Mi Familia

Pnina Abramovich
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Mi Familia

by

Pnina Abramovich

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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The City University of New York

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Thesis Sponsor:

May 15, 2017
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Dedicated to

Pacha Mama - Mother Earth.
Acknowledgments

My Partner - Roee Rona.

My Parents - Miriam & Robin Abramovich.

My Brother - Rafael Abramovich.

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MFTA - Materials for The Arts.

Pacha Mama, Costa Rica.

I appreciate the dialogue I have with you and the opportunity to collaborate with some of you.

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One of my sources of inspiration are native American folk songs, mainly from Brazil, Peru, Mexico and Colombia. I’m familiar with many of them and have learned to sing and play some of them on flute and guitar.

Folk songs tend to have a simplicity and directness that are manifested through the lyrics, the chords, and the rhythm. These are in opposition to the intonation and their dynamic characteristics (in terms of speed and volume).

I find such balance between simplicity and complexity to be very inspiring.

1 Native American folk song (source unknown)
A version of this song is available at- *Todo Es Mi Familia*, Music, 4:13, May 20, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7TMtsFzstc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7TMtsFzstc).
I choose to quote this particular folk song because it is the kernel of my current work and also because I’m using its melody and lyrics as part of a sound work in my installation.

This song reminds me that the separation I feel between myself and all that exists is not real. It reminds me that we are all related, that all life forms are related and that each one is directly affecting the whole by just being.

It reminds me that my being matters and it makes me ask myself what kind of effect am I creating as a living entity and what kind of effect am I called to create?

These questions become very intriguing to me when I ask them in the context of my work because it gives my work a purpose beyond serving myself.

Our senses are responsible for the way we experience reality, they are essential for our survival, although they are limited and can mislead. Art activates the senses in a playful way, often exploring their limitations and pushing their borders.

I’m interested in using the senses’ limitations in order to create an experience of expansion.

By experience of expansion, I mean an experience in which things that we can’t ordinarily perceive are presented through unusual mediating devices.

Since childhood, I’ve been experiencing a phenomenon called synesthesia, a neurological phenomenon that causes one sensory response to automatically trigger another sense simultaneously.²

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It started when I began tasting smells, which can be a hazard in certain cases. Later on, at the age of 18 during my two years of sound engineer studies, my sense of hearing and sense of sight started to “cooperate”. I remember the first time it happened very clearly. I was looking at the view of a small town and all the structures were interpreted in my mind as sound, each had some kind of frequency range according to its shape, size and materials, while visually everything looked vibrant.

I’m describing this experience because it affects the way I perceive reality and therefore affects my work. At first, synesthesia was manifested in my work as part of the subject matter and later on it emerged as an important sensory experience in the work. In many of my latest works I attempt to create a solid experience by creating synergy between the senses, energizing and bringing more clarity to the work.

Apparently, without offering any information from my research in my art, some kind of knowledge passes through the experience of my work, liberating me from being didactic and allowing me to be more playful.

**Previous Work**

In my previous work, *528*\(^3\) (a site specific, interactive sound installation, 2016), I was interested in constructing a simple experience of the relationship between sound and shape/space.

In particular, I wanted to show the way space and sound transform each other and especially the way that vibration affects the molecular structure of matter.

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\(^3\) Video documentation of the work is available at- https://www.pnina-abramovich.com/528
I built a small-scale wooden structure according to the pie-shaped proportions of the space it was presented in. The design of the small-scale structure invokes both the appearance of a musical instrument and the look of a religious building like a church or temple. Inside the structure, I attached a tuning fork that produces the frequency 528Hz when dinged. 528Hz is one of the frequencies of the ancient musical scale called solfeggio\(^4\). This frequency is related to the heart chakra and is used in healing to invite transformation and miracles, and also to repair DNA. The room in which I presented the small temple/musical instrument came to an extremely acute angle in one of its corners and in this corner next to the ceiling I placed a small hidden speaker that produced constantly the same 528Hz frequency in a very low volume, so low that it could be noticed only when dinging the tuning fork (due to the amplification that occurs when both sources emit the frequency at the same time). A person dinging the tuning fork would face the sharp corner of the room, standing at some distance from it. The acoustic experience that the audience perceived involved a sense of sound traveling in space supported by visual elements such as lighting, colors, materials, scale, shapes, objects and the gaps between them, and also a psychoacoustic phenomenon called “binaural beats”. “Binaural beats” is a phenomenon that was discovered in 1839 by a Prussian physicist and meteorologist, Heinrich Wilhelm Dove. It’s defined as slightly different frequencies heard simultaneously that cause the brain to produce a third, slight-

\(^4\)“Solfeggio frequencies make up the ancient 6-tone scale thought to have been used in sacred music, including the well-known Gregorian Chants. The chants and their special tones were believed to impart spiritual blessings when sung in harmony. Each Solfeggio tone is comprised of a frequency required to balance your energy and keep your body, mind and spirit in perfect harmony.”

ly different frequency (tone) that sounds like a beat. It is used in healing and is considered to be a stimulation that encourages access to altered states of consciousness. I would like to clarify that the reason that these phenomena could occur, despite the fact that the tuning fork and the electronic signal shared the same frequency, is because of their opposite qualities. The sound of the tuning fork has no stability, it fades out and the sound of the electronic signal is stable and continuous. This difference and the different placement of the two sound sources in the space allowed the binaural beats phenomenon to occur.

Another sense that was activated in this installation was the sense of smell. The whole floor was wiped with gray clay and in the spot where the tuning fork would be if the space of the room corresponded exactly to that of the small temple/musical instrument, I formed a small crater shape out of clay and filled it with water. My intention was to allow the vibration of the frequency to be made visual as a ripple on the water. The smell of the clay was very present and the moony appearance of the clay coated floor made the room feel like a fragment of a larger outdoor space. This installation was a turning point for me because it was the first time I translated my knowledge of sound and healing into an experience that other people could relate to without getting any information, based on the experience only. In many ways, this work was experimental. I wanted to explore through it whether activating the senses through several levels of mediation can affect healing. It was very satisfying to discover that the frequency and sound phenomena affected people in a strong way, even the ones who didn’t know anything about my intentions.

For example, one guy was singing the national anthem, some laughed, some wept, some stayed longer than I expected and some came back to experience it again. In general, there was a sense of excitement and openness, which I also attribute to the interactive side of the work.

**Current Work**

My current work, *Mi Familia*, is an installation that includes drawings, sculpture and sound. My work addresses the relationship between humankind and nature with the intention to reflect on it rather then to criticize it, although the result can be interpreted as criticism. Instead, I’m interested in redefining and extending the term “family” through analogies that I make between various cultures’ practices.

This work involves using found sites (stumps), found objects (Christmas trees), rubbings (an indexical registration of presence) and the performance of ritual transformations as an attempt to mediate these trees’ condition in as naked and pure way as possible. I show the trees outside of their expected context, an attempt to demonstrate their appropriation to human symbolization, a specific reality that also applies to many other life forms that share this condition. I use the mediatory genealogies of found objects, found sites and indexical representations like rubbings so that I can build a language around natural forms like tree stumps without modifying them. I bring together combinations of pagan and contemporary traditional practices and symbols as well as combinations of primitive and modern art-making practices in order to allow them to reflect on one another. The relation between specific art practices and the ethical and mystical ideas behind my work constitutes the core of what I’m doing.
I am aware of other artists who work with natural elements and specific sites in the natural environment to construct their work. Thematically, a lot of this work relates obliquely to my own practice and has paved the way for my ideas of mediation. These artists include Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Mary Miss, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy and Meg Webster. These artists, whose work is sometimes referred to as Land Art, have “unpaved” the way for artists like myself for whom art does not necessarily need to be in a gallery and for whom natural elements and sites offer locations for work and inspiration. I am very interested in the work of Meg Webster, whose practice includes making “gardens” that can be situated in galleries and outdoor exhibition spaces. She has even designed streams and small wetland sites as works of art. My own interests are rather different, but I am indebted to all of these artists for the awareness they have created about how art can be constructed from natural elements and sited in nature or other sites outside of galleries and other official exhibition venues.

*Mi Familia* is basically an altar made to cherish nature through one of its elements, trees.

For this project I work with Christmas trees, natural beings cut down to serve a symbolic function, and street trees, natural beings planted to improve urban streets.

Christmas trees and street trees are only two of many elements that have been appropriated from nature by humanity. I choose to work with them because they are loaded with meanings that allow me to use the context that comes with them in terms of cultural history, tradition and religion to specify the relation between human symbolic actions and nature.

Once humanity appropriates something from nature, it is treated like a product so that it loses its original identity and function in the world. All cultures use natural elements as part of their practice, but I am inspired by cultures that respect and celebrate the sacredness of the natural world.
The current drive to improve the post-industrial cityscape has led to the expansion of a commercial enterprise - tree farms. Certain types of trees were selected for this mission, according to their qualities, especially their environmental tolerances; for example, tolerance to drought, pollution and high pH levels. Trees in nature are supported by a fungus branching system called a mycelium. This mycelium “net” is essential for their survival and it allows all plants to share nutrients and information. Since street trees were planted by humans on farms and then transferred to the street, isolated in concrete squares, and separated from each other by underground constructions, they don’t have this support system. Perhaps that is the reason that many of them don’t survive.

On the other hand, the authorities also cut street trees when they are healthy, or maybe too healthy. When a tree is growing and doesn’t fit anymore in the limited space that was given to it, it starts to break the concrete and take over, a thing that some people don’t appreciate.

I have a long history working with trees as part of my practice, and my current work is the most significant project for me because I now have the opportunity to work on a wider scale of meaning that goes with the function of street trees and their location, and with the function of Christmas trees as a symbol in a culture in which I don’t participate.

6 Mycelium is the vegetative part of a fungus or fungus-like bacterial colony, consisting of a mass of branching, thread-like hyphae.


7 for example: https://www.pnina-abramovich.com/digging
https://www.pnina-abramovich.com/life-form
https://www.pnina-abramovich.com/two-donkeys-and-rope
https://www.pnina-abramovich.com/plastic-bag
This work started with one street tree, a stump that I molded and cast in concrete. This stump is located in Brooklyn and once I saw it I became interested in working with it as an image. When I went there to contemplate the stump I witnessed one of the neighbors walking his dog and the dog jumped on the stump and sat there for a while. I wasn’t sure what was happening and I was surprised to discover that this dog has liked to sit on this stump since he was a pup and sits there every time they pass by\(^8\). As funny as it may be, I was thrilled that I had the opportunity to see this because it clarified for me my own unexplained need to work with this specific stump.

The reason that I find the surface of the stump to be an interesting image is its texture, which tells the story of the tree; its age and the way it was felled.\(^9\) I see this image as the “finger print” of the tree, a way to memorialize it and everything it had been through.

While working on the mold I had the opportunity to talk with more neighbors who were interested in what I was doing and in learning more about the tree, such as why it was felled and when.

Apparently it was one of those trees that were “too healthy” for the city streets, its roots crossed all the way from the edge of the sidewalk to the entrance of the building that is located in front of it - 146 Skillman Ave. An old lady fell and was hurt, she claimed damages and then the authorities sent someone to cut down the tree so that no one else would get hurt and sue the city.

The concrete cast of the stump was first presented as part of a sound installation, *Street Tree*\(^{10}\) that I showed in the open studio event in fall 2016. The sound came out of the concrete cast that

\(^8\) See picture listed under illustration 1.

\(^9\) See picture listed under illustration 2.

\(^{10}\) Video documentation of *Street Tree* is available at- https://www.pnina-abramovich.com/street-tree-video
was presented on the floor. The sound is a song written by a rap songwriter and singer, Melanie Willy, on top of an ambient sound of jungle, shamanic prayer and drum loop.

She wrote the lyrics according to the information that I collected about this tree, both from the neighbors and through research, and it is presented from the tree’s point of view. The work has evolved since then and here in my thesis show it’s presented as a memorial monument or an altar, including 20 more stumps whose forms I traced as rubbings.

The drawings are finished with frames of variable designs and sizes. All the frames are colored black in order to give them unity. Each frame functions as a tomb, enclosing the image and referencing the square shape of the concrete around them.

I see the drawings as tree portraits and their composition on the wall resembles a wall of family pictures.

I decided to tag each stump with the name of its location by stenciling the words under the image, emphasizing the distance these trees have come from their source, both in terms of function and community.

I believe that tagging the stumps by the street name (rather than by the type of tree) allows people to relate and connect through their affinity to their home.

The use of stencils is aligned with the concept of the tree as a product and also with the aesthetics of street art, which is also the reason that I chose to collaborate with a rap artist and use rap as a style for the sound. Rap is a music genre and culture developed in the United States by inner-

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12 Sound of Street Tree is Available at- https://www.pnina-abramovich.com/street-tree

13 See pictures listed under illustration 3.
city African Americans in the 1970s and known as a genre that was sourced in the streets of NYC.

To present the concrete cast of the stump, I placed it on a table top, making a frame for it out of a plexiglas sheet cut to follow its irregular contours. The encasing plexiglas serves, when bordered with wood molding, as the top of the table. Viewers are invited to use the cast to create their own rubbing, making the sculpture interactive. This idea is based on reactions that I got from people on the street while making the rubbings. It seemed that people could easily relate to the action of rubbing, not only because it doesn't require any special skill, but also because this action has a nostalgic notion and an interesting result.

The sound that I mentioned before comes from two pairs of headphones whose cables emerge from branch stubs on the bottom of the table, allowing the audience to listen while creating a rubbing, watching someone else make one, or just while looking at the installation.14

In the presentation I include a vase with herb smudges that were made out of a whole fir Christmas tree’s branches. Herb smudges, such as sage and cedar15, are usually used in various ceremonies for healing and purification. Here the fir smudges function as a reference to the oil that these trees have in their needles which is also used for healing16. My intention in having them is to give the whole work a sense of a traditional and religious ceremony.

14See pictures listed under illustration 4.
15 See pictures listed under illustration 5.
The first time that I was in New York after Christmas I was very surprised and upset by the number of dead trees lying on the sidewalks as garbage after the holiday was over.

Every year I experience it as some kind of holocaust and the trees seem to me like a pile of dead bodies.

Just as some types of trees are appropriated by humankind to be street trees, evergreen trees such as spruce, pine and fir have been appropriated to be Christmas trees. Christmas became an official holiday of the Christian religion in the fourth century, a tradition that historians associate with ancient cultures’ festivals centered on the winter solstice. The tradition of decorating an evergreen tree began as a pagan practice and the tree was called a Yule tree. The original custom used outdoor live trees that were decorated with hanging candles. Today, 33 to 36 million Christmas trees are produced in America, and 50 to 60 million are produced in Europe. “Naturally, cutting this many trees is a big problem, both ethically and environmentally”. This type of


18 “The Yule tree lights and ornaments originally symbolized the sun, moon and stars as they looked on the Tree of Life. The Yule tree decorations also represented the souls of the departed who we remember at the end of the year. And then there is the modern day gift giving which originated from hanging sacred presents on the Yule tree as offerings to the gods.” “The Cosmic Wisdom of The Ancients - The Tree of Life,” Pegasus Research Consortium, accessed May 1, 2017, http://www.thelivingmoon.com/44cosmic_wisdom/02files/Tree_Life04.html.


tree is a loaded symbol that has traditional, religious and historical aspects and, at the same time, personal and nostalgic aspects.

For me, the Christmas tree is a symbol that represents the relationship that humanity has with nature and, because it is loaded with all the other aspects I mentioned before, it allows me to explore many levels of meaning at once. I collected a few fir trees from the street, brought them to my studio, and ended up working with 7 of them. I treated 3 trees by binding each branch on one side with thin white cotton thread and leaving the other side unchanged. The binding resembles insect webs and egg sacks, bandaging on a wound, and herb smudges. Fir trees have oil in their needles that have a medicinal effect, so the bandaging and healing imagery is important to my concept of having a complete relation to nature. By binding them I want to point out that each natural element offers something more significant than being a decoration for a few days.

The action of wrapping the branches as such has a ritualistic quality, not only because it’s a repetitive one linked to a shamanic tradition, but also because it reminds me of some kind of embalming ritual made more purposeful because the trees were dying while I did it.

It is important for me not to change the appearance of the trees in a way that will turn them completely into something else; I want my modified trees to retain the connotations associated with Christmas trees. A main element in this work is the sound of a song, *Wish You*, 3 singers (each animating one of the modified trees), Chen Prat, Noa Lambersky and myself, singing the words of the familiar Christmas song “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” spliced onto a melody of a native American folk song “Todo Es Mi Familia,” accompanied by maracas. In my mind the fir

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20 Sound of *Wish You* is Available at- https://youtu.be/9TcVstp1V28
trees in the installation are blessing humankind and wishing them a merry Christmas while they are dying, indicating their unconditional giving.

The strong smell of the fir trees also supports the family context, as the sense of smell works with our memory and can raise nostalgic moments about the family or, on the other hand, thoughts of the future.

In front of the singing Christmas trees I placed a sofa, allowing the audience to sit while listening to the work, creating a comfortable environment that can reference a home-like feeling. I surrounded the sofa with more Christmas trees, creating a stronger scent and a sense of intimacy with the trees.²¹

People are not used to seeing Christmas trees in the spring and I believe that this change will allow the audience to see these trees in a new way.

Through the trees that are present in my work, I would like to share my respect for all kinds of life, especially my respect for all of those who have been appropriated by humankind. This is my way to ask for their forgiveness and to pray for a better relationship between nature and humankind.

²¹ See pictures listed under illustration 6.
Bibliography


Image list

1-21. 21 framed drawings, rubbing technic and stencils, black crayon on rice paper (Kozo, 44g, Mulberry Bland), verity of sizes and frame’s designs.

22-23. The drawings as one unit hanged on the wall.

24. Stump cast, Concrete.

25. Framed stump cast, concrete, plexiglass, wood, wood molding frame.


27. Detail of the customized table.

28. Fir brunches, white cotton thread, clay vase.

29. Paper stand, wooden frame, sketch pad 24” x 36”, black crayon in plexiglass container.

30. Modified Christmas trees, 3 fir trees, 3 green plastic trees stands, white cotton thread, 2 speakers.

31. Christmas trees and a sofa, 3 fir trees, green sofa, off-white wool cover.

32. Detail of the Modified Christmas trees.

33-35. Exhibition Installation Views

Pnina Abramovich, Mi Familia MFA Thesis Exhibition

April 20, 2017 - May 7, 2017
Images
#8-10
Supplemental Media List

Academic Works uploads:

- Video Documentation and sound (*Street Tree*), *Mi Familia* Installation.
- Video slide show and sound (*Wish You*), *Mi Familia* Installation.