Displacement and Emplacement

Master of Fine Arts: Painting and Drawing

Graduate Thesis

May, 2022

Gregg Rivas
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State University of New York at New Paltz

We the thesis committee for the above candidate for the Masters of Fine Arts hereby recommend acceptance for this thesis.

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Displacement and Emplacement

My main exploration these last four years has been around the elusive, the ambiguous phenomena that relates to the experience of immigration and displacement. My work extends beyond the boundaries of gender, culture, and language through abstract automatism and captures the complexities of being not assimilated enough to be from here, and not foreign enough to belong to home anymore. I have had to carry the experience of immigration sin que me quede de otra. This process of becoming (an asylum-seeker, an alien, a citizen, an American, a dual-citizen) has been ambiguous and elusive and has had a direct impact on how I see my work. I am a Venezuelan American citizen by naturalization since 2015; five years after I arrive to the US as an immigrant.

The transition from one country to the other was not orderly or straightforward. It was messy, confusing, hopeful at times, and disheartening sometimes. Once I arrive with a degree in computer science and no English, I started to realize the complexities of a cultural world around me, which sparked the realizing of my career desires and complexities as an immigrant. These cultural experiences have been tossed around in my head, processed and re-processed constantly as I am building myself in this culture. After a few years trying to find my cultural grounding and some health scares, I realized that my main source of inspiration and drive for expression was painting and drawing. I am Venezuelan-American artist whose interests focus on the use of abstract landscape to explore and convey emotional reactions that evoke projections from the viewer. In this document, I explore the ways in which my cultural background displaces me in the America culture, and how art has served me as the space to find the much-needed emplacement that immigrants yearn for.
Literature

To achieve this, I will start with the exploration of literature that deals with different ways to think about the issue of displacement and emplacement. One is an article named “Surviving violent, traumatic loss after severe political persecution: lessons from the evaluation of a Venezuelan asylum seeker” (McQuaid, Silva, and McKenzie, 1). This article exposes the painful realities of a Venezuelan asylum seeker and describes the different layers of trauma and historical displacement occurring to many inhabitants in Venezuela during the last two decades, because of political opinion or party affiliation. Specifically, this article fits into my discourse by highlighting the sequelae of sudden and traumatic losses that Venezuelans have experienced during the last years and how that informs these people’s functioning post-immigration (McQuaid, Silva, and McKenzie, 1). This article describes the complex social and health problems present in Venezuela, which by 2018 became the leading country with asylum claims to the US. Although I left the country in 2010, human violations, political persecution, low physical security, economic deprivation, and the deterioration of the healthcare system in Venezuela were already very pronounced as a result of its authoritarian government.

Similarly, because the post-immigration or the aftermath is a lifelong process, I align with the book “Crossing and Dwelling” that examines the issues of displacement and emplacement (Tweed). Specifically, any journey (i.e., spiritual, migratory, becoming) consists on a variety of movements across time and space where life is subject to constant change. The immigration experience is then one more experience of continuity of change where the interrelatedness with the many facets of life need to be honored. In my case, art has become that space for me to freely interconnect interests and symbols in this process beyond -English- words but only through abstraction. Tweed argues that we have the need to dwell in a time, space, state of mind; and at the same time materialize this dwelling through the practice of homemaking. As
an artist, the practice of homemaking results extremely valuable for the labor of emplacement and survival. Thus, my problem is situated around how rootedness, embodiment, and emplacement as aspirational arrival point of immigrants are reflected in my practice as an abstract painter. I will work to find novel ways to frame abstraction as a survival tool within this process.

Another author that has been very important to my research is Stuart Hall (1990) in that he argues that cultural identity is not an accomplished, singular fact but it is a process of production, which is never complete. What we know as cultural identity is a bulk of hidden collective histories that are also positioned in a date, time, and context. One of the ideas that I have found most relevant to my work from this author is the idea of difference/rupture and similarity/continuity in that it offers me a relevant framework to understand my lived experiences as an immigrant, experiences that are not binary in nature. Lastly, this author further writes about peoples in the Caribbean and South America in the context of colonization in a way that makes me recognize the long legacies of colonialism that surround my identity back home and in this country. Venezuelan people throughout history and in contemporary times have been subject of many and continuous displacements. With the Columbian colonization, native people from Venezuela (Caribs) a became permanently displaced, decimated, erased. I have found that in this, we share similar histories with people from Africa and Asia and have been in the constant need to migrate for survival. These histories of exclusion, imposition, and expropriation have left many of us, in the past and in the present, displaced and “without an anchor” (Fanon 170). Moreover, according to Hall, the New World discovered by Columbus was the beginning of diaspora and diversity. Diaspora then is not a single ethnic group that altogether migrates and desperately tries to come back to their homeland. Diaspora is the experience of holding a sense
of hybridity that constantly produces and reproduces identity and is filled with nostalgia for the lost origins. The source of desire, memory, and search.

Research

My work proposes novel ways to understand the immigration process, not only as the geographical re-location of bodies, but as the turbulences that explain the move and are carried throughout the process, the multiple layers of displacement, loss and uprootedness; and the post-immigration meaning making through emplacement. I borrow from my personal experiences as an immigrant, the literature, and abstract automatism to propose a set of works that capture this process.

I research this topic through experimentation with ideas and materials. The experimentation space then allows me to wonder the “what if” I combine this with this, or “what if” I represent unusual things in my paintings. Maybe these spaces will grant me a clue to belong or “get it right.” This has led me to produce work that is inherently driven by my emotions and experiences and reveal non-objective and simple depictions that can easily connect to others’ experiences. I also make observations of other artists’ work and experiment trying to emulate their work. I take a two-dimensional work and represent it as a three-dimensional. This methodology has also allowed me to remain elusive and has freed me from having to conform to a language that is still unfamiliar to me, I do not fully understand, and sometimes intimidates me. In other words, this methodology allows me to embrace the multiple layers of vulnerability that come with not conforming culturally.

I actively work with materials and techniques that help me capture the phenomenon and represent it from embodiment. I get in contact with the phenomenon of displacement and emplacement, trying to put a name to it in English, representing it in multiple versions that I did not know about my work, and I have constantly questioned if these make justice to what I am
trying to say. Thus, my production is strongly influenced by surrealism where I suppress conscious control over the making process, allowing my unconscious mind to have greater dominance than logical, figurative control. I have studied this phenomenon consistently and that has been evidenced in multiple versions in my work. I experiment with materials in my painting such as acrylic, plastic, yesso, oil paint, glue, canvas, wood panel, paper, and textures to create different effects that explore, question, and effectively convey the phenomenon. In this process, I have taken some risks and mixed things such as acrylic and oil paint to see what happens and create other textures. I can say that as an artist I am pulling from everything I have in my studio and in my head to effectively capture and convey this phenomenon. This is exactly what I do in my personal life as an immigrant: pulling from everywhere, every known word I can use in English, any resource I can use to be successful, to survive.

In other words, I get inspiration from a figure that is related to the issues of displacement and emplacement, for example, a landscape from home. I draw this landscape and fill it using the negative space and positive space with other geometric, stylized figures, converting it into an abstract representation. Then, I volumize each figure throughout the painting to create dynamism. I achieve this by using perspective, contrast, and volume in each figure. With this, I intend to create perceptual dynamism in the viewer by being attracted to multiple aspects of the painting at the same time.

As a result of these explorations, I have created two drawings and five paintings for my MFA exhibition. The first painting is titled *Alien in a New World* (Figure 1). Here I captured the complexities of identity from being an “alien” in the sense of being a foreigner and an “alien” in the sense of an UFO (in Spanish). In this painting I captured the fluid and relentless process of identity making described by Hall (1990) in an almost humorous way by being identified
culturally as an alien. The experience captured in this painting goes back to the time when I arrived to this country as a permanent resident, and seeing that in some of the USCIS paperwork my status was defined as a “legal alien.” This idea of an alien has stayed with me throughout these years until the time when I painted this work. In this painting, the world that surrounds this alien is confusing and the only clear figure is the blue alien standing in the top right corner. This painting also captures the narratives of legality that depend on time, space, and context. The legal alien is represented at the top given all its legal privileges, whereas there is a minor red figure, another alien, hanging below due to its lack of legal privileges that further displace it.

The next two images (Figures 2 and 3) are drawings that are grouped together and are titled *Main Sketch Stressed* and *Sketch Stressed N# 1* to capture the process of creation. In here, I used the prompt of an individual who is visibly stressed, tired, sad, and worried, and I related it to the burdens of being displaced and lost in a culture that becomes overwhelming. As Hall mentioned in the book chapter, the process of identity making is not linear, logical, or organized. Instead, the process of acculturation is messy and confusing and discouraging. This man in the picture was drawn in pencil as a way to capture the transitivity of identity and mood states. The following drawing depicts this man in color, as a way to represent the transformation that naturally happens over time. One of the things that I captured with the level of distress of this man, is what Tweed (2006) called the arduous task of homemaking. Most likely, the man represented in these drawings was going through the hard process of acculturation where he simultaneously tried to cope with the displacement and fight for emplacement or homemaking in a new culture. The second drawing includes color pencil to get a sense of how I wanted to develop the final painting (Figure 4).
The next image (Figure 4) is titled *Stress* and it is a transformed representation of the man drawn. My intention was to represent the mood of the stress and the burdens of acculturation, beyond the figure of the man. I then created an abstract representation of this man’s experience with the color blue. The color blue in this picture represents harmony and calm, which to me connect to the idea of cultural identity (Hall, 1990) as a process that naturally unfolds in complex and contradicted ways, beyond the present experience of stress. Additionally, the color yellow in this painting represents hope and joy, which are the natural experiences that surround emplacement and belongingness. This painting then carries both, the despair and stress of the process, as well as the hope and happiness emerging in the process of acculturation.

The next image (Figure 5) is a landscape titled *Oda to the Unicorn World* “To my Poughkeepsie’s friends” and captures the richness and complexities of Poughkeepsie and New Paltz, as the two cities where I have grown the most personally and professionally in this country. The colors and shapes in this painting represents the multicultural diversity I have been surrounded by and it captures the expansion and enrichment of my own identity as I have lived here. According to Hall (1990), the process of cultural identity making is tied to the context and time of our lives. This painting represents the dynamism of this process as I have learned to know and appreciate other minority groups and their meaning in this context where I am also discovering who I am and what I represent as a cultural being. In the upper left corner of this painting, I drew the scenery from New Paltz with blue and white colors that represent the winter season along with the Hudson River.

The following painting (Figure 6) is titled *Dandelion* and is the representation of immigration or diaspora. In here, the simplicity and delicacy of a dandelion flower captures the powerful forces that push people towards displacement, and the vulnerability of human beings
and peoples of the world being pushed to exile and uprooted or disconnected from their main cultural stem. This abstract painting is predominately white to capture tranquility and the silence that sometimes obscures the harshness of this process, and the human beings or little parts of the flower are flying away in this process. These human beings are made of toilet paper to capture the vulnerability and political disposability of their complexion. The concept behind this painting relates to the social political forces that push people out of their countries to become immigrants, or as in the case of many Venezuelans, asylum seekers in the US (McQuaid).

The last painting (Figure 7) is titled Wonderful Poughkeepsie’s Raíos and it captures the process of homemaking in the new destination (Tweed, 2006). This painting uses fall-like organic colors that are present in Poughkeepsie and that have made a home here for me. Through abstract automatism, this painting captures the colors and textures that are part of my process of emplacement.

Displacement Archive
-Christie’s Inc. (2003). Arshile Gorky’s year after year post-war and contemporary art -
nga.org – Public Art Archive, publicartarchive.org – Personal memories and photographs
Artists, Texts and Visual Culture

Works Cited


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Artist Statement

My work explores the experiences of immigration, geographical displacement, uprootedness, and acculturation through abstraction. My production is influenced by surrealist automatism where I suppress conscious control over the making process, allowing my unconscious mind to have greater dominance than logical, figurative control. Thus, my creative process captures the simplicity of objects, shapes, and landscapes using texture, dimensionality, and movement that do not attempt to represent a specific depiction of a visual reality, but that altogether evoke curiosity and wondering in the viewers where they assign basic meanings and interpretations to what is observed.
Images

Figure 1. *Alien in a New World*. Acrylic on canvas

Figure 2. *Main Sketch Stressed*. Pencil on paper
Figure 3. *Sketch Stressed N# 1*. Color pencil on paper

Figure 4. *Stress*. Acrylic on Canvas
Figure 5. Oda to the Unicorn World “To my Poughkeepsie’s friends”. Acrylic on Canvas

Figure 6. Dandelion. Acrylic on Canvas and Toilet Paper
Figure 7. Wonderful Poughkeepsie’s Rojos. Acrylic on Canvas