

A Chorus of Marks and Artifacts

Essay by Natalie Haddad

What is a chorus of marks and artifacts? Marks and artifacts are records, of pasts, lives, voices. A chorus is a multiplicity of voices. Its role has shifted across time and contexts, but it is marked by a fundamental tension between the individual and the collective, between being of something and outside of it.

The same tension characterizes the construction of identity, particularly in the contemporary global world; as cultural theorist Stuart Hall writes, “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference.”¹ A chorus, a myriad, of marks and artifacts, is a record of collectivity and difference. Despite their distinct mediums and aesthetics, Demetri Espinosa and Anina Major both approach art as a multiplicity of voices that speak to these two sides of identification.

For Espinosa, this is embodied in the concept of the Third Culture Kid (TCK). Coined by sociologist Ruth Hill Useem in the 1950s, the term denotes a child whose formative years are spent moving from country to country, culture to culture. TCKs usually come from Army or diplomatic families, but someone raised in one place, but with various—and sometimes clashing—cultures can experience something similar. Being at once both and neither, constituted through difference, TCKs can inhabit multiple identities yet they cannot fully “claim” any one.

Born in Massachusetts to a Greek mother and Mexican father who separated when he was young, Espinosa grew up in an environment characterized by distinct cultural influences: American, Greek, Mexican, to say nothing of more subtle clashes, such as being raised in a Greek enclave in New England.

Espinosa’s abstract paintings animate the tension between cultures. In “Foreign Forest,” the forest is a panoply of forms, expanding from minute circles and marks in the top left to larger, irregular shapes stained with thin washes of multiple colors in the bottom right. The visual cacophony is underscored by outlines that delineate the marks as individual shapes all trying to navigate a space that has no clear passage.

Espinosa’s painterly gestures and marks, each vying for space, conjures another choral metaphor, that of harmony and disharmony caught in a dialectic that seems unable to reconcile itself. Thick black marks in “Foreign Forest” compete with the pastels that comprise the painting’s primary color palette, pitting the illusion of harmony (the pastels, on a chromatic and symbolic level) against the aggressive overlaid brushstrokes.

Often, inchoate figures and objects seem to emerge out of the allover abstractions: in “Catharsis,” for instance, zigzag lines cohere into sawtooth jaws; and in “Tooth Decay,” white squares and Xs and gray staccato marks allude to teeth. In many paintings the marks accumulate into a hum of nervous, excitable energy that can veer on vertiginous, as with the cyclonic swirls of “Drowning.”

¹ Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’?,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 4.

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Water is a recurring theme in his recent works. “Consumed” and “Drowning” are accompanied in the exhibition by “Late Night Swim” and “Deep End.” Together the paintings compose a narrative that begins with the individual, controlled act of taking a swim and crescendos in an experience of being overtaken by forces of nature, in a loss of self. While the narrative suggests fear, loss, even death, the notion of being consumed by a force greater than oneself can be liberating as well, as in Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian chorus in ancient Greek tragedy, which he conceives as a collective loss of self that annihilates the veil of “civilized man” and creates a space for metamorphosis, a “surrender of individuality and a way of entering into another character.”²

Where Espinosa looks to water as a metaphor, Major reflects on the experience of growing up in the Bahamas, a place circumscribed by the Atlantic Ocean and defined by the flux of cultural identity in relation to the diaspora and tourism.

Similar to the “third” identity of the TCK, Stuart Hall describes the Caribbean as a “‘third space’ — a space of unsettledness, of conquest, of forced exile, of unhomeliness.”³ In his memoir, the Jamaican scholar describes the experience of Caribbean people as “dispossessed and disinherited from a past that was never properly ours. We were condemned to be out of place or displaced [...]”⁴

Through her ceramic vessels and assemblages, Major responds to the effects of living in a year-round tourist economy, namely, the internalization of a performed self predicated on external factors: the interrelationship between the economy and extrinsic racial and cultural stereotypes. The resulting erasure, to much of the outside world, of people and culture beyond the hospitality industry is, in effect, a silencing of voices, a separation of people from place.

For Major this dispossession is countered by the physical space of the Bahamas, its ecological landscape, embedded with voices. Clay, a hybrid of water and earth, reifies the artist’s connection with the home she encounters from a distance (she’s lived in the United States for several years) and gives enduring form to familial and distant connections.

Her “loci,” which were inspired by dried blowfish found in straw markets in the Bahamas, point to the local ecosystem, but the form has an intuitive affinity with the round, spike-covered vessels made by Lobi women of Burkina Faso in West Africa;⁵ discovering the Lobi vessels led Major to look for other similar forms across the Black diaspora. In biology, “loci,” the plural of “locus,” refers to the “physical location of a gene or other DNA sequence on a chromosome, like a genetic street address.”⁶

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 64.

³ Stuart Hall, “Creolité and the Process of Creolization,” in *Creolizing Europe: Legacies and Transformations*, ed. Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Shirley Anne Tate (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 18

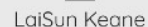
⁴ Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 61.

⁵ “Lobi Ceremonial Pot,” Wake Forest University Museum of Anthropology, <https://moa.wfu.edu/2021/03/lobi-ceremonial-pot/>. The spikes on the Lobi vessels symbolize defense.

⁶ “Locus,” National Human Genome Research Institute, <https://www.genome.gov/genetics-glossary/Locus>.

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Major's hybrid forms and assemblages further connect the natural environment with the past and present voices of the people of the Bahamas. In "Containment," a partially glazed ceramic form that recalls a birdcage holds natural sponges; atop it is a sphere made of woven clay strips. According to Major, the sculpture was inspired in part by a photograph of a seated woman trimming sponges and wearing a straw hat. Though the abstract form bears no direct resemblance to the woman, its shape and materials transform the historical photo into a powerful, organic presence. The work brings together land and sea, one woman and another, across space and generations.

The plaited vessel on top is particularly significant. Major meticulously weaves vessels with strips of clay, a skill she learned from her grandmother, who wove straw baskets to sell to tourists. These artworks invest ephemeral objects with a sense of permanence and resilience. Hybrid sculptures composed of different plaiting styles, join diverse craft traditions. Major also shifts emphasis from the consumer, centered in tourism narratives, to the artists, such as her grandmother.

In uniting these threads, Major is not pursuing an originary Bahamian identity, but is, rather, countering displacement with place, non-presence with presence. Nor is Espinosa only seeking to reconcile cultural tensions through his turbulent abstractions. With *A Chorus of Marks and Artifacts* at LaiSun Keane, the artists record the voices that have been exiled, erased, or lost in the interstices of "identity" and project them as a chorus for all to hear and see.

Demetri Espinosa x Anina Major

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About the Author

Natalie Haddad is a co-editor of *Hyperallergic Weekend*. She received her PhD in Art History, Theory and Criticism at the University of California San Diego. Her research focuses on World War I and Weimar-era German art. She has written extensively on modern and contemporary art and has contributed essays to various art publications and exhibition catalogues.