

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Terremoto
A Gaze Beyond the Crystal
María Elena Ortiz
16 December 2019



A Gaze Beyond the Crystal

Curator María Elena Ortiz—co-editor of this issue—talks with artist Hulda Guzmán to point out different aspects of Surrealism that echo in her artistic practice. Together, they underline that the oneiric, and the uncertain, can still cope with the hegemonic imaginary that blur the intimate.



Image: Hulda Guzmán, *anne in her bath*, 2013. Acrylic on cedar plywood, 120 x 120 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

I began this conversation with the Dominican artist Hulda Guzmán in an attempt to satisfy my intellectual desires, aiming to contextualize her work in relation to a surrealist history of the Caribbean, a subject that fills me with inspiration. However, our conversation took us into more philosophical realms that revolve around human experience: moments, feelings, or energies that, despite being physically sensible, are not naturally perceptible to our eyes. Even though I still have much to research about the relationship between Suzanne Césaire, Lydia Cabrera, André Breton, and Hector Hypolite, among others, my conversation with Hulda reiterated

the multiplicity of our lives, the very thing that surrealism proclaims—namely, the existence of human experiences that cannot be explained by logic or reason, aspects that permit new insights into the role of artists in terms of creating visual spaces for said experiences.

María Elena Ortiz: This issue of *Terremoto* is dedicated to images that eschew the voracity of the capitalist gaze. In the case of your work, which deals with dreams and fantasies, images act as spaces of knowledge that lead toward an exploration of the relationship between imagination, narrative, and the production of images. How do you interpret these dynamics?

Hulda Guzmán: I think that as a species we have forgotten that imagination is the basis of creation. Whether we are aware of it or not, “manifesting” derives from our imagination. Through it, we can create the best scenario for ourselves, and fear is the limitation of our imagination.

In regards to the production of images, imagination is often limited by hegemonic ideology. Within the current system of contemporary art, we are aware of this order—or at least we pretend to be—and artists are obliged to act in compliance with this concept. It makes us accountable for the art we create. I do wonder if art has the ability to help support a counter-ideology. How do you describe in words the unfathomable?

In this sense, art is an excellent medium, and probably the only one aside from spiritual practices, that allows us to communicate and channel those things that are difficult to explain in words.

In contrast, I believe that the intellect is a processing system, delimited by Western constructions of space and time in relation to capitalism’s technology. Reason must recede so as to give way to the ultra-subconscious thought, or as I call it, ultra-conscious thought.

MEO: It is important and urgent to become a counterweight to the dominant social ideology through insurgent images that stand up to the imaginative control that corporate interests and the market articulate—those which favour the creation and circulation of certain images that seek to perpetuate the production and accumulation of capital. That said, when I look at your paintings, they remind me of dreams or prints from occultism, a practice that understands our existence in relation to the extra-sensorial and the multidimensional as a means of escaping said control.

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HG: Dreams and imagination are tools for creation. Both represent an alternate dimension of existence, another state of conscience, one that is more honest because of its closeness to memory, desire, and sensibility—subjective feelings. My work invokes dreamlike states that veer off from a narrative foundation rooted in Western logic to enter irrational territories of fantastic beings and places.

Many of my paintings combine common daily activities with allegorical scenes and symbolism. Through the association of these different narrative patterns, my work tries to integrate and reveal to our visual perception all the different layers of existence that are invisible within the confines of what our domesticated human eye can see. For example, *trustful surrender* (2017) illustrates a moment of passion and the electromagnetic burst that such a moment generates in the atmosphere that one also perceives as “real.” In addition, small sexual demons are part of the scene; they attend the event, surely attracted by the spirit and vibration of the moment. These creatures and their magical narratives humorously symbolize the energies that control the situation. These figures illustrate the different ways in which sexuality and eroticism manifest themselves, and through them I try to describe an abstract and complex state. Basically, the image that the painting generates recalls the multiple realities which we inhabit and that coexist naturally: the physical, the surreal-subjective, the virtual, the spiritual-energetic, etc.

We live in an ocular-centric world, where the Western intellectual process dictates that we must see everything in order that we may “understand” what reality is. In my works, I am interested in exploring mystery as an integral part of our existence. When nothing is certain, anything is possible.

MEO: So, your work attempts to illustrate energy—something that is not visible—as a human experience, but without using abstraction as a strategy. In your paintings, the representational generates an important space for narrative.

HG: I have chosen figurative painting as my main medium because of the way that we humans perceive the world around us. Aside from what is not easily discernible to the eye, we experience a dimension that presents itself under the laws of space and time; yet these “laws” are abstract constructions that were developed and determined by the Western ocular-centric worldview. We have these incredible body-machines through which we process concepts and ideas by creating stories and anecdotes that illustrate them. Conditioned by the limited “imaginings” made available to us by a hegemonic system, we interpret situations through a linear narrative—beginning, middle, and end. This is how we process life and all the lessons we are here to learn. I use strategies of this linear narrative to create paintings that offer multidimensional narrative possibilities.

The narrative subjects arise from questions I ask myself, such as: What is worth studying or contemplating? Or, what concepts do I consider important or relevant to discuss?

The scenes that I have painted comprise a sort of illustrated diary with autobiographical content, which I find extraordinary, fun, and worth sharing.

MEO: The history of surrealism in the Caribbean is a clear influence in your work in so far as the value this visual language has bestowed upon the unconscious as a space of knowledge, a space where logic and linearity are continuously disorganized and allow for another kind of association. What other influences exist in your work?

HG: In many of my paintings, I combine everyday actions with scenes of allegorical and surrealist symbolism. At the same time, I combine different histories and traditions to weave together diverse patterns of narrative that bring attention to the different dimensions of existence that remain unperceived. For example, Renaissance painting has served as inspiration to me because of its distinctive manner of cultivating stories, in which both portraiture and the representation of landscapes play important roles. In Renaissance Humanism, the artist did not leave anything to chance; everything is loaded with symbolism and so paintings carry complete narratives within themselves. Surrealism is an important source of inspiration for me, but other art histories inspire me too.

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Another of my interests is eroticism, through which my work has evolved towards simplicity, in my pictorial treatment (minimal compositions, an economy of resources) as much as in my subject matter (more intimate scenes such as interiors or couples). Paintings such as *dynamic relaxation* (2013) focus the viewer's attention on the secluded and describe architecture from an internal point of view. This technique allows for a work built around interior design, furnished with carefully selected objects, and proffers reflections on the ontology of the objects.

In this more intimate setting, the represented scenes capture moments of closeness and sexual acts. For example, a tropical Kama Sutra that takes from classical Chinese and Japanese art a minimization of scientific rationality in favour of the simplicity of a gesture with the purpose of intensifying the transmission of the narrative and emotions, a simple and economic pictorial formality created for introspection and contemplation.

The piece *dynamic relaxation* (2013) is painted over wood, harnessing all of the memory that the material brings to the pictorial game. The sensuality of the wood is emphasized by the erotic scenes that aim to focus on the naturalness of the subject, dispensing with the Western Judeo-Christian morality—modest and conservative—that usually conditions the erotic. In China, for example, the link between sin and the erotic does not exist. While reading Chinese literature, one perceives that the Chinese mentality does not seem to understand why people cannot share pleasure, as long as it does not generate untruthfulness. For Taoists, far from taboo, sex is seen as something natural, as respected as eating. I found that the only disadvantage that they saw, in relation to the principle Taoist objective of prolonging life, was the potential deterioration of the vital energies necessary for guaranteeing longevity. To this end, they invented methods, such as *coitus interruptus*, that allowed for the satisfaction of various persons and for them to pleasure themselves with all kinds of erotic games to quell energy. They considered abstinence to be insane. Indeed, yin and yang were created to be liberated and transformed, and without sexual engagement, they are retained and blocked. It is when there is no union between yin and yang that demons copulate in their place, so much so does nature desire it. Albums of erotic paintings were made in turn with the intention of instructing people on the enjoyment of liberty.

MEO: I can understand how there are aspects such as the energy produced in sexual pleasure that the eye cannot see and the hand cannot represent. How do think that the images in your paintings help us understand reality, thinking for example about the series *be kind to your demons* (2018)?

HG: In that series, I tried to represent the idea of managing the destructive energies of the world through understanding and accepting dark forces as a means of reaching equilibrium—not through domination, sacrifice, or brute force, but through compassion and love.

As its name indicates it, *be kind to your demons* presents moments of reconciliation with the energies and ideas that torment us—demons which are abstractions that reflect that which we don't know how to deal with in the reality we inhabit. The series suggests that we invite said demons to share our intimacy in order to find the inner peace we seek.

The demons represented in the series reference the *daevas*, an Iranian term that refers to a particular type of supernatural entity with “unpleasant” characteristics, divinities that are (or should be) rejected because they promote chaos and disorder. They are personifications of every evil imaginable and take the form of demons, monsters, or other villainous creatures.

The painting the nightmare (of the same series) is the only one in which the demon is behaving badly; it is being “mischievous,” licking the feet of the people while they sleep. This suggests, on the one hand, that when welcomed and accepted, the demons manage to be cordial and considerate. The title the nightmare emphasises that this image is just a product of the fear expressing itself as prejudice with which we approach “reality.” The demons symbolize our low states of consciousness (or un-consciousness). This series illustrates the concept and process of accepting our obscurity instead of suppressing it.

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Image: Hulda Guzmán, *dynamic relaxation*, 2013. Acrílico sobre triplay de madera roble, 120 x 120 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

In Jungian psychology, the shadow refers to an unconscious aspect of personality, an aspect with which the conscious ego cannot identify itself. Because people tend to reject or remain ignorant of the less-desirable aspects of their personalities, this obscurity turns widely negative. “Everybody carries a shadow” said Carl Jung, “and the less it is embodied in the individual’s life, the blacker and denser it is.” It creates a veil of illusion between the ego and the real world, and it is here that we find ourselves stuck as a society. Particularly interesting to me in Jung’s book *The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature* is the idea that the shadow contains not just the destructive aspects of personality, but also its powerful abilities, potent and creative.

We must become aware of all these dark aspects in ourselves and honour them in order to integrate them into our lives. Failing to do so, the individual becomes weak and disparate. One can serve two internal purposes without dispelling energy or force. The shadow should become a part of our conscious personality. First, one should accept and take seriously the existence of the shadow. Then, one should consciously take note of its qualities and intentions. This process is only possible through an awareness of our moods, fantasies, and impulses. If we can find a way of negotiating with our shadow and allowing it to live within our conscious personality instead of suppressing it, we will gain not only a sense of confidence in our individuality, but also a deeper knowledge of what it is that we really want in life. The shadow is the door that leads to the Self.



Image: Hulda Guzmán, *the haircut* from the series *be kind to your demons*, 2018. Acrylic gouache on wood veneer on cedar plywood, 34.5 x 63 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

MEO: In relation to the Caribbean, when you mention the shadows, I think of everything that has been systematically hidden beneath interpretations that reduce the plurality of our histories as an archipelago. Such is the case of the native Tainos, the last precolonial inhabitants of the Bahamas, the Greater Antilles, and the northern Lesser Antilles. What is happening in *fiesta en el batey* [Party in the Batey] (2012) in this respect?

HG: In *fiesta en el batey*, the viewer is invited to explore the image and linger on the details of the Taino narrative that has been dispersed throughout the panorama. This painting depicts a scene of an imagined reality in which the native Tainos were not driven to extinction. They are shown making casabe, eating crabs, drinking, dancing, bathing, resting in hammocks, playing music—in a nutshell, everything that they did before the colonial invasion. The only difference is that I have situated them in the new millennium with all-terrain vehicles and immersed in modern architecture, organic and ambivalently conscious that they are searching for harmony between the human habitat and its natural environment.

It is staggering to consider everything that we have inherited from this civilization that faded so quickly. In language, for example, a lot of vocabulary of Taino origin persists: hamaca [hammock], chin [small amount], canoa [canoe], conuco [garden plot], cana [sugar cane], caney [hut], maní [peanut], maíz [maize or corn], batata [sweet potato], batey, guayo [metal instrument], ají [chili], guayaba [guava], Caribe [Caribbean or Carib], huracán [hurricane], and many more. In general, the festive and hedonistic spirit that is depicted in the pieces leads us to reflect on the ancestral Taino presence in our “Caribbean” culture.

For me, the most relevant aspect of Taino culture is that they lived in harmony with their natural habitat, in a unified, symbiotic, and correlated relationship. This painting is an image that recuperates the communion between human and

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habitat. This bucolic idealization focuses on the gentle side of tropical laziness and neglect, accepts its pleasures, and reflects on a social element taken from life in this Third-World Island.