

Healing Networks

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The work titled *Fortune Telling* depicts a nameless figure spanning across the canvas with arms and legs wide open. This figure is sandwiched between two shapes -- one that almost impales the figure from between its legs and the second shape which directs the eyes of the viewer upward. Above, the figure's head is intermeshed with a triangle. For this piece, I began painting with acrylic paint on unstretched, unprimed cotton canvas. The fibers of the canvas fall arbitrarily into the painting -- becoming a part of the composition, with layers of paint mounted on top of them. Some of the raw canvas is visible through the textured brushstrokes -- these textured strokes of color appear rigid. The background recedes with matte, purple paint, and the foreground reveals itself with a shade of blue. The warmth of the orange to the left of the painting sets up a structure within the composition because the warm and cool-toned colors are so contrasting. My mind identifies the different temperatures as different spaces that exist in two separate realms of time and space.

As I look from the left of the canvas over to the right, following the curve of the figure centered in the middle of the composition I notice that they appear simultaneously in different dimensions. The ambiguous figure resembles a nameless, unlimited version of myself. Their left arm, a muddy, dark orange, and their right arm, a neutral, and higher value yellow-orange. The legs are outlined in a neutral cool-toned brown. A high-value shade of phthalo blue is a teardrop cutting through cuts the neutral, lower body. The head of the figure is camouflaged in a triangular shape that vaguely resembles a planchette. The sharpest point of this planchette has a cool, light green which makes this point seem like the top of the shape. Within the planchette are diagonal cuts of blues close in value and saturation.

A small shape at the bottom left corner of the painting has the same organic anatomy as graffiti letters -- it's rounded and sculptural. The stark value contrast, specifically, the very light values in the shape look synthetic or made of plastic. The sharp, abstracted, angular object piercing through the bubbled letter is camouflaged by the subtle value differences in that part of the painting. I see this worn by the figure like a badge of honor, like a ritual where a modification to the form is symbolic of reaching a milestone. Body modifications like tattooing and piercing were part of the Taino tradition. The aboriginals of Puerto Rico used stones to carve ink into their skin as a way of marking their positions as warriors of their communities (Posted by Keiahani on August 26 et al.). Tattoos were also used to strengthen connections between the Tainos and Zemis (gods), and to honor ancestors and lineages. These markings represented honor and courage for my ancestors. I now view my body modifications as a way to navigate thresholds between the spiritual and physical worlds. In the process of healing, the idea is to gain wisdom and strength after trauma and pain. The piercing of the figure in the lower-left corner shows a commitment to growth which is a catalyst for my paintings.

The division of the shapes in this painting resembles a "past, present, and future" tarot spread. I take my tarot cards into my studio to guide me as I decide which are the most important messages I need to express in my painting. C G Jung Institute of Chicago speaker Ken James, notes the correlation between tarot and Jung's theories of the collective unconscious. James stated that "Among Jungians, the study of divination systems, such as the I Ching, Astrology, and the Tarot, is considered just another aspect of the study of the mind. Analytical Psychology's consideration of these systems is predicated on Jung's understanding of synchronicity. Events that occur in rapid succession or simultaneously in space/time can be understood not only

through possible causal relationships but also by investigating the meaning that arises in the psyche of the percipient when confronting these events,” (Jung and Tarot).

The week that I painted *Fortune Teller*, my counselor recommended I read *What Happened to You: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*, a book that was written by Dr. Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey about the long-lasting psychological effects of childhood trauma. Through this book, I discovered that one of the ways people cope with fear after trauma is by making connections and noticing patterns around them to decide if they're safe. In that way, patterns, and the symbols in tarot, can help people predict the future. The orange avatar leaps across the canvas -- this sense of movement captures time and space -- and progression for the subject. They span as if they were an aerial creature.

The body of work made after *Fortune Telling* includes several canvases attached to one another with thread. I like the idea of all these fragmented parts of my experiences, conjoining in some sort of Frankenstein fashion. The safety pins are visible to the audience as well as the patches of raw canvas. In these smaller pieces, I paint different iterations of barbed wire. I make connections to barbed wire and body modifications because the silver, stainless steel material suggests body piercings. In a tale about the Orishas in Santeria, an Afro-Cuban religion, there's a story about how the frog got its poison. Frogs were preyed on by snakes, and as the frogs noticed each other dying, they made an offering to the Orishas for protection against their predators. The Orishas granted the frogs safety by giving them poison. The poison killed the snakes that ate the frogs leading them to eventually leave the frogs alone (Lele, 131-133). I think of my own body modifications not only as a metaphor for my growth but as protection against those who may hurt me— piercings are sometimes my barbed wire-- my spots against my predators. I think about the ways I have made my body a weapon to protect myself from pain. In these paintings, I

show the body enclosed in fear and surrounded by barbed wire. The gestures of the figures demonstrate self-preservation.

I work on unprimed canvas and the acrylic paint seeps into the pores of the surface. Because the paint sinks, it has a dull finish. I use dull paint to express silence because I want to trigger the subconscious mind of the viewer. I use flesh tones in abstracted representations of the body to reinforce their humanness and create environments that overlap the figures in highly saturated colors. I try to play with the kinds of relationships I can build using high saturation and low saturation colors. In another one of my paintings, *Three of Cups*, the dulled down colors are repressed by the highly saturated marks of impasto. The figures are in harmony with each other, and their environment. The intermeshed neutral and vibrant colors emphasize the union expressed in the content of the painting. Throughout the process of creating this body of work, I referenced Modernist painters like Georgia O'Keefe, Piet Mondrian, and Helen Torr. From my research on American Modernists, I learned that many of them approached color in their paintings with the help of synesthesia. I felt inspired to use color psychology and my subconscious response to color to guide my painting.

I keep my sketchbook with me all the time. I'm prone to overstimulation and I sketch to keep calm. I sketch the feelings of my body when I am uneasy or feel threatened. Blocks of color help me name the specific emotion I want to share in my paintings. I make several iterations of humanlike figures which I create in reference to archeological discoveries of the aboriginal people of South America. In addition to my interest in Incan culture, I trace my heritage to the Awarak people, native to the continent of South America, who migrated to the Caribbean countries of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. The subgroup that built communities and life in the Caribbean called themselves Taino. Throughout my childhood, my mom would teach

me and my sisters about our indigenous culture and Santeria to pass on the traditions and values of our family. Out of respect and acknowledgment of my ancestors, I connect with them in the ways my mom taught me to. The moments in my day where I take time to speak with my ancestors make me feel safe and hopeful. I like referencing them in my work because they're important to my daily life and my healing. They help me take life one second at a time.

In the Spring of this year, researched the work of Ana Mendieta. Mendieta created a body of work called *Siluetas* -- where she performed emotional rituals with her body and natural elements of Earth. Mendieta's interest in Cuban Santeria made me feel really connected to her culturally and spiritually. My painting, *Three of Cups*, came from sketches that I would make in the woods. I spent several days out of the week around my college campus, submerging myself in nature. In that time, I felt Mother Earth become my home. This was a pivotal moment in the work because it inspired a new color palette that was vibrant. I began to view color in nature in a different way because I started to feel emotionally connected to it. I sought to capture the energy of the forest, like Charles Burchfield. Not did my new relationship to nature influence the color in my paintings-- it influenced the content of the work as well. I have since made several drawings with colored pencils that portray my feelings about creating a home in the woods. The angst and anxiety that I feel while sketching and painting cause me to work at a fast pace. The mark-making in art is a byproduct of the urgency to purge negative feelings from my body. When I finish a painting or an illustration, I feel better about my trauma because I feel like I make a beautiful thing out of experiences that hurt me. With these works, I am able to connect with other people and life which removes the victimhood of abuse and assault. For me, the beauty of my paintings, and the ways I rebel against victimhood, is by daring to connect to the world around me after experiencing pain. I find that the work I made this semester was an

opportunity for me to dive into my artistic practice in a more vulnerable way -- serving as a conduit between the metaphysical and physical worlds for the sake of healing from my experiences. I want to continue to translate these traumas and the healing I've made with the help of my ancestors and nature to show other people that art can be a radically liberating passageway to more compassionate, and peaceful states of consciousness.

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