

Bodies of Color: Images of Women in the Work of Firelei Báez and Rachelle Mozman

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This essay explores works of art by two artists who draw on the form, the image, the representation, and the reading of the female body. The body serves equally as sign for presence and invisibility, the permanence of its surface acting as a text that the artists develop through their work. The body becomes the living proof, made visible and reconsidered through the art object. As Didier Fassin has asked: Can we merely disintegrate the notion of the body when it is through its materiality that we apprehend the world? And can we completely abandon the language of race when people are stigmatized or even killed on the basis of this all over the globe?¹ Indeed, it is through the rendering of the body as evidence of difference, a difference clearly and permanently marked through phenotype, that the viewer is confronted with the multiple narratives the body carries.

Painting, the most traditional and historic medium and film or photography, associated with the most radical avant-gardes of the twentieth century would seem to be at cross purposes. Instead, through these vastly different mediums, both artists specifically address the reading of the surface of the female body as a way to understand the social implications of race and gender. Both artists are children of immigrants who have spent extended amounts of time in the country of their families' origins. Both explore the interstices between concepts of race, the body and feminine behavior as coded in the United States (New York City) and other referents for "home," Central America (Panamá City) and the Caribbean (Santo Domingo/Santiago).

Through their work, artists Firelei Báez (b. 1981, Santiago de los Treinta Caballeros, Dominican Republic) and Rachelle Mozman (b. 1972, New York, New York) explore the relationship of the body and landscape, the body and personal history, but also more complex notions such as how the body is enacted in space and time and how it is interpreted socially. Through their imagery, they explore the dualities and contradictions of the female body and its expression in visual culture. In Báez's work, the abject is embraced as a form of radical response to socially prescribed female roles, using gestures and acts of the (racialized) female body as a form of rebellion. In Mozman's, the effect of gesture, pose, and emotions are considered through the lens of melodrama, suspended in the moment of a photo or captured on film.

Firelei Báez uses found book pages as the background onto which she paints the silhouettes of buxom female forms to visualize explosive responses to the restriction of the power of the female body. Rachelle Mozman uses her own body and the body of her mother to explore interpretations of class and gender in colonial and mid-twentieth century culture of Central America and the United States. Ultimately, both women draw on feminine archetypes—the innocent, the seductress, the caregiver, the goddess, the rebel, the masculine woman, the sage, the ruler—in order to examine the roles they occupy or subvert as a result of their social environment. Báez's paintings assert not only the female form but also use decorative pattern, excess of form, and vivid colors to reject traditional concepts of beauty and rebuff even expected notions of the sexual. Rachelle Mozman's characters are eternally suspended in the

¹ Didier Fassin, "Chapter 24: Racialization: How to Do Races with Bodies," in Blackwell Reference Online, Blackwell Press, p. 421; [<http://www.sss.ias.edu/files/pdfs/Fassin/Racialization.pdf>, accessed Aug. 1, 2014]

moment of a photo or captured on film, challenging inherited ideals of beauty as well as perceptions of age, race or ethnicity.

Firelei Báez: Abject/Object

Aesthetically, Firelei Báez's formidable work draws on a variety of sources including miniature painting, the eighteenth and nineteenth century penchant for silhouettes, historic representations of the female body, and the postcolonial experience. In many of her pencil and gouache works, Báez explores the ways in which skin tone and hair texture—that is, outward evidence of the racialized body—are bound by social expectations and how the interpretation of the female body is generated through these telling physical aspects.

Báez is interested in anthropology, science fiction, black female subjectivity and the role of women's work; her art explores the humor and fantasy involved in the consideration and presentation of the self. Her inspiration is focused on local urban communities with origins in Africa and the Caribbean. In particular, she focuses on women of color who she sees as having an ability to “live with cultural ambiguities and use them to build psychological and even metaphysical defenses against cultural invasions.”² Indeed, among these powerful defenses is an embracing of the abject in the form of a celebration of the abundant female figure. This love of the body is visually rendered through the artist's favoring of womanly forms, whether in silhouette miniatures or on a monumental scale. Leisha Jones considers a definition of the abject that can be associated with Báez's work and her visualization of the female body as a formal radical presence:

Cultural abjections include sexual taboos, prisons, disease wards, freak shows, anything that threatens to confront the leakiness of order and other, the liminal, the borderline that defines what is fully human from what is not. *Vagrant viscera*. The postmodern subject as gendered by-product may confront this terrain, like the loss of God, with actions intended to find and penetrate borders of the self to produce a definitive outline, silhouette on the wall. *Thin veins*. The future is in here. Me/not me, inside/outside become existential dichotomies for abjection to propagate. Cultural deployment of philosophies of the abject may challenge the limits of language through the attraction/repulsion of others. The threat of the hyper- feminine becomes real.³

Considering freak shows and sexual taboos in the liminal margin that separates human and other, Jones allows us to consider the rebellious acts of Báez's painted figures as a reflection of these forms of cultural abjection. The women and, by extension their painted silhouettes, threaten the expected order, social, sexual and racial, by their very gestures and the way in which they inhabit their own bodies. Curvaceous and bold, they are unapologetically present. Prominent forms are emphasized through the focus on outlines and shadows. To be clear, Judith Butler's definitions of the abject help us to develop this inside/outside existence to understand how social media outlets like YouTube and Snapchat become powerful platforms for bodies elsewhere denied. Butler notes: “the abject for me...relates to all kinds of bodies whose lives are not considered to be “lives” and whose materiality is understood not to “matter.” Though reluctant to name specific “abject bodies,” she underscores how the U.S. press regularly describes non-Western lives, poverty and psychiatric “cases” in othering

² Firelei Báez, Artist statement [www.fireleiBáez.com, accessed August 10, 2014]

³ Leisha Jones, “Women and Abjection: Margins of Difference, Bodies of Art,” *Visual Culture and Gender*, Vol. 2, 2007 [http://vcg.emitto.net/2vol/jones.pdf, accessed Aug. 11, 2014]

terms.⁴ The self-representation afforded by the informal visual and textual spaces of social media allows those “outside” normativity to express themselves.

Already by the early twentieth century, the threat of the black female body in an urban context in the U.S. is established. Hazel Carby notes that, “[t]he movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous.”⁵ This threat of the hyper-feminine is readily apparent in Báez’s small works on paper from the series *Prescribed Seduction*. Here, the artist has combined two contrasting sides of the mass media, published materials and imagery borrowed from the Internet. The drawings are rendered on pages appropriated from books from various libraries. The texts mostly address male-identified areas of study such as engineering and architecture as well as the historic “grand tour” of Europe that was popular among the wealthy classes during the nineteenth century. Narratives about these extended trips for the elite, manuals for engineering and similar works become the background to the drawings. The allusion is to the pervasiveness of male privilege.

Title pages, diagrams and even back covers from these books become not just the background but a meaningful part of the work. One such title page is from a book that explores the economic theories of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who has been compared to Darwin in his writings about evolution. He is best known for having coined the term “survival of the fittest” and was obsessed throughout his lifetime with establishing the universality of natural law. A deeply influential philosopher, Spencer represents an archetypal figure that embodies precisely the kind of male privilege that Báez is alluding to with her chosen texts. The bodacious feminine figure wearing stilettos in this work saunters across the cover page of the book on Spencer, posing an intervention to the text that is physical and conceptual. Is her sizable, curved backside a result of the development of the female form via natural law? Represented only as a dark outline of curvaceous proportions, her form is then filled in with floral motifs that are reminiscent of Dutch still lifes or the floral patterns of Spanish shawls made in the Philippines. They literally “embody,” through their very being, the postcolonial object/body.

The figures in Báez’s imagery represent young women from YouTube videos paired with diagrams, title pages or text. The decorative elements trace the crossing of bodies and visual and material culture from Spain, to Africa, to the Caribbean and back: from an architectural element of the gates of the Alhambra, to a patch from a colonial textile for a dress, to the texture of a banana leaf. The routes of colonization are traced through these elements, which are subsequently inscribed on bodies, in a beautiful symbolic referential trope. Of the women in the videos, the artist astutely notes, they are “marginal bodies trying to seduce.”⁶ For her, there are strong parallels between miniature painting and the monitor via which YouTube is consumed. Rounded bodies act out a permanent contradiction, aggressive and sensuous, fierce and beguiling, forceful, insistent, and enticing. The abject is embraced in these YouTube self-presentations that are also about spectacle and self-possession. Báez’s painted figures, adapted from videos posted on social media, represent the outlines of the voluptuous bodies of young women. Caught in the midst of a seductive pose, perhaps part of a dance movement or sensuous gesture, their acts reject traditional standards of beauty, femininity, and social expectations. For the artist, these figures become like the drolleries seen in the margins of

⁴ “How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler,” *Signs*, Winter 1998: 281

⁵ Hazel Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8 (Summer 1992): 739

⁶ Conversation with the author, August, 12, 2014.

medieval manuscripts. Rendered small, they act as outsized challenges to the reduced roles occupied by women in contemporary visual culture.

Báez specifically addresses the racialized body and the history of the border between Haiti and Dominican Republic in *Man Without a Country (aka anthropophagist wading in the Artibonite River)*. The work focuses on the violent relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic and how these painful moments of history are repeated. The Artibonite River lies along the border between both countries and is the site of many Haitian crossings into the Dominican Republic in search of employment. It is also the site of the worst massacre in Dominican history, when the dictator Rafael Trujillo ordered the killing of over 30,000 Haitians along the border.⁷ In 2013, politicians also decided that Dominicans of Haitian origin would be losing their Dominican citizenship, being left, in essence, without a country, without a home.⁸ Exploring these political machinations, she evokes the struggles to survive as a constant battle against social perceptions of the physical body and its color. The separation of about a dozen social classes according to skin tones that is part of everyday life in the Dominican Republic has resulted in specific names for groups that reflect skin color that date in some cases from the colonial period. Under Trujillo, additional racial categories were created, most of them avoiding any reference to blackness.

Challenging the role of ethnography, the artist has also used photographs of her own likeness as a subject. In a series of silhouetted portraits, the only visible signs of her identity are carried through the texture of her hair and her skin tone. Straight, curly, wavy, frizzy, each image reveals the effects of the weather on her hair and subsequently on her silhouette, underscoring the presence of Africa and its expression on the surface of the body, even with minimal visual information. Punctuated only by her eyes, these works emphasize the visual weight of the artist's skin tone and the form her hair takes. By using the silhouette as a trope, the artist links her work to the historical form that emerges prominently in the early nineteenth century as a way in which anyone—not just an artist—could record likeness. The historic ubiquity of the silhouette marks it as an important symbolic form, one that is taken up again by many contemporary artists as a kind of shorthand for the racialized body.

Her work based on silhouettes, *Can I Pass: Introducing the Paper Bag to the Fan Test for the Month of June*, refers to tests that relate to the judging of skin tone and hair texture. These tests were used historically (though remnants of their power are still highly evident) to designate a different social class for people of African descent with hair and skin tones that were closer to those of Europeans. While the paper bag test is well known in the United States, the Fan Test is from the history of the Dominican Republic, where men who hope to be divorced can invoke a law from the colonial period that states that a woman's hair must flow freely when blown by a fan. Hair that does not flow readily reveals too much African blood, thereby tainting the woman's entire being. By limiting the figure in these gouache paintings to eyes, skin color, and hair, the artist focuses attention on these three key elements. Perhaps most powerful is the expression in the eyes, which varies from brooding to ecstatic, from subtle to fierce, from indifferent to troubled.

⁷ For an excellent account of the political history of the Dominican Republic from independence to the 1990s, including reprints of key speeches and correspondence, see Ernesto Sagás, *The Dominican People: a documentary history* (Princeton, NJ : Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003).

⁸ "We are Dominican," Human Rights Watch, [hrw.org](https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/07/01/we-are-dominican/arbitrary-deprivation-nationality-dominican-republic), July 1, 2015 [https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/07/01/we-are-dominican/arbitrary-deprivation-nationality-dominican-republic] accessed August 12, 2016

Báez's fantastic portraits include visions of women with fanciful hairdos that seem to be made from eccentric animals and other whimsical organic forms, particularly in examples such as *Not Even Unalterable Limitations*. In this large-scale drawing, a slender neck holds a graceful head, topped with a series of black and white feathers and flowers. The woman's slight grimace emphasizes her own control over subjectivity as she nearly glares back at the viewer. We can interpret this image as a response to the tradition of British and French aristocratic portraiture of the eighteenth century. Traditional standards of beauty, the pose, and the accoutrements and excesses of the Rococo period are all implicated. Such portraits were central elements to the construction of aristocratic identity; members of the European elite were represented by artists as noble and powerful, steadfast and authoritative, beautiful and dignified. Báez's commanding female figure reflects both difference (of Julia Kristeva) and traces of the abject through her hair-covered body. Another reference to Dominican folklore, her upper body is covered in abundant lengths of hair and traces a resemblance to the Cigüapa figure, a siren-like female ogre who calls to men from her hideaway in the darkest depths of the jungle. The Cigüapa is a radical figure who, in this context, can be seen as a response to the hegemony of European standards of beauty. She is at once terrifying and enticing, shocking, grotesque and sensual.

Adjacent to this body of work, Báez has also produced a number of powerful, over life-sized drawings of female figures in which the body is literally rendered as a site for landscape. Fulsome figures are inscribed with dense tropical floral patterns or images of the land that draw from Chinese ink paintings. The over life-sized drawings originate through interviews the artist conducts with the subjects, asking about their partaking in the historic annual Brooklyn West Indian Day parade. The fulsome bodies stand proudly, decorated with colorful forms and three-dimensional textures that mimic the exuberance of carnival costumes. In addition, parts of their limbs are covered with colorful, linear drawings. These tattoo-like images relate to the ethnic background of the subjects, marking their difference but also their belonging to other racial and ethnic groups, some seemingly hidden in the context of the Caribbean. In this way, the body drawings serve as witnesses of migrations that remain under-recognized in the history of constructing a "native" identity, making visible these tales of crossing and re-crossing global waters.

Rachelle Mozman: The Prevalence of Melodrama

In her short film, *La vida sí es imitación/Life is imitation*, Rachelle Mozman adapts important moments from Douglas Sirk's film, *Imitation of Life* (1959), adding to them a layer of the kind of melodrama that is highly developed in Latin American soap operas. As Laura Mulvey has noted:

Melodrama can be seen as having an ideological function in working certain contradictions through to the surface and re-presenting them in an aesthetic form. A simple difference, however, can be made between the way that irreconcilable social and sexual dilemmas are finally resolved. If the melodrama offers a fantasy escape for the identifying women in the audience, the illusion is so strongly marked by recognizable, real and familiar traps that escape is closer to a day-dream than to a fairy story.

Mozman's takes key scenes from the life of a bi-racial character—what we might call "moments of racialization" and in some cases rewrites the script. Assumptions about race are

⁹ Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: McMillan, 1989): 43.

addressed throughout the film. As in Sirk's original film, a bi-racial child asks about the skin color of Jesus Christ; later, now a bi-racial teenager, she is assumed to be socializing exclusively with the local "colored" youth. These moments, as captured through Mozman's lens are framed by shots of abundance in a basket full of peaches, or a focus on the rich fabrics of the furniture in the upscale home, wealth that has been gained at the expense of a close relationship with a daughter. Indeed, the film's trailer underscores the drama of female relationships, narrated through these tag lines: "Of all these things is woman...the drama of life, —what a mother says to a daughter, —what a daughter says to a mother."

Mozman is particularly concerned with the casting of these characters from the original film and how such choices reflected the culture of the United States and American concepts of race from the mid-twentieth century. She was interested also in how these choices were understood outside the United States. The artist's response to Sirk's film also challenges notions of beauty, and even the interpretation of skin tone, by using the same female actor to play the parts of both black and white daughters. A young white actor plays both parts, wearing a particularly bad curly black wig in a scene in which there is disagreement over a white baby doll toy. The artist addresses a woman's need to conform by then switching the race of both daughters, as a black actor plays them in their teenage years. Bi-racial Perla obsesses over her hair (in another bad blonde wig), seeking approbation from white characters. Ultimately, the artist notes, tragic Perla seeks to mirror the image and aggressive character of Miss B, the white alpha female, over that of her own gentle and subservient mother—life *is* imitation. Mozman notes that this desire mimics that of many conquered peoples, seeking to liken their appearance to that of the colonizer. This is an aspiration especially prominent, she notes, among people of her mother's generation and among Latin people in general.¹⁰ Ideals of beauty as interpreted by European standards are pervasive in Latin culture as seen in commercials, television shows, print media, and film. Notions of beauty and, subsequently, visibility, are reinforced through these media: to be beautiful is to be seen and to be seen is to participate not only socially but eventually also politically and socially. There is an exploration of this kind of ideology that has permeated the psyche of these characters; they are all drawn from archetypal roles. Though there is no direct reference to the abject, the artist hints at it through her purposeful use of hideous hairpieces that are improperly worn, marking a disturbing contrast—difference—between skin tone, features and hair color.

Like the women in the two film versions of *Imitation of Life*, the women in her photography and films are also looking for social mobility, also facing questions about family and relationships. In the end, the realities encountered by women of color are reflected in the narrative, the actions, the gestures and perhaps most significantly, in the surface of the bodies. Biracial passing, a narrative at the center of much early twentieth century literature, focuses on the role of the "tragic mulatto," a figure understood to be doomed because of his/her skin color, hair texture, eye color and how these would eventually influence social standing.

Prior to this short film, the artist worked on several series of photographs in which race and class are central aspects of her study. In *Casa de mujeres/House of Women*, one image features three women who are identical except for their clothing and skin tones. Of the three, the figure with the fairest skin bares the most—only thin straps cross her bare shoulders and her hair is pulled back in a chignon, allowing a view of her neck and clavicle bones, her fairness. Her "dark" sister wears a dress with sleeves and a high, round collar. The maid wears her uniform. The darker sister clings to her fairer sibling as though dependent upon her

¹⁰ Author's conversation with the artist, July 15, 2014; Brooklyn, New York.

in multiple real and symbolic ways. The servant stands apart, silver tray in hand, offering a string of pearls. Her skin tone is the same as that of the “dark” sister. In the background, a double-handled calyx-style vessel stands alone atop an ornate pedestal, a reference to classical forms that underscores the stage-like setting made for historic tragedies. There is circle of light, a purposeful illumination, of which the center is the light-skinned sister. She stands highlighted within the image in the center of this aura. Though she and her sister share identical features and wear the same diamond hair ornament, her position within the group is preserved not only by her presence and this circle of light, but also because she is the social and visual focal point of the other figures in the image. The dual twin figures represent not only the love/hate relationship of sisters but also these two emotions housed in a single female body.

In both *Casa de mujeres* and *La vida si es imitación*, the maid is always a caretaker and often a figure more prominently maternal than the mother figure. In one scene, she appears to be arranging the fair-skinned sister’s hair. The sparseness of the room —perhaps the maid’s— forces the viewer to focus on the gesture of the servant, the shared moment between the two women who, while united in proximity and in everyday life, also live the constant separation of class. A similar image shows the fair-skinned sister sitting on her own bed. Enveloped in a domestic setting, the feminine roles are reinforced through the flowered wallpaper, the doll, the oriental vase and large glass platter on display, the vanity with a mirror, a fancy shawl, and a crocheted throw. The accouterments of good taste and worldliness surround them, throwbacks from a colonial past, but the ownership of these goods helps to constantly underscore the separation between the two figures.

The artist, returning to New York City after having spent some time in Panama, wanted to make a series of works that would address issues of class and race through subtle layers of scenes of daily life. This grew into *La negra y su pequeña*. She saw her mother as a paradigm of this existence that is marked by the perimeters of race and class and, eventually, cultural difference. The artist’s grandmother and great-aunt were known as “la negra” and “la blanca” within the family in a time in which opportunities and social mobility were more directly tied to skin color. Even the maid’s character, she notes, is tied to her mother’s feelings of how she was perceived after moving to the U.S.—experiencing a more racialized existence.¹¹

In furthering the story begun in *Casa de Mujeres*, *La negra y su pequeña* addresses the life of the darker sister as she left Panama to begin a new life in 1968 in the very small town of Woodstock, Virginia. Life here was framed by the Victorian-era home she occupied as the only assimilated woman of color in town. The daughter figure is created from a digital composite of the artist and her mother, underscoring the intense, powerful and problematic relationship between mother and daughter. Both women in these images struggle to assimilate to life in a small town in the southern United States in which the presence of the KKK is palpable into the 1970s. They are transformed by how they are perceived by others. The artist notes:

In this work, both La Negra and Pequeña struggle with the shift in identity that immigrating to a small town in the United States stirs in them. The conflict is in attempting to assimilate to a new culture, where the history of color and the distinction in class transforms how they see themselves. The new culture they are in becomes a powerful internalized voice that gets acted out.¹²

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Conversation with the author, August 12, 2014.

According to Mozman, there is an internalized voice, a gaze that judges beauty, qualifies the self by comparison, and attempts to assimilate. Acceptance is believed to come through a physical transformation, a mimicking of the colonizer, followed by a validation of the look through a mirrored admiration.

The work by both artists can be seen as part of the “return to the body” that is central to contemporary artistic production of the moment. As Christine Ross posits, the embracing of the abject seems to suggest a renewed interest in the acknowledgement of the body as an important symbolic form that serves to explore contradictions that are expressed socially and politically. She asks if this return to the body is:

a way to affirm the roots of the self in a time where traditional categories of identity (nation, religion, the family, etc.) are being radically challenged? In the specific case of the representation of the "female body," does the abject simply reaffirm the metaphysical definition of the woman as a dematerialized body?¹³

In the end, Ross asserts that the kind of image that artists like Báez create represent a response to traditional notions of beauty. She notes: “this specific use of the abject can and should be understood as a strategy that seeks to disrupt the Kantian definition of aesthetics as pure pleasure, to produce a "body" that elicits other forms of unpredictable pleasures.”¹⁴

These unpredictable pleasures --unknowable, inconsistent and unexpected-- are represented at the opposite end by Mozman’s film and photos, which offer a critique of narratives that focus on traditional notions of beauty as represented through mid-century photography and film. She adapts the telenovela, a unique artistic form that intervenes into the monolith of "high" culture through the mechanism of melodrama. The telenovela format reaffirms this fact daily. In the Americas to the south of the Rio Grande, this form is even more unique because it often considers an invented or historic past, or a parallel present outside of traditional notions of mainstream culture (i.e. the period of early independence, the countryside). Mozman's use of Sirk's work as a basis for her study functions in two ways: it considers the perception of life in the United States from the perspective of an immigrant and considers the relevance of Sirk in the Americas as examples of a) the hybridity of American culture and b) the multivalent experiences of people of color where race influences perception and experience, though that remains elusive to his characters and subsequently also to Mozman's.

Exploring form, image, representation and reading of the body, Firelei Báez and Rachelle Mozman both use the female form as a visual tool. Among the themes addressed in their works are complex explorations of how identity is enacted through the gesture and form of the body, through its surface readings. In the work of Firelei Báez, the culturally abject is displayed as a response to social tensions embodied by narrowly prescribed female roles, using radical acts and movements, signs and tropes of the racialized body as a visible rejection of these expectations. In Rachelle Mozman’s imagery, melodrama enacts the signifying aspects of the narrative, enhanced through the effects of gestures, poses, and excessive emotions.

Báez and Mozman’s works are united by an interest in the impact of various outlets, such as television and social media, on the psyche of real women. Invented stories, imagined tensions, concerns with perceptions of self and other and generally the projection of women in the

¹³ Christine Ross, “Redefinitions of abjection in contemporary performances of the female body,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 31, *The Abject* (Spring, 1997): 150.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

social sphere are subjects of investigation in various series by the artists. Both are interested in historic and contemporary interpretations of women's roles as well as the subtleties of relationships between women, whether loving or violent. Báez and Mozman remain concerned with how the physical aspects of appearance in turn inform social realities and with the constant regulation of bodies of color. Together, they represent important voices, children of immigrants from Central America and the Caribbean who explore similar concepts of race, the body and feminine behavior from the perspective of artists raised in the United States. More emphatically, their works represent the broadening of the discourse in contemporary American art.