

Communal Medicine: Tending Abundance

A variety of recent projects in the visual arts have focused specifically on the histories, politics, and material cultures of health. These have run the gamut from revealing the inadequacies of healthcare bureaucracies to exploring more expansive models of wellness that consider the psychological, spiritual, or social dimensions of trauma and sickness. Included among these projects are the works of artists Gina Goico, Perla Mabel, and Rixy. These artists have individually explored abundance as an aesthetic strategy and political commitment, embracing formal and narrative maximalism as a mode of resisting the fragmentations of our bodies and communities under white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. *Communal Medicine: Tending Abundance* considers how these artists' strategies of somatic engagement, world-building, and storytelling facilitate an expansive model of community care.

The writings of historian and activist Aurora Levins Morales resonate with the commitments of these three artists and serve as a touchstone for this exhibition. In an essay about storytelling, disability, and justice movements, Levins Morales states, "We survive, when we do, because we are able to build webs of relationships, able to tend to each other, feed each other, able to chain ourselves to fences in loudly chanting groups, able to insist on our own stories about who we are."¹ Despite the salience of violent discourses and policies that render certain bodies and minds as dangerous, defective, and disposable, we survive and insist on abundance—of joy, pleasure, and comfort. Linking individual needs with collective struggles, Levins Morales reminds us that the ability to heal and resist trauma not only exists within us individually, but also within our relationships to our communities. The paintings, photographs, and sculptures by Goico, Mabel, and Rixy resonate with these sentiments and remind us of the resilience of our bodies and of the power of our commitments to each other.

In an ongoing multidisciplinary project, *LovingSUITS*, Gina Goico creates wearable sculptures and records stories about family and love shared by Dominican women. The soft sculptures in this series, such as *LovingSUITS 4* (2019), are filled with plastic beads and plush, and are anointed with lavender, frankincense, and other scents. When worn, the combinations of texture, weight, and scent work to soothe bodily tensions and facilitate comfort. Understanding the gendered and racialized discrepancies of care work in the Dominican Republic,² Goico prioritizes Black, Dominican women in the activation of her somatic sculptures. This choice foregrounds the politics of her aesthetics, in which comforting and reparative technologies are mobilized to tend to those often tasked with performing care unilaterally. The radical dimensions of Goico's gestures of care also come into relief when considering the racialized inequities of the U.S. healthcare system.³ Along with addressing the extraction of care in affective economies and the inadequacies of medical care in the U.S. healthcare system,

¹ Aurora Levins Morales, "The Truths Our Bodies Tell," in *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals*, rev. ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 49.

² See Amalia L. Cabezas, "Intimate Encounters: Affective Economies in Cuba and the Dominican Republic," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 91 (October 2011): 3-14.

³ For recent study reviews on this, see Janice A. Sabin, "How we fail black patients in pain," *Association of American Medical Colleges*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/how-we-fail-black-patients-pain> and "Understanding Maternal Mortality Rates Among Black Women," *St. Catherine University*, June 13, 2021, <https://www.stkate.edu/academics/healthcare-degrees/black-women-maternal-mortality>.

Goico's attention to other senses also resists ocularcentrism—the privileging of the visual over other bodily senses, and the discourses that equate seeing with knowing and thus possession.⁴ The soft sculptures and other works by Goico cultivate abundant sensorial experiences, destabilizing the primacy of sight and its conscription into regimes of violence.

Perla Mabel is similarly interested in the body, with a particular interest in its constitutive role in natural and spiritual ecologies. In *Calling Home* (2022), a green, feminine figure holds up an object to her ear while twiddling a rosary in her other hand. She stares over her shoulder at a window which shows her reflection over a verdant landscape—or so it seems. The reflection is rendered opaquely and appears distinct from the figure in the interior space, indeed seems to exist independently from the figure while merging with the exterior landscape. This second figure recalls Édouard Glissant's observation that "The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process."⁵ Merging the silhouette of the figure with the colors and plant life of the landscape, this figure literalizes the vital connections between people and the land described by Glissant. The act of calling home in this painting is thus a performance of connection that foregrounds the intertwining of our lives with the land. Mabel's composition expands this sense of emplacement by also invoking the spiritual. Around the allegorical representation of the land are gray tombstones and a golden ladder that floats into the distance, referencing Egun, the ancestors who are venerated along with the orishas in Santería. The worlds represented in Mabel's paintings remind us that we are vital parts of living ecosystems—both natural and spiritual—and that we have an expanded wellspring from which to draw strength. This expanded sense of one's roots is critical for cultivating resilience in the face of historical and ongoing violence.

Through painting, mixed media assemblages, installation, and public art, Rixy is committed to sharing stories of abundance. Her artworks are vignettes set in (or on the way to) "Cúcala," a fictional island world inhabited by sensual and powerful femme characters. Rendered in fluorescent colors and armed with claws, talons, and fangs, Rixy conceives of these figures as heroines who fight against the toxicity of "Machismo," the villain of Cúcala who represents machismo (an exaggerated masculinity). Well-equipped to fend themselves, Rixy's characters are also accompanied by fearsome animal companions. The crocodile accompanying the figure in *Gargola 1* (2020) and the panthers in *To Not Give a Mango's Damn* (2021) provide foils to appreciate the grace and ease of the sensual figures. Alluring, self-possessed, and fierce, these characters attract the gaze and redirect it, reworking the act of looking into a negotiation. Rixy's story worlds incorporate traces of our reality—recycled cardboard boxes, cowrie shells, synthetic hair—creating bridges between our material conditions and the fantasy world represented therein. The unframed, collaged scenes implicate us in these narratives, reminding us that pleasure and joy are not distant fantasies.

Together, Gina Goico, Perla Mabel, and Rixy affirm the strategies of survival we carry individually and collectively. Their diverse artistic practices explore the capacious contours of abundance as an aesthetic and political

⁴ For more on the visual, transparency, and opacity, see Ilya Parkins, "texturing visibility: opaque femininities and feminist modernist studies," *Feminist Review* 107 (2014): 57-74.

⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 105-6; quoted in Tatiana Flores, "Inscribing into Consciousness: The Work of Caribbean Art," in *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, ed. Tatiana Flores and Michelle A. Stephens (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 60.

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orientation that resists the violence of oppressive regimes, which fragment our bodies as they do our communities. Leveraging the power of our bodily senses, ecology, and storytelling, the works in this show invite us to embrace a holistic view of ourselves and tend abundance—of joy, pleasure, and comfort—in resistance to the historic and ongoing traumas of life under white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy.

By Juan Omar Rodriguez

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