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Rupture

by

Dionis Ortiz

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2017

Thesis Sponsor:

12/20/17

Date

Nari Ward

Signature

12/20/17

Date

Thomas Weaver

Signature of Second Reader

Dedicated to

my son

Cristian Antonio Ortiz

Acknowledgements

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Before attending Hunter College, it had been 14 years since I graduated with my undergraduate degree at SUNY Purchase College. During that time I created different bodies of artwork, exhibited and curated shows in my community and was commissioned to make public art projects. I created a body of work entitled *Migration* and it was about my experience growing up within a community of immigrants in Harlem. The artwork was comprised of mixed media paintings on paper and canvas. I wondered what else can I do beyond paintings on paper? how do I move forward without feeling like I am making the same work I made in *Migration*. The Hunter College community helped me realize the endless possibilities of where I can take my ideas. I am grateful to have been a student of the following Professors: Juan Sanchez, Drew Beattie, Susan Crile, Nari Ward, Andrea Blum, Daniel Bozhkov, Paul Ramirez, Joel Carriero, Reiner Leist and Thomas Weaver.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Background and Culture	3
II.	Artworks and Methods	8
III.	Artwork #1: <i>Adapt-82</i>	10
IV.	Artwork #2: <i>Promenade</i>	12
V.	Thesis	14
VI.	Bibliography	17
VII.	Images	18

Background and Culture

I am an interdisciplinary artist working in painting, photography, printmaking, sculpture, video and installation. I employ these mediums to create a coming of age story as a Dominican New Yorker, exploring masculinity, vulnerability, the supernatural, family, and religion, as well as how culture plays a role in my community and in my life. I think about my status as a single father, raising a boy in Harlem. As a single father, I feel a sense of responsibility towards my son to foster a connection to Caribbean culture through language, music and art. I include having him help me cook so that he becomes familiar with the various foods I like to prepare and be comfortable as a male to be in the kitchen. I help him with his homework, which is very satisfying because it gives me an opportunity to teach my son different methods. I teach my son to have good manners, to not litter and to use the waste cans in the streets. My son is mindful of his responsibility towards his community. We practice helping others when possible, for instance he tells me how he is the “master of finding things”, when his friends lose things at school. I guide my son through the reality of what it means to live in Harlem. I answer questions about why there are people in the neighborhood who get arrested and about the difference between uniformed and undercover police officers. I try to avoid having my son see SWAT teams going to raid an apartment building. In a time when police brutality seems rampant in black communities, I continue to instill in him the belief that the police are employed to serve and protect him.

Growing up in the 1990's raised questions for me about what it means to be Latino and what it means to be an American. Pop culture such as television shows and

music influenced me during my childhood through a one-dimensional perspective of what it means to be an American. My immersion in popular culture masked the pervasive denial of the contributions of indigenous and immigrant populations that is endemic to the American experience. Growing up I recall watching television shows that were mostly white family-friendly shows such as sitcoms like “Growing Pains” and “Full House”. The families lived in big beautiful homes and the parents were financially stable; the shows evoked a strong sense of family unity. What was interesting about these shows is that black and brown people were not visible unless they were depicted as providing a service, like a delivery person or service worker. A few were based on a family of color, like the television show “Family Matters”. “Family Matters” showed a large working class family in a big beautiful home in the suburbs, a situation that was quite different from what I was used to. The actor Steve Urkel brought humor that became the highlight of the show. In turn, the show became more about Steve Urkel and less about any relevant family issues of the time. If “Family Matters” had ever displayed a sign of addressing reality, it would have been at risk of being taken off the air. I felt disconnected from the characters on every level of life experience. I remember that around the same time Arsenio Hall interviewed Louis Farrakhan on his show and talked about racism in America; not long after that, the show was taken off the air. As a teen, I understood that if television shows speak about black culture or display an experience of what it means to be a person of color, the show may lose its sponsors or get cancelled. I was, however, pleased to see shows like the “Cosby Show” and “A Different World.” The fact that the Cosby Show was set in Brooklyn made me excited

because I felt I could picture the neighborhood. I was also able to see Latinos presented in a better light, more like friends or colleagues to either of the parents. The children in the show were very contemporary in terms of their music and style of dress and spoke in a vernacular that I could relate to because of my familiarity with the African American community. I admired the way they spoke, it made me want to speak English like them. To me, this was a model show. In “A Different World” the characters were young, liberal and educated but a few came from humble beginnings. You were shown where they lived before going to college and this encouraged me to want to go away to college. These shows took precedence in my life because they were more consistent with my surroundings in African American and Latino communities.

Television shows that were completely cast with Latinos became irrelevant to me once I discovered shows like “A Different World.” These shows were either “Telenovelas” or comedies. I gravitated towards comedy shows by Roberto Gomez Bolaños, “El Chapulin Colorado” and “El Chavo del Ocho” because they were humorous live theatrical shows. The lead character in “El Chapulin Colorado” played by Roberto Bolaños is a superhero who helps people in despair. He wears a red jumpsuit with his initials CH on his chest. He was very similar to Robin Williams who played Mork in the sitcom Mork and Mindy. A Chapulin is a grasshopper often eaten in parts of Mexico. “El Chavo del Ocho” was about a boy played by Roberto Bolaños who was commonly seen coming out of a barrel in his poor neighborhood. Part of the humor was seeing Roberto dress and act like a child and be in dialogue with other actors playing multiple characters. The show had a slapstick style of humor. The set was designed to resemble

a poor community in Mexico. You had to use your imagination to sink into the environment they were presenting. Unfortunately, Latinos of a dark complexion were not visible during comedy shows like this. Latino popular culture perpetuates “Pigmentocracy”¹. My mother would watch telenovelas and I would notice how dark skinned actors would only have subservient roles, not speaking roles. The lighter skinned actors would have leading roles and were the bosses to the darker skinned actors. Over time you would barely even see darker skinned actors on the show. Fast forward, I visited the Dominican Republic in 2013 and walked by a movie theatre and saw a poster for a movie called “Feo De Dia, Lindo De Noche” translates to “Ugly By Day, Handsome By Night” the lead actor is Fausto Mata, a dark-skinned actor. The premise of the story is that during the day he is an unattractive single man who cannot get a date but then he is put under a spell by a light-skinned woman and by night he becomes this handsome white ladies man. The majority of the women in the film are light-skinned. I find it insulting that the producers of this movie wanted to blatantly dehumanize a dark-skinned man by claiming him as undesirable to women. This is a clear sign that today’s media want to publicly continue to uphold the ideology that being black is less than or not beautiful.

During high school, I had the opportunity to make artwork about my culture. I would compose slave narratives where I insert my portrait witnessing black slaves on the slave ship of Christopher Columbus. I felt a sense of oppression when I visited a bookstore in an attempt to find information on the Dominican Republic, only to find

¹ “Pigmentocracy” which is a term used to describe discrimination based on the social meaning behind the color of one’s skin. A term coined by Stuart Hall.

books made for tourists because a more in-depth history of the Dominican Republic was not available. Today we continue to face similar challenges. Children of Dominican descent are not being educated about their culture within the public school system. My son has experienced being put down about being dark-skinned by other children of lighter complexion of a Latino background. This experience creates colorism in a child's mind and can lead to bigger challenges for the individual while building tension amongst families of different cultures. Even though we have progressed over the years to now have access to an abundance of information about Dominican culture, there are people who choose to not seek this information.

Immigrants today are also living in a state of fear and oppression because of our current political climate, the fear of being deported and/or losing affordable quality healthcare is now constant. Donald Trump promotes making America great but he doesn't offer an inclusive feeling of different cultures. Trump being elected was a sign of how much more contentious U.S. relations have become with her neighbors. Trump calls Mexicans rapists, yet, *"24% of Latinos in the United states voted for Trump"*² Trump reminds me of a modern day Rafael Trujillo, who was the president and dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 through 1960. Trujillo's father was Dominican and his mother was Haitian. Trujillo denied his connection to Haiti and would say his mother was from the Dominican Republic. He was a fascist and looked up to Hitler. Trujillo eventually bleached his skin to rid himself of his brown complexion. The people of the Dominican Republic feared Trujillo, yet they felt he kept the country safe. Crime was not

² *24% of Latinos in the United states voted for Trump*, Ta Nehisi Coates, The First White President.

an issue and the economy was stable. In 1937, he initiated the Parsley Massacre where he ordered his soldiers to have any person of Haitian descent killed. Soldiers were told they could recognize a Haitian by asking them to pronounce “perejil”. Haitians had difficulty pronouncing the word perejil because they could not roll their r’s like Dominicans. Up to 15,000 Haitians were killed. Trujillo had the power to say or do anything he wished. The fear he instilled in people is no different than the fear Donald Trump wants to instill. Trump’s resemblance to Trujillo made some Dominicans feel that he would keep the United States safe.

Artworks and Methods

Many of my creative works end up as components in my installations. I often contextualize other activities like drawing, sculpting, painting and collecting culturally loaded readymades by placing these creative elements in installations that create fictional domestic environments. My installations create an ensemble of elements that contextualize all my creative activities in terms of my life experience. I have especially worked through Duchampian readymades or surrealist found object practices to embody my work about my past and my community. My goals only partly coincide with those of Duchamp and the Surrealists, but their ideas have opened up a language for me that is especially suited to my commitment to reflecting on my past.

My artwork has offered me an opportunity to take an in-depth look at this contemporary state of the political environment and relate it to deeply personal experiences. Drawing allows me to explore my creativity and view of reality which

involves the natural world, African and Dominican culture, gender and language. I am interested in the concealed and denied aspect of African and native culture, and how this denial shapes American identities, based on the effects of colonialism. Confusion is extensive and to the point that cultural lines are blurred in terms of what identifies a Dominican American.

“Dominicans in the United States have adjusted their values to include U.S. cultural values and practices as a means of adaptation and survival. Dominicans have learned to harmonize, producing a transnational consciousness that allows them to integrate and inhabit multiple spaces at once”. Sagas and Sintia Pg 229. This very poetic statement describing Dominican resilience resonates with me because I see myself as someone who has adapted U.S. cultural values to my everyday life in terms of being culturally diverse, achieving the American dream, having a family and a car, and owning a home. The various foods I eat and music I listen to reflect my open-mindedness to the other cultures that live in New York. However, where do we Dominicans draw the line of including U.S. values in our cultural values? When do we stop trying to adapt and survive and learn to thrive? When are we masters of our own destiny? Masters of our environment? My art practice reflects both my desire to sustain my Dominican identity and my inevitable absorption into certain aspects of the American scene.

I was able to connect with Dominican-American author Junot Diaz, particularly his work *“The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao”*, because he spoke to Dominicans who have lived in the U.S most of their lives. In Diaz’s book the main character Oscar is

not accepted as Dominican because he does not meet the expectations of a common Latino who is athletic and debonair. Instead he is awkward, likes comic books and is nervous around girls. He speaks both English and Spanish. His mother fights with him to be “normal” like other Dominicans. He does not have a lot of friends and is bullied often. I easily gravitated to a character like him because I have similar qualities or experiences. It made me think of high school and how I wanted to change the direction of my life in school. I accepted that I was physically weak yet I understood that it was more than just having physical strength. It was how I asserted myself when being confronted with a bully in front of other students. Through courageous acts of standing up for myself, I was able to gain friends from different circles that would help in avoiding other potential bullies. It was all about who you knew and the gangs they belonged to.

Artwork #1: *Adapt-82*

This past year I found a hair dryer machine without the chair out in the street for garbage collection. I brought it to the studio and made it part of a new work entitled *Adapt-82* because it is a remake of the hair dryer chair I grew up with. My sculpture *Adapt-82* is about independence and utilizing objects of the everyday to gain a sense of freedom. I named the piece “Adapt” because hairdryers are used by people of color to straighten hair in emulation of white people’s hair and to make this change is to “Adapt.” “82” refers to the year my mother began using the same dryer for straightening hair for a living. As a child at home, my imagination gave me the ability to mentally escape and I would use my mother’s hair dryer chair as a spaceship to transport myself to outer

space. I was not allowed to play with other children out in the street because my parents became paranoid after listening to all the negative events on the news like the war on drugs, drive-by shootings, etc. In my community, when someone is killed, family and friends make an altar and place it in front of the victim's apartment building. The altars are memorials for the deceased but also serve as reminders of the violence in the community. I set out to invest the found hair dryer machine with some of the quality of a street altar, seeing a correlation because *Adapt-82* is in part a shrine to my past. I also have invested the piece with a practice of readymade transformation that parallels my childhood imaginative escape by once again making the found hairdryer into a spacecraft through the construction and assemblage of found materials. I then found the same burgundy color vinyl used to upholster the chair at a fabric store in my community. I utilized old worn out furniture couch legs to build the wings to the chair. Handheld dryers act as rocket boosters and curling irons serve as handlebars. I covered the wings with hair and burned it together to create a weblike texture around parts of the chair. When I was young I wanted to break out of the repetitive and monotonous day to day of helping my mother prepare for her hair clientele, so *Adapt-82* suggests the site of my fantasy as well as an object that ties me back to my history with my mother.

In my artistic practice I am in search of a logical and consecutive flow from one object to the next. I like to juxtapose objects, regardless of whether they can be seen as painting, sculpture, household décor or junk, but in such a way that they create a narrative. My practice has taught me that I don't need a conclusion or a definitive answer during my process. My practice can be a continuous game that has no final

piece. I enjoy experimenting with how materials around me can work hand in hand. For example, I took bricks from a house being demolished and recontextualized them into domino pieces, a popular game on the sidewalk in my neighborhood. I saved the dust that I accumulated from drilling into the bricks. I then took a mold of Jesus Christ and mixed the brick dust with candle wax to create a sculpture and placed it in a box with different kinds of hair and burned it everything together until the materials more or less fused. It's about how the remnants of one material can transpire into another and contribute to an image that exemplifies transcendence in my life. As a childhood altar server, the image of Christ becomes part of my narrative about my past and the interplay between my youthful beliefs and devotion and my artistic creation of objects that reflect on that complex cultural heritage and extend my devotion to my community.

Artwork #2: *Promenade*

Promenade is about self-discovery, survival and rebirth. When making *Promenade*, a video of my son Cristian walking on the mounds of sidewalk snow, we walked in our neighborhood on Broadway from 144th St until 135th Street and back. It was a sunny and mildly cold day and I had decided to take him out for a walk after helping him with his homework. Whenever Cristian sees the mounds of snow on the sidewalk he always wants to climb and walk through. I decided to record him to remember that day. That day was significant because he was supposed to have been in school but he expressed his feelings about not being interested in sitting in a classroom and would rather spend the day with me. He wants to imagine himself going through an

adventure and test his ability to overcome challenges, like the unevenness of the snow or the possibility of falling. When watching the video of Cristian, I thought of man's first landing on the moon. From what I remember about this historical event, it was considered one of mankind's greatest achievements, to go to a place that no man has gone before. When watching the landing on the moon, what stuck out to me was the way the astronaut walked in gravity, very light, slow careful movements, beep sounds from the equipment and the astronauts inhaling and exhaling, as well as the voice of the person back at mission control at NASA. My video is about self- discovery versus discovering new territory. I wanted to explore a child's imagination from a video I recorded on an iphone. I slow-motioned the video and played with the sounds. What stands out is the ambulance siren and the wind blowing. I wanted the siren to remain because I want the viewer to know he's in a city. When I muffled and skewed the wind it sounded like the heartbeat during a sonogram. I hear my voice and it feels as if I am watching him from a mission control center at NASA. In retrospect I often have had to communicate over the phone or through video chat in my day to day to help him with his homework or just chat over the phone about his thoughts or dreams about going to outer space or even flying. Just as I changed my mother's hair dryer into a spaceship, I converted my son's experience with snow into a quasi-heroic fiction that transported a simple reality into a fiction or fantasy that both escapes and re-values my ordinary day to day life.

Thesis

For my thesis I have created an interior space that memorializes my past. The installation also evokes a sense of encounter with new beginnings by picturing my status as a single father and my ongoing family life as well as appropriating photographs of my pop culture influences. By working under the question of “what is my culture?” I want to investigate my traditional cultural values to reveal the not-so-defined complications of being Dominican American. The room resembles an art studio within an apartment and assimilates majestic and baroque architectural qualities that are part of everyday Dominican home décor.

I am inspired by *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison in which the protagonist lives in a basement with a thousand three hundred and sixty nine light bulbs. Light is a metaphor for his self-empowerment and intellectual enlightenment. I have used as a reference photographer Jeff Wall’s image (entitled “The Bothersome Man”) of a black man in a room festooned with masses of lightbulbs, a room he had no doubt been inspired to picture because of Ellison’s book. Consistent with this approach is my intention to utilize the color values of brown as well as complimentary colors within the interior of the room to, again, acknowledge colors used to decorate the homes of members of the Caribbean Diaspora.

Audio is incorporated into the installation with a soundtrack that incorporates recordings of ordinary sounds from my neighborhood, like kids playing in the street, street drummers, etc. I have transformed ambient sounds from my neighborhood into a

melodic and pensive track to incite deep thought by abstracting it into a modern sound.

The room of my installation is illuminated with an antique chandelier coming down from the ceiling that gives off a majestic and regal quality of light; the chandelier also references my mother's aspiration for an elegant home environment. My parents always wanted my brother and I to become somebody important and or make a great living. She would always encourage me to join a baseball team in hopes of me becoming a successful athlete since with that success comes wealth. Placing the chandelier in my installation serves to represent the sense of aspiration that I experienced as an important aspect of growing up.

The chandelier is part of an ensemble of images and objects that are at the core of my work. To me, the clear glass prisms hanging from the chandelier are my tears of feeling like I was a problem or a burden as a child. I have attached a long swath of fabric that hangs from the chandelier like a veil. On the floor I have installed vinyl adhesive floor tiles such as we had in my parents' home and created patterns with them that mimic the feel of a mandala. The mandala serves as a release of tension in my fictional household and as part of my inquiry into my search of a true self.

Another key reference for this installation is Ilya Kabakov's installation "The Man Who Flew Into Space". In the installation, Kabakov addresses the circumstances of living in an oppressed society such as the Soviet Union and his desire to escape from those conditions. *Adapt-82* is an essential element in my thesis installation because it is my fantasy vehicle for venturing into outer space.

My thesis installation encompasses my deeply felt cultural beliefs and what I

seek to pass on to my son to encourage his own freedom and individuality. I have tried to show my double consciousness (an idea importantly articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois³) about my past and my participation in the American “melting pot.” As a second generation immigrant, my consciousness faces two ways, toward the past and toward the future. I value my past and want my community to be respected for exactly what it is. At the same time, I seek to join a larger conversation about how diverse citizens of this country can enter into its constantly changing cultural currents without sacrificing their deep commitment to their origins. By entering these cultural currents I have embarked on a project of intellectual assimilation into American life that adds to my awareness but separates me from full incorporation in the world of my past. My thesis installation is a distinct aspect of a new consciousness and is my most complete and thoroughly realized expression of this double feeling.

³ It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, --an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls Of Black Folk*.

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Image List



Dionis Ortiz, December 14th, 2017 through January 7th, 2018
Installation view



Installation view right



Installation view left



Installation view -entrance left



Installation entrance



Detail shot of floor tiles