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An Alphabet

by

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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

2018

Thesis Sponsor:

December 17th, 2018
Date

Paul Ramirez Jonas
Signature

December 17th, 2018
Date

Lisa Corinne Davis
Signature

I dedicate this project to my family and to Puerto Rico

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Accessible: I'm not very tall, 5 feet even. Sometimes I add an inch if someone asks.

Belief Systems: I believe that some things are true that we might believe are false. I believe that some things are false that we might believe are true. I believe that our lives are predestined by some kind of higher power, whoever she is. I believe we make our own destiny. I believe the end of the world is imminent, and I believe it will be slow. I believe in the Butterfly Effect, and that everything has led to this, and I believe in coincidence. I believe all dogs go to heaven. I believe I have lived many lives, and that in my last life I was somewhat of a Colette. I believe in things I cannot see, and some that I can. I believe in Mr. Rogers and in Miss Piggy. I believe children never lie until we teach them. I believe the internet is the most crucial invention man has ever created, and I believe the internet was the beginning of the end. I believe the Kardashians are a carefully crafted social experiment created by an evil genius, and I believe they are holograms made by corporate America. I believe in aliens, MIB version, and any version –really - that are waiting patiently for our self-made demise to swoop in afterward. I believe in fabric softener. I believe there is a Cyndi Lauper and Kate Bush song for every mood. I believe everything takes time, and that time is an illusion. I believe I am a carefully formulated product of my generation. I believe in one hit wonders. I believe the world would be significantly better had we never invented guns or corsets. I believe in women. I believe in the summer blues. I believe in arbitrary tactics for decision making. I believe in the power of wine, and masturbation as a coping mechanism.

I believe in magic. I believe life is uncertain, and I believe there are no wrong or right decisions. I believe that everything is crumbling, but that dreaming is free.

Coincidence: Is it divine intervention or an accident? You can be in the right place at the right time. I have never made a wish on a birthday candle or an eyelash that has come true; but I once found 50 dollars on the sidewalk.

Divination: A device used to predict a vignette of possible outcomes. Like Dada, I try to come across answers generated accidentally via the process of engaging in experiments and constant questioning; rather than to go into making art with a specific answer in mind.

Escapism: I've drawn a map of invisible doors that lead in and out of each other. I used to be afraid of forgetting until I realized it can happen without your consent.

Fantasy Fragmentation: A world of wonder and a disappearing act. Sensory distortions require an attitude of submission and an openness to solving puzzles.

Games: Every time we drove to The Bronx from New Jersey to visit my family, my bother and I would say "coco monster" over and over again from the moment we entered a tunnel or went under an overpass until we were out. I was never allowed to sit in the front seat of the car because I was the youngest.

During the Christmas holidays when the neighbors started to decorate their porches and windows, my brother and I used to count houses with lights when we would ride in the car with our mother on our way to drop off my father's dinner at work. He got the side of the street closest to the passenger's seat and I got the other side, while sitting backseat. The winner was the one with the most houses by the time we got back home. Games made it easier for us to be close.

History: When I was a girl, we would go to Puerto Rico almost every Summer to visit my maternal step-grandmother. She was a seamstress and had her workshop in the basement of her house. I remember all the machines and racks of dresses. Scraps of colorful patterns, florals, and stripes, polka dots, and sequins covered the floors. I was not allowed to touch any of the machines; but I watched in a daze as she stitched fabric together with the guidance of her hands –something familiar assembled from shapes and colors. I loved the scraps on the floor and the discarded pins and buttons. I would collect the fragments that caught my eye; my grandmother would set me up on a small table with a needle and thread. I would stitch together small pockets and purses to carry even more pieces of fabric and buttons. These were my treasures. This lust for collecting treasure was already an old habit. Walking around my neighborhood as a kid, I would pick up small castaways off the sidewalk and put them in my pocket: bottle caps, playing cards, rocks, screws, coins. They eventually made their way into a blue pencil box my mother bought me from the 99 cents store.

I carried this blue box everywhere. I remember thinking it would be the one thing I would take from my room in case of a fire. I would spend recess looking at my treasure, laying it all out on a small piece of fabric; putting them into groups and arranging them in different patterns. I don't know where this compulsion came from; but I do know I had a lot of family members with collections. My mother collected Betty Boop memorabilia, my aunt collected owl figurines, another collected cat figurines. This passion for objects and assemblage has made its way into my process as an artist. My work formally explores that sense of playfulness and wonder from childhood. Personal and ancestral mythologies are the product of objects from my past. I am often attracted to objects that remind me of being around my family; the way I view my surroundings is a product of those formative interactions with them and their belongings. I am a first-generation American born to a Puerto Rican mother and a Dominican father. For me, my family history has always been present in the traditions, superstitions, and stories that I came to know. It is hard to deny a past that lingers in the essence of objects passed around from home to home. My culture does not forget the dead, it celebrates them by keeping them alive in memory through the keepsake. What I know about my ancestors, came from asking questions: after being shown my grandmother's ponytail of hair kept in a box since 1968, or my grandfather's reading glasses, or a dirty tissue rescued from the pocket of an old sweater. These remains were saved in order to remain close to the long past. Our frequent large-family gatherings nurtured storytelling and reminiscing.

Nobody thought I listened while I sat with what everyone referred to as, "las cositas de Michelle". I learned a lot about storytelling, my families struggles, and the different memories of the same events. These family artifacts have made their way into my "cositas." They are artifacts of a time I could never visit and of some people I could never meet. They are my most significant source of inspiration. I get to know them through mythification. What I know about my family history before I was born, i've assembled from disjointed stories, artifacts, and photographs. My ongoing game is in putting it all together; creating an essential fiction as a way of knowing as I continuously seek out a version of the truth in the name of identity.

Illusion: I once saw a cloud turn into a cat; and my hometown was the site of an apparition of the Virgin Mary on someone's bedroom window. Both are, maybe, a miracle.

Jinx: He would accept the reversal of the jinx and return it to its sender.

Kindergarten: I remember our lunch lady had an Elvis obsession and she would hum his songs during recess.

Language: The inclusion of many different forms of language in my work acknowledges that there are multiple ways in which we process information and make creative

decisions. I am a bricoleur, an avid improviser, I assemble montages that construct and convey meaning through a formal structure that is neither naïvely humanistic nor romantically impulsive. Instead, it stimulates an inclusive and dynamic dialogue between the assemblage of objects, imagery and the audience. I aim to acknowledge that we each construct meaning based on our unique and individual experiences.

Llave: The key is to never stop asking questions. The key is to repeat a word until it loses its sense. The key is to make sure after all this time you are still able to have fun. The key is to be open to signs and after a moment of deliberation to discard their potency. The key is to believe what others do and not what others say. The key is to give yourself a break. The key is often misplaced somewhere obvious. The key is susceptible to jamming if placed in the wrong lock. The key is one of several copies.

Myth and Magical Thinking: Records of Historical fact or deliberate fictions? Ways of understanding otherwise incomprehensible events or huge misunderstandings? I fancy Thalia was the most relatable of the three graces; youthful exuberance, a crown of ivy, wearing boots, and always holding a comedic mask in her hand. I think she would have been a great millennial; but her mask would have many apps.

Noñería: This is how to pretend you are an expert typer:

nejbi;bqeiuvgr;rgjfuhugu ygf'peihflPHpihgr 'ighr'p gy'fh 'oguiqfgjvgr f'oiugfouhf

o'egfufg'ohfugwdcu;bC;ldgwfu; gefuo gefougefu;gfoufguefgeo'gf'ief 'pfih 'ifg
[q8eft '8fji pfy[8fye[80fgefuge[f0g0e8[ft [fg ufh]f[y[8 'fy do'iufh
eogu [r0 g'y9e'IRYF;UGFOUgwdfou gyfe0[q8yg9' pdhvIGY[0 8GY.

Optics: Things aren't always what they seem and yet sometimes they are. I see most things through a looking glass in selfie mode. It often goes off in my pocket on its own.

Play as Process: I find that my process is one of openness. I give myself a structure and then allow myself to work within the parameters of that structure –like a game. I may find an object and spend hours talking to it as though it may respond. I have taken apart machines just to see what's inside. I improvise and try not to make judgments. I roll dice to make decisions. I close my eyes and shuffle a dictionary to find a word. Nonsense breeds sense.

Que?

Randomization: An arrival in camouflage and a strong defense; a feather is better than a bird. You are underrated, in some directions. Beginning in the home with a curious and calm mind; task in hand. Depart not from the path without determination because disbelief destroys the magic. Distance yourself from the eloquence of others.

Someone's soul will overshadow the extra work of your unlimited potentials and every wrong attempt will be discarded. Spend time on your existence; the useless detail. Don't worry, compel yourself, meet life's situations, emulate what you admire; every flower, sweet time, special occasion, a victory, and the roses. No sign needed. Some things are just meant to be. Ideas come from everywhere. A commitment and a warm fire are good to the last drop. A clear mind; another time. Make a name for yourself with unusual equipment. Catch an echo through the waking world and take a seat. Accept the existence of unrealized durations, meaningless pathways, balanced phenomena, effortlessness, and mercifully limited actions. It's Between Hamlet and the ghost. At the same time; an arc of a circle, straight lines, distances, a meandering truck, profound quality, an endless stream. Whatever the history, the day develops with an advance. Expect the unexpected; lick it up; set the tone; see pink.

Story-telling: Divining redirects here

She Lived in a

Barely

Visible

Wispy

Shaped

Low

Droning

House

(Where the traced circles were allegedly discovered).

Synthesis of common threads preserves traditions that merge into superstitious substances, strange voices, sentimental hoards and ambient demons.

A frenzied state

induced by vapors;

rising from a chasm in the travertine.

Passing time (as they did in the ancient world) speaking intelligibly

and giving prophecies in her own voice.

She went fishing in the mainland,

a hybrid Campesina on the verge of

Maybe modern times

Could have saved you.

Time: This non dimension forms an undivided whole.

Uncanny: Something made for children, but is subliminally mind controlling.

Vulnerability: Sometimes I question what the point of all of this really is. I get upset and think it's all been an incredible waste of time and money. My family misunderstands what being an artist is; first generation kids are meant to take stock of the hard work of their immigrant families and choose a secure path –as gratitude for their sacrifices.

I am no doctor or lawyer; but I've learned heaps about how the world works.

Wizard of Oz: I repeatedly watched the tape over and over. Dorothy went on a vivid journey to another land in her dreams. I revelled in the transition from a monochromatic world into a technicolored world filled with magic and cinematic special effects. I related to a story of a lost girl and her group of misfit friends trying to make their way to see a wizard that they hoped would relieve them of their particular burdens. The prophet was exposed as a fraud and in his plea presented Dorothy and her friends with totems representative of what he felt they lacked: something physical to put their faith in. The film then births one of the most famous cinematic artifacts: the ruby slippers, a haunting remnant of a fictional world brought to life. The object dismembered from its story both injects and ejects you from the fantasy. I am fascinated by this simultaneity. It is an act of reaching deep into the fantasy realm in order to pull out its deepest moments of reality.

Xena is my dog: A dog is a girl's best friend.

Yesterday: I swore it would be a productive day. I am nothing if not a platinum member of the self-sabotaging fanatics club. I have a memory foam mattress that I bought from Wal-Mart two years ago that's sloping down on one side because my agoraphobia makes sleeping next to a wall or a person slightly difficult.

I sleep on my stomach, so with the added indentation of my mattress my back has been hurting. So, I got an hour long massage, then had some miso soup, and I was feeling pretty good about myself. The library is closed on Sundays: I went to a quiet bar to write. It was a polite and quiet space; I ordered a glass of wine and managed to successfully start this paper. The stress started to kick in; I ordered more wine. I ended up at Popeyes where I ordered some chicken and biscuits and went to another bar to eat. I played dice with some friends and lost forty dollars. I talked about imitation in art and had a cigarette. Six glasses of wine later, (luckily I had the good judgement of drinking a couple glasses of water), my hangover is minimal.

Zenith: The first television I remember having was a Zenith. It replaced the old wooden box television set we had since my first memory of TV. The screen was thirty two inches or so; but it took me until I was five to reach the top, which functioned as a glorified shelf. My mother decorated it with knick-knacks and decorative objects that had a sense of flair. Once there was a vase with plastic flowers and a couple of black porcelain sculptures in the form of a man and a woman intertwining. These objects often changed and circulated around the apartment. After the box television died, my mother kept its corpse in the living room, unable or unwilling to part with its utility. She propped a tiny TV on top of it with the knick-knacks, and we watched from that small screen for a couple of years until she had the extra money to buy a new one.

I still think about that box and its fillings and dressings. I could be in the middle of an episode of Looney Toons and then catch myself staring at the objects on top; or when the light of the screen was off I would wonder if the shows were asleep on the inside. This device had the power to communicate information and place it right in our home (now that power lives in our pockets.). My mother instinctually dressed it up and made it fit in with our surroundings. It was my truth machine, and I stored a lot of my belief into its images. And we dressed it, huddled around it, and glorified it like an altar. The eventual replacement television was a Silver Zenith with remote control; this one didn't have a shelf, so as the old box went out, a large wall sized entertainment unit came in. With more shelves came more fillings. This wall was our identity as a family: what we watched and what watched us back.

Image List

Pg 14, Installation View, *Cueva Ventana*, Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition Part 2, Fall 2018

Pg 15, Installation View, *Cueva Ventana*, Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition Part 2, Fall 2018

Pg 16, Still from *Cueva Ventana*, 2018, Single-channel Video, 8 Minutes 50 seconds

Pg 17, Still from *Cueva Ventana*, 2018, Single-channel Video, 8 Minutes 50 seconds



Installation View, *Cueva Ventana*, Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition Part 2, Fall 2018



Installation View, *Cueva Ventana*, Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition Part 2, Fall 2018



Still from *Cueva Ventana*, 2018, Single-channel Video, 8 Minutes 50 seconds



Still from *Cueva Ventana*, 2018, Single-channel Video, 8 Minutes 50 seconds

Private Link to Full Video: <https://vimeo.com/306712795>