

2 Horizon(te)s

"Of inside, of children born and unborn, of land, history, of today, of streets, of soil soaked, of underwear, and inside underwear, of metal and the metal taste in my mouth, of vision and sky, of affection, the most beautiful turned brown left to rust, of beginnings and endings, of us all, of cheeks, lips, of noses, of eyes, of fear, of love, of time filled with bodies, beings, souls, and spirits left unattended, of vomit, of passion, of rage, of life with death, of destined futures and butchered pasts, of ancestry and tradition, of magic, creation, and courage, the only spilled."

- Maria de los Angeles Rodríguez Jiménez from *a swallow*, 2020

A Convergence

María de Los Angeles Rodríguez Jiménez penned these words in the spring of 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Infection and death rates were peaking as citizens across the US protested the brutal murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. The artist would later transcribe the poem directly onto the wall, making it an integral element of the multimedia artwork *a swallow*, 2020. Rendered by hand in red letters, the stream of conscience utterance encircles a painting, a bricolage of leather and satin remnants that have been cut, stacked, folded and sewn together. The canvas hovers slightly off the wall, suspended from two pieces of wire and is embellished with oil and acrylic paints in hues of red, orange, blue and flesh tones. When fabricating the piece, the artist turned some of the leather fabric sections inside out, exposing stains and textural imperfections in the cloth. These marks resemble scars and blemishes on human bodies.

Since 2014, Rodríguez Jiménez has made mixed media art works and installations she describes as paintings. Employing a wealth of fine and found materials, including paper, canvas, mirror, paint, beads, concrete and razor wire, the wall- and floor-bound pieces span the corners or rooms, stand upright on the floor, and dangle from the ceiling, toggling fluidly between painting and sculpture, abstraction and figuration. She is intent to mine the liminal spaces between physical and spiritual realms. For her, the human body is the "fragile vessel," a conduit in between. Bodily references associated with femininity abound in works like *Una Batica y Ochún*, 2021; *Eleguá*, 2021; and *Regla*, 2014-20, where a pulsating center of blue indigo is visible in the center for those with the courage to lift and pull back the fabric layers.

The artist used two stretched pieces of wire mesh to form the makeshift stretcher for the "canvas" that punctuates *a swallow*. She confessed it was the disembodied "other half" of another contemporaneous work, *Exú meets Matisse*, 2021, which began as a larger painting. To realize both pieces, Rodríguez Jiménez bisected the canvas, severing the underlying image of a bird (a swallow) in two. According to the artist, separating the beak from the body was a necessary gesture that led to a certain "alchemy of materials." She notes it was a visceral response to the overwhelming sense of suffocation she felt was contained within the larger painting. It was a sensation pronounced by the hundreds of thousands of COVID patients around the world taking their last breaths and the seeming indifference of governments in Brazil and Cuba to mass death tolls.

Rodríguez Jiménez also acknowledges a strong reference to blood in *a swallow*. She associates the nourishing life force with the body's liquidity and female reproductive processes. It is connected to Afro Cuban ritual practices, where animal blood is often used to make offerings and divine the future. *a swallow* thus encompasses myriad associations related to the body's fragility and vulnerability, heightened by the realities of 2020.

It is not uncommon for the artist to begin making artworks in this fashion, starting with a referential image, a feeling, a word, a sensation, or the simple turn of a phrase. She is fascinated by the nuances of language and cultural references that are lost in translation, or misinterpreted, when moving from one language (especially her native Spanish) to another. These slippages, and word plays, as evident in *a swallow*, become points of departure to launch abstract, formal investigations, which then take their own independent turns, offering platforms to ruminate on one's lived experience and the exigencies of the present.

In *2 Horizon(te)s*, Rodríguez Jiménez's sumptuous, corporeal paintings are brought into dynamic dialogue with the haunting canvases, drawings, and installations of Hartmut Austen, a German born painter based in the US since the late-1990s. Austen's *oeuvre* registers poignant, personal responses to the sobering news stories through a sophisticated and highly individualized language of abstraction. For Austen, painting and drawing are daily practices that provide vital outlets for processing and distilling his reflections on global and geo-political events, especially in 2020, "when you really don't know what to make of a moment."

While the presence of humanity is not always immediately apparent in Austen's canvases, his art is squarely grounded in representation. His works typically begin with a foundational image he finds in print in the newspaper or on the internet. He also draws inspiration from a vast image archive in his studio and drawing notebooks kept since the 1980s. Paintings in the exhibition made since 2017 reflect his responses to an array of contemporary social and global concerns, including natural disasters (*Sabine Pass*, 2017), the Syrian refugee crisis (*Aleppo*, 2017, and *Procession*, 2018), and conflicts at the border between US and Mexico (*Borderline*, 2020).

He mines the architecture of collectivity and is drawn to images of people on the move, migrating and transiting through landscapes and architecture, and engaging in public space. Crowd scenes, political demonstrations, and protests have been particular areas of focus. Unconventional viewing angles and perspectives fuel his imagination. He is fond of cropped, close-in views that obliterate reality (see *Two Kids* and *Borderline*) and vast, bird's eye views that afford other levels of abstraction. The underlying image in *Seminar*, 2018, was based on an overheard shot of audiences interacting inside a lecture hall. *Sabine Pass* derives from the rear view of an all-terrain vehicle filled with evacuees during a devastating hurricane; it reads like an aerial view of the contours of the flooded Galveston, Texas landscape. *Day is Night* exposes a sniper's sightline along a contested national border.

For the artist, the images from the day's headlines become "instigators for pictorial ideas" that quickly move into purely abstract expressions. What may begin as "oblique responses" to political currents quickly enters the realm of the imagination to revolve around painterly ideas and concerns. The results are paintings with rich, cumulative layers of paint in contrasting color combinations, where the marginal edges of the underpainting are left visible. This creates energetic and syncopated surfaces of color and light that vibrate, as in *Storage*, 2018 and *Untitled*, 2021. In *Gawkers*, 2021, rendered in shocking tonalities of chromatic grays and green, the original scene of a crowd of onlookers is abstracted to such a degree that it appears like a ghostly afterimage. In *Demo*, 2021, a group of huddled demonstrators becomes an abstract shape, which the artist repeats multiple times like a pattern using high-keyed yellow paint. He turns the image over, stacks it, and employs it as a building block to create an entirely new pictorial reality.

During COVID and the 2020 US presidential election, Austen made an unusual and surprising work. Rather than draw on a contemporary news photo, he returned to a tender image from childhood, a drawing of two stick figures he made as a teenager in 1984. He associates the striding posture of the alien "fantasy figures" with the band The Talking Heads. The group's iconic hit song, "Stop Making Sense" (also the soundtrack for the band's concert movie made

by Jonathan Demme) spoke to Austen as a young person struggling to find his way and make meaning as an aspiring artist. Decades later, and during a year of “lockdown,” Austen reconnected with the sense of isolation and despair of his youth, which gave him strength to grapple with the present circumstance. In *Untitled*, 2020, the whimsical, striding forms are enlarged to adult proportions. They dominate a stark black canvas as they wobble precariously, attempting to find new footing on a shifting and fragmented map of the US and a world turned upside down by contagion.

Landing on 2 Horizons

The impetus to bring Austen and Rodríguez Jiménez together at Terzo Piano was as an intuitive response. It was the result of an invitation from Giorgio Furió to propose a duet between two artists I appreciated, who might be unfamiliar to DC audiences and whose works would have resonance in a city with such a venerable tradition of abstraction and color field painting. While my choice was clear from the start, in the midst of the protests and pandemic, I struggled with what it meant to curate a show that centered abstract voices, especially when there was so much tangible concrete pain and reality everywhere. What did it mean to make art (especially abstract art) in this confusing moment, in the aftermath of disease, social unrest, and exhibit it in the capital city following the Capitol insurrection?

Did it matter that the artists did not know each other or have any particular relationship to DC? Did the fact that they came from different generations and cultural backgrounds have any bearing that might lead me to reconsider the choice? In this moment of reckoning around race and gender, could I ensure that their individual subjectivities would be preserved and reflected and not get lost or become essentialized? In reflecting on Austen’s and Rodríguez Jiménez’s respective practices, I pondered the rich tensions between figure and ground. I thought about the courageous ways they use paint and employ materials and color. I also considered what was legible in each of their works and what each chose to make visible or maintain just below the surface.

2 Horizon(te)s on the Capital

From the start, Austen and Rodríguez Jiménez embraced the potential of the pairing. We focused on selections and juxtapositions that would tease out the figure in Austen’s work while elevating Rodríguez-Jiménez’s attention to materials and her astute sensibilities as a colorist. The design of the exhibition was guided by a mutual desire to create of a fully integrated installation, one in which each gallery would have works by both artists placed in direct and dynamic conversation.

The painters decided to make new works for the exhibition, cognizant of each other, the space of the gallery, and the context of the Capital city. The history of strife in the nation’s capital, both recent and historic, was a conscious consideration for Austen in the design of a new site-specific wall painting. He based the installation on an earlier drawing, which featured a dilapidated building in Germany following the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. The crumbling infrastructure offered a potent metaphor for the current state of American democracy. His decision to render this striking image on a pink background (Benjamin More “Pink Punch” to be exact) is unsettling. It not only suggests the human toll of power but at the same time generously and elegantly embraces the warm tonalities prevalent Rodríguez Jiménez’s corporeal works.

A swallow is Rodríguez Jimenez’s counterpoint to Austen’s new installation, along with *Cortando y rezando* (Cutting and praying), 2019. The latter is an unusual example in the artist’s *oeuvre*. Situated on the floor, the work appears like a “fallen” painting, twisted and weighed down by concrete and sharp razor wire. *Cortando y rezando* carries its own

historical weight rooted in the legacies of conflict and conquest in the Caribbean dating to the colonial period. It is a history Rodríguez Jiménez pointedly acknowledges in *Exú meets Matisse*, 2021, which offers a respectful nod to the dual influences of the 20th century European colorist Henri Matisse and the Afro Cuban *orisha* (god) of chance and choice-making. This encounter encapsulates the two world views (Western and non-Western) that have shaped Rodríguez Jiménez's personal subjectivity and artistic practice. She is a Cuban-born artist trained in the US, in Euro-centric aesthetic traditions, who is a practitioner of the Afro Cuban religion Santería, which she also brings into her studio practice.

Santería derives from the Yoruba/Lucumi tradition in Africa that emerged in Cuba and part of the Caribbean in the aftermath of the slave trade. It is a hybrid, syncretic, and self-styled belief system in which the attributes of African gods and spirits overlay the Roman Catholic iconography of saints. The names and attributes of Afro Cuban *orishas*---*Exú/Eleguá*, *Ochún*, *Obatalá*---appear throughout the artist's titles. For Rodríguez Jiménez, Afro Cuban religious practices offer an inspiring language of adaptation, survival, and transcendence. It is a conscious perspective she brings into her creative endeavors every day, where she continues to "reinvent belief" by subverting materials, and effectively "creolizing" them. It is a methodology she brought to this collaboration, which led to the reworking of the exhibition's title from "Two Horizons" to "2 Horizon(te)s." The latter offers a non-hierarchical fusion of English and Spanish.

Austen's and Rodríguez Jiménez's impulses to inject and inflect subtle nuance into form and language, to privilege emotion and intuition in the face of challenge, to complicate and subvert painterly conventions---these shared concerns resolutely affirm that abstraction, in the hands of these talented artists, can indeed meet the demands of our current moment while imparting an undeniable humanity.

Olga Viso
Guest curator