

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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19. Nuyorican Abstract

Thinking through Candida Alvarez and Glendalys Medina

Arlene Dávila

Womxn contemporary artists have historically faced greater challenges in obtaining art historical and market recognition. This is even more the case for womxn and non-binary artists of color, and those working in genres that are most typically associated with male white artists, like abstract art. To date, we know very little about Latinx abstract art, while abstraction remains racialized and so firmly associated with whiteness that, despite generations of internationally-renowned artists of color working in abstraction, it is still difficult to summon the Latinx abstract.

These issues are brought to the fore in *Latinx Abstract* (2021), an exhibition at BRIC in Brooklyn exploring abstraction as an important aesthetic in Latinx artists' diverse repertoire. The exhibition forces a consideration of the racial politics of abstraction, an unavoidable topic when discussing a genre so tied to a Eurocentric history tracing its origins and best representation to European and Anglo-American artists in the mid-twentieth century (Ferrer 2021). Think here of the "abstract expressionist" masters canonized by the Museum of Modern Art from the 1940s and 1950s. As the exhibition's curator Elizabeth Ferrer notes, for decades now, art historians and curators have challenged and rewritten this canonical view, uncovering the many excluded histories of abstraction, to little avail. For instance, anthropologists have shown abstraction to be a transcultural artistic manifestation found in cultures across time and space throughout the world (Borea 2017). For their part,

art historians have examined the globality of abstraction, showing its development across regions in simultaneity or with anteriority to the “abstract expressionist masters” that dominate the Eurocentric canon (Karmel 2020). Then, there are the many philosophical arguments questioning the distinct nature of abstractionist aesthetics. This is the view that, insofar as all art operates in a “denaturalizing and reformative fashion”, it is definitionally always abstract (Harper 2015).

Still, the pervasive conception of abstraction as extraneous to people of color endures, buttressed by the stereotypical assumption that one is supposed to “see” identity in their art (English 2007). Abstraction, conceived in strict opposition to some equally static conception of realist art, troubles this dictum, hence the many debates preoccupying African American artists and critical race theorists for generations in regards to what constitutes black art and how it should look (Cahan 2015, Harper 2015). Related to this issue are debates on the political possibilities and constraints of abstraction for artists and communities of color. While some question abstraction’s political stakes, others praise its “freedom” from the representational risks of evoking “positive” and negative images and stereotypes (Harper 2015). In fact, in a context where black and brown bodies are increasingly coveted in a contemporary art market dominated by primarily white collectors, we can understand why some artists of color may purposefully choose abstraction to avoid their fetishization and commodification. At the same time, abstraction’s whitewashing tendencies endure in its use as the chosen aesthetic to contain and erase ethnic and racial difference. For instance, Johana Londoño documents the use of abstraction as a tool to sanitize, whitewash and accommodate racial difference in urban design, by reducing it to color or a style that lessens and contains the threat of difference and its political significance (Londoño 2020).

In sum, to think about abstraction and artists of color is to necessarily engage with identity and politics, and while neither works in a silo from the particular contexts in which they play out, we can at least strive for more textured and expansive considerations of abstraction that ease some of these representational predicaments. We can start by questioning the racialization of the genre, and how much its continued association with whiteness has historically rendered any abstract artist who is not white either suspect or derivative. Second, we could

challenge formalist distinctions between ‘realism’ and abstraction in art history and MFA training parlance, which sees them as opposites and irreconcilable aesthetics.

For sure, Latinx artists are ready to move past seeing abstract art as a bounded, identifiable aesthetic that is more “legitimately” Anglo European. My interviews with Latinx artists showed that they were tired of fielding irritating questions whenever they work in abstraction (Dávila 2020). Some felt pressure to move away from figurative work to abstraction, which they felt was favored by their MFA mentors as “qualitatively” better. Others experienced pushback against doing abstract work in the form of accusations that they wanted to whitewash their work, or of blatant and subtle biases favoring work that could be “seen” as Latinx, displaying an expectation that brown and black artists painting brown and black figures would be more commercially viable. Many also bemoaned the art market’s limiting pressure to decide between branding themselves as “figurative” or abstract artists, as though this were a strict and irreversible choice. In other words, abstraction was seen as a highly contested terrain loaded with meanings and issues, beyond artists’ control, or their intentions. All of this made abstract art extremely political—because to do abstract art often involved battles to assert the right to produce work free of imposed expectations, constraints, or assumptions.

Yet one key lesson from reviewing the history of African American artists and abstraction is the importance of claiming space in all types of exhibitions as a way of transforming and troubling its dominant meanings and uses. To date, an archive of important exhibitions of African American art have canonized abstraction in African American art, in ways that make early questions around the authenticity or the politics of abstraction in African American art seem almost passé, at least when considered from a historical perspective. These include the well documented *Contemporary Black Artists in America* exhibition at the Whitney Museum (1969) and the *Deluxe Show* (1971), early solo shows of abstract artists, *Al Loving* (1969) and *Frank Bowling* (1971) at the Whitney Museum, as well as numerous group-shows featuring abstract artists at the Studio Museum. Many more exhibitions have seamlessly highlighted black abstract artists in major museums across the US from Houston to Baltimore, as well as exhibitions of international recognition

such as *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, which highlighted their political and revolutionary aesthetics. To date, African American abstract artists such as Mark Bradford and Sam Gilliam remain some of the most successful African American contemporary artists—both of them males—which raises the specter of male dominance in contemporary art, and considerations around gender, abstraction, and commercial success.

With Latinx abstract art, however, we are far from achieving a more complex and rounded representation where abstraction is presented as a widespread aesthetic, rather than one that is rare or politically charged. Indeed, stereotypes of Latinx art and visual culture as mostly figurative, didactic and political stem from the scarcity of representations that exist. Here Ferrer's exhibition is revolutionary for powerfully signaling the scarcity of exhibitions featuring abstract artists with vigor. Ferrer points to the 2013 exhibition at the American Art Museum of the Smithsonian Institution curated by Dr. E. Carmen Ramos, *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art*, which featured a number of artists working in abstraction such as Olga Albizu, Teresita Fernández, Jesús Morales, Paul Henry Ramirez, and Freddy Rodríguez, as well as to the solo exhibition by artist Virginia Jaramillo, in fall 2020 at the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas as two foundational exhibitions foregrounding Latinx abstract artists. Coincidentally, Jaramillo's show marks the fiftieth anniversary of her inclusion as the only woman and Latina in the Menil's groundbreaking *The De Luxe Show* (1971), one of the first abstract contemporary art exhibitions to feature artists of color in the United States (Moya Ford 2020). Then there is also the Carmen Herrera solo show, which catapulted her to market success, though as I note elsewhere, the tendency to brand her Cubanness has lessened her recognition as a Latinx artist (Dávila 2020). Still, the number of exhibitions featuring Latinx abstract artists that get national attention are few and far between.

Thus, I want to end by considering two of the artists in the exhibition in order to contribute to improving the scarcity of knowledge about abstract Latinx artists. I purposefully focus on Candida Alvarez and Glendalys Medina, two Afro Boricua artists born and raised in New York, because we do not tend to associate Nuyorican art with abstraction, even though there are many examples of Nuyorican artists past and present

working in abstract art, such as Carlos Osorio, Marcos Dimas, and José Morales. I also seek to challenge the hegemony of male Nuyorican artists in all types of genres. The artists I chose represent different generations and experiences. Born in Brooklyn in 1955 and now living in Chicago, Candida started her art career in New York City in the midst of multiculturalism, at the height of 'Hispanic' art. In fact, she was one of the artists interviewed by Coco Fusco in her critical 1988 essay "Hispanic Artists and Other Slurs", which exposed the stereotypical homogenization of Latinx and Latin American artists. Glendalys, twenty-four years younger, was born in Puerto Rico and raised in the Bronx, and is working at a moment of growing recognition of Latinx artists. Their inclusion in a show like *Latinx Abstract* would have been unimaginable for Alvarez in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Latinx artists were seldom the subject of an exhibition spotlight of their own, much less a focus on their abstract art.

The artists' generational difference also affects their personal racial and ethnic identification. Coming of age at a time when 'Black' was simply equated with African American, Candida prefers to identify as Boricua, Puerto Rican or Nuyorican, while Glendalys also self-defines as Afro-Puerto Rican, or Afro-Caribbean, as well as non-binary, like many Latinx of her generation. Of note is Candida's recent coming of age despite her long and productive career. Alvarez had her first major institutional survey in 2017 in the Chicago Cultural Center, considerably late for an artist of her caliber, and on the heels of a sudden turn to uncover neglected contemporary female artists. She has also been recently 'discovered' by the art market. After facing a sporadic relationship with the market amidst a growing favor for artists of color doing representational work—which left little room for a female Puerto Rican abstract painter—she is currently represented by Monique Meloche Gallery in Chicago (2019–present) and Gavlak Gallery in Los Angeles (2018–present). For their part, Glendalys experienced speculation from gallerists interested in their work as a younger artist, but less so now when they are savvier and more adept at maneuvering the art market.

Finally, each of these artists has long challenged categorizations and narrow definitions of her work, warning us against the tendency to pigeonhole Latinx artists within particular genres. For instance,

during a conversation with artist Kay Rosen, Alvarez refuses to pick sides between abstraction and representation, pointing to the work of Gerhard Richter, who did not “have to pick a side”, to insist that her work happens between the two: “What happens between them both? It’s called L-I-F-E. For me, that was my answer” (Alvarez 2020).

Candida eschews these boundaries and techniques constructed in the history of modernism, recognizing that while they may be integral to how art is written about and taught, they have little to do with artists of color who have had to “fight for our freedom.” As she asked: “How dare you tell me that because of the color of my skin, I have to fit your stereotype. They think that if you see a woman of color, you have to give them a brown figure—Artists should be given permission and freedom to invent.” On this point, Candida echoes the will of so many Latinx artists to challenge the deterministic ideas around her body, gender and color: “I am always the body first—it never leaves, that’s why I had to go to a place I would be mysterious.”

In fact, Candida’s work can be seen as a long trajectory to fight for her imagination and her paintings as a mysterious space in which to be free, to create, and invent. Candida’s colorful Vision Paintings, exhibited in *Latinx Abstract*, are a perfect example. These paintings were influenced by the frescoes and paintings of Piero de la Francesca when she visited Umbria and was amazed by their color and brilliance, despite their age. Candida takes color seriously; she considers it magical, but also the product of science and experimentation. She also sees herself as a poet or writer in the process of creation and describes her paintings as the product of expression, imagination and conversations with multiple imaginary interlocutors that visit her whenever she paints. While creating the Vision Paintings, her visitor was Puerto Rican Impressionist painter Francisco Oller (1833–1917), the artist that most influenced her to become an artist, and more specifically, a painter. She tells me that “He came into the room” when she was thinking about his famous painting “El velorio” (*The Wake*, 1893), which she deconstructs formally in the Vision Paintings.

Indeed, in a recent Artnews interview Candida describes her paintings as “chatty”—alluding to the endless conversation her work inspires. “I feel like my paintings are talking back to me”, she says.

"I love that they're very chatty. They give me peace. They give me memories. And sometimes, they're just distractions." Abstract work is usually considered to lack narratives in relation to figurative art, yet Candida's work encourages us to appreciate the narratives involved in the actual process of creating the work, halting the impulse to seek overarching narratives in artworks, which fail to take into account the interiority of the artist or their method. As she describes, Vision Paintings communicate but in ways that writing or speaking cannot. In fact, they communicate beyond the visual, if one considers Candida's blurry, troubled vision and her tendency to work without glasses: "it is really my imperfect vision that leads the way through the painting."



Fig. 1 Candida Alvarez, *Vision Painting: No. 6* (2020), Acrylic on linen, 20x20".
Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery. Photo Credit: Tom
Van Eynde, Chicago.

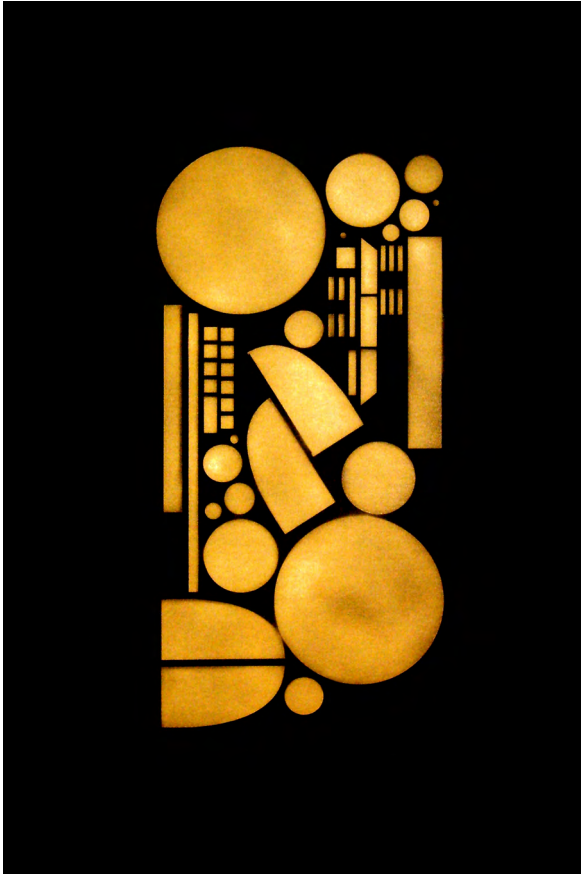


Fig. 2 Glendalys Medina, *BlackGold* (2012), Spray paint on paper, Edition of 50.

Glendalys's works in *Latinx Abstract* echo a similar quest to challenge the imposed limits and meanings of abstraction. In fact, as one of many Latinx abstract artists I met who has faced accusations of producing work that is "too white", or, in particular, of seeking to emulate Sol LeWitt, this goal is both political and personal. "It's not easy to swallow a person of color doing abstract work", they tell me, marveling at why white artists remain the key public reference available for accessing abstraction, entirely bypassing generations of abstract artists of color.

In fact, Medina's piece *BlackGold* (2012) represents a direct challenge to dominant views of abstraction as "too white." With this piece, Medina

anchors the values of transcultural identity and difference—which they feel are missing in the art world—imbuing geometric forms, often seen as an absence of identity, with highly saturated cultural references. For instance, in *BlackGold* they make up a pictorial and original visual alphabet based on geometric shapes deconstructed from the popular boombox. In it, Afrodiasporic cultural references from hip-hop commingle with indigenous visual references to anchor the work in pre-modern influences of abstraction. As Glendalys tells me, “The indigenous people were the first graffiti artists.” Like other Nuyorican artists, Glendalys uses Taino references as a foundation for her own Nuyorican identity. In particular, their use of gold draws on research into Fray Inigo de Abad y Lasierra’s 1788 representation of Taino as “sun-kissed” and the dominance of gold in the colonial Spanish economy, which fueled the genocide of indigenous peoples across the Americas. With this piece, Medina exposes gold’s continued fetishization in present-day consumer-capitalist societies, while elevating urban, hip-hop, and Afro-Nuyorican and Taino references in her work. When drawing on Abad y Lasierra’s accounts, Medina is well aware that they are drawing on the incomplete and fictional perspective of colonizers, but this only makes these sources more uniquely suited for her re-telling of new narratives of Nuyorican empowerment. In the end, Medina traces a direct line of invention, creativity and empowerment between the art and writing the Taino left in stones and those of kids carrying boomboxes, listening to hip-hop and writing graffiti in the Bronx.

In all, abstract art has played and continues to play a key anchoring role in the experiences of these two Nuyorican artists and many more abstract Latinx artists. For both, abstraction functions as a space to refuse narrow identification and stereotypes about their work, and to tell broader stories about their past and present, while challenging art history narratives where there is no space to imagine artists like them. Their narratives about their practice, positionality and work also provide clues as to how artists contest and refashion borders and identities in the art world. They demonstrate why it is so important that we broaden our understanding and repertoire of women’s creativity and invention, as well as the scope and image of contemporary Nuyorican art.

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