustains Gordon-Wallace as a committed ambassador for the arts in this city. For communities and artists outside of Miami's milieu of privileged high-end blue-chip art dealing evinced in international art fairs like Art Basel, this other Miami foregrounds blackness as an ethics rather than mere optics. That is, this exhibition asserts that *an intellectual regard for Blackness*—its people, cosmologies, and histories (past and present)—is a core value—whether it is the African practices of Latin cultures or black cultural practices of the US and the Caribbean. The artists featured here often commit racial and ethnic suicide to unlearn implicit racial biases and to develop resistive art practices of a Miami-inflected black hemispheric imaginary—as processes of rupture and transformative realignment.

Radical Hope

The first art objects one encounters when walking into the Corcoran Gallery are the delicate but vibrantly-painted and precariously-placed vases by the Dominican immigrant artist **Chara Oquet** who has called Miami home for the past thirty years. For me, the vases immediately conjure Derek Walcott's 1992 Nobel Prize speech emphasizing that Antillean artmaking is about reassembling fragments from their original places or forms "and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole." It is fitting, then to use Oquet's vases as both art objects and metaphor to think about the entire exhibition. As we will see, throughout the artists' statements and essays, all of the artists are trying to reconstruct shards of language and fragments of memory. That these *love acts* take place in Miami or through a Miami-based arts organization and the artistic community and network established by Rosie Gordon Wallace is the power of the diasporic re-assemblages being staged for a national audience.

Oquet's installation reassembles the "black roots" she was taught to deny and disregard as a member of "the privileged class" in the Dominican Republic. For her, diasporic life in Miami has meant unlearning anti-black sentiments. "Miami," she states unequivocally, "was where I really got to know Haitians and their culture, the Cubans, Vodun, Santeria, candomblé." One sees in Oquet's installation, "Entering a Rara Garden," this racial, cultural, and cosmological re-education that "blurs the line between art and object, the exotic and the banal, [ritual and spirituality], in an attempt to align the mind, body, and spirit in one space." This is the creolization practice that comes out of spatial proximity in Miami. The vases simulate the choreographed motion of Rara street festivals that conjoins the pulsating energy of the carnivalesque with the prayerful ecstasy of spiritual rapture. Placed on white cubes of varying heights against a black curtain, the vases painted in bright hues of blues, yellows and oranges and different in size, shapes and textures simultaneously overpower their white-cubed placement while also evoking altars of African-derived spiritual practices. This assemblance of sacred ceramic vessels portrays and pays homage to the vibrancy of everyday material iconography such as roosters and plastic flowers encountered on the streets of Little Havana and Little Haiti. Thus, this installation, like the body of her artwork, communicates to viewing audiences Oquet's steadfast view of "radical hope," a holistic practice as she puts it:

learned from my own culture.... to visualize and feel hope for a better future...to use our sense of joy and happiness to maintain no matter what to keep us from falling into despair. In the [Dominican Republic] we dance it all out. We put the

music loud and keep going despite poverty, hurricanes, bad governments, earthquakes and whatever else they throw our way. I am not saying escapism, but we need to find tools to keep going. This Rara garden is a celebration of nature and joy despite everything because I believe in mother earth as a living organism, powerful, alive and in constant motion. I have the hope that as a part of the universe, humans will find the way of working together to save our planet and all living organisms including ourselves. We must not lose this hope; and, we must not succumb to gloom and doom because if we do, we will all perish. Without hope there is nothing.

Ordinary Objects

Drawn to “its sensuous malleability, glorious messiness and the possibilities of playing in dirt,” Caroline Holder also works with clay. For the Barbadian transplant living in Brooklyn, the materials and subjects of her art connect back to a sense of place and the ordinary within her own narrative. “Insomniac's Menagerie,” her wall installation, is comprised of a number of texted-ceramic wall pillows above a bed’s headboard framed by the simulacra of traditional Barbadian monkey pots. Viewers entering this menagerie are invited to meditate on the streams of consciousness concerns that keep them up at nights: “Where’s your accent? What do you mean “I’m not Black.” For Holder, these are anxieties brought on by her own intersectional identities as “artist, (older) parent, teacher, West-Indian.” In re-creating the ancestral Barbadian monkey pots originally used to keep water cool, Holder’s refashioned monkey pots house contemporary immigration debates. The decorative panels of white porcelain inlays read “immigrant (noun), emigrant (noun), emigrant (adjective) émigré, and refugee.” This domestic object of life-holding water stages debates about the U.S. through iconography of the statue of liberty as well as visual representation of “the land of milk and honey.” The two accompanying small wall sculptures with baby hands address the youngest and most innocent victims of our current global anti-immigration crisis that includes imprisoned child immigrants. These, Holder’s installation urge viewers— across race, gender and nation—are core universal human values; and, the “Insomniacs Menagerie” admonishes that these are inhumane atrocities that should keep us all up at nights.

El Camino

Shoes cast in white-glazed ceramic of varying sizes from babies to children and adults anchor to the floor of the otherwise ethereal translucent white gauzy fabric draped between the majestic white columns in the center atrium of the Corcoran Gallery. **Juan Erman Gonzalez’s** “El Camino” honors the road that marked both his Cuban family’s immigrant existence and perseverance using sewing as means to make a living, as well as the many miles travelled on his artistic journey where “Ms. Gordon-Wallace has held my hand.” Using reclaimed materials and post-production fabrics, he stitches together the affective remnants of his “early Cuban childhood living with a rationing booklet for food and all items of consumption.” The large sewing needle as well as the multicolored threads create a membrane like structure visualizing both the tools of production as well as their products that inserts a ghostly embodied presence of immigrant female labor history. Visualizing the ephemeral quality of such embodied female labor practices is particularly timely in the midst of anti-immigrant labor sentiments.

Squaring the Architectural Sublime

For **Devora Perez**, a child of Nicaraguan parents—born, raised and having lived in Miami her entire life, this city inspires a muted palette, and is the vista from which she views the world at large. Using transparent, translucent and industrial materials as well as simple geometric forms, Perez brings a minimalist aesthetic to bear on reinterpreting the changing architectural landscape of South Florida. The installation *Man-Made Environment (here, there, and everywhere)*, hangs suspended from the ceiling propelling the viewer to encounter it at eye level. Composed of asphalt enclosed in a rectangular plexiglass and wooden frame, *Man-Made* is meant to resemble a horizontal landscape painting. Absent is the usual verdant green flora and fauna used to create newly gentrified spaces as picturesque: both warding off the community and enclosing the new inhabitants from the “unsightly” neighborhood around them. In Perez’ installation, the asphalt is clumped together to mimic the natural landscape. And as such, she both engages and politicizes the picturesque, to make a direct correlation to its strategic use in concealing the violence of colonization and gentrification. Devoid of romantic ornamentation and the sublime nature traditionally depicted in the historic genre of landscape, Perez brings the viewer into an almost sterile environment that is simultaneously a visceral landscape.

A Commingled Cultural Fabric

The pedestrian, especially as it relates to individuals’ relationships to the environment dominates Jared McGriff’s art practice. A transplant from San Francisco living on Miami Beach, his artwork often paints street scenes or street walkers: “My work, he tells us, “always reflects my surroundings, so here there are nods to the pedestrians of Miami Beach, frequently workers within the service and hospitality industries, florals, big skies, and the often peculiar dynamics of a commingled cultural fabric.” In a city navigated more by car than walking, these ephemeral moments when distinct and distant bodies intersect on the streets of Miami Beach hold his pictorial eye. Particularly compelling is that McGriff’s artistic gaze is that of the black painter, inviting questions about what means for a black man to paint Miami Beach, the very spaces where decades prior, black service workers were only allowed to traverse as workers with ID cards. McGriff’s two works in the exhibition are figurative, imagined portraiture - one that is an exploration into self-reflection, the other is more focused on the relationship between the individual and their environment exploring questions around connectedness and belonging. In Miami, his palette has become more vibrant and brighter, and his use of mixed media paintings—oil, watercolor—create imagined portraits that carry conversations about how individuals relate to each other and their environment.

Refuse: Between Waste and Possibilities

Born and raised in South Africa of French Huguenots refugee ancestry, Anja Marias lives her white African identity as the colonizer and the colonized as a transplant living in Allapattah—a neighborhood historically comprised of black and brown working-class communities. Marias makes sculptural art—eight feet high—out of discarded objects which she paints a flat white—unifying the collected domestic objects. She describes her practice as such: “in my sculptures, I depend upon domestic objects, furniture, or demolition debris collected from Miami neighborhoods at night before refuse collectors pick it up. These objects come infused with a

given history. It is as if they resonate with the lives of those who before lived with them. This way of artmaking creates a collaboration between myself and an anonymous collective in my city. I do not see these objects as a representation of 'waste' but that of 'possibilities'. Where the discarded, the broken, the unwanted can metamorphosize and be dignified." It is useful to juxtapose—even provisionally—Marias' refuse artmaking practice to that of this city's more signature artist of refuse, Overtown's now native son, Purvis Young. He collected the shards of his community's debris in daylight as he moved among them. His works capture the period of slow violence as this neighborhood disintegrated after the construction of I95 in the 1960s. For Marias, in contrast, the community's shards are collected at nights while the neighbors sleep and before the garbage collector comes. Her use of flower pots, bunt baking tins, gardening tools, shovels, axes, and broom which she puts on pedestals— memorializes the everyday practices of the community with flat whiteness. Where Marias works in white to elevate the quotidian lives and objects of black and brown residents, Young captured in color the uncontainable excess of the everyday life in Overtown.

Collectively, these artists and their art installations reassemble fragments of blackness out of dreams deferred and displaced. Visualizing a commitment to black reconstructions against the odds reveals Miami to be a precarious *and* vibrant creolized site of national and hemispheric black self-making.

The end