

Houston Center for Photography

Spot Magazine, Fall Issue 2020

By Leslie Moody Castro

Stillness is Never Stillness: Artist Rachelle Mozman Solano in Conversation

Rachelle Mozman Solano is a photographer who is keenly aware of the intersection between the vernacular and the historical, and the oral histories that have defined and shaped her own identity and individual experience. The threads of these identities are captured in her photos, and specifically *Casa de las Mujeres*, a series composed from the stories told to her by the women in her family and the vernacular within which they were constructed. Their lives are the stories of colonization and the remnants of histories resting on top of each other.

Mozman talked with me about the work and its context, and our conversation remained as such: a conversation based on the foundations of the layers within the images themselves.



Rachelle Mozman Solano, *En la casa del campo*, c print, 22×26 inches 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

Stillness

Two women sit next to each other in identical wooden chairs, each facing the other, hands on their knees. Each assumes her role, her class. They look at each other, they share the same room, the same space, the same house. The woman on the right sits distinguished, her pale skin contrasting with the bright red silk top. The woman on the left looks back, her darker skin complimented by the brown tonalities of her uniform. She is barefoot—the room echoes of stillness.

Rachelle Mozman Solano: My mom is from Panama, and I really wanted the work to be focused on Central America and the environments and backgrounds to be colonial homes. She was my first subject, really the first person I pointed the camera at and was like, “oh, there’s something really deep here.” I

think it was that she was my biggest enigma. I just could not understand my mother. So I feel like a lot of my work with her is about trying to understand her. She's just very enigmatic, odd, and eccentric and traumatized.

Her stories are microaggressions, and the material is fascinating to me. We've always been very close, almost like sisters, and while making the photographs was fun in a lot of ways, it was also hard because she's a diva; though, she's a great collaborator and a great actor.

My mother had a sister, and they were very close, and my grandmother had several sisters, and they were all very close. However, there still seemed to be a rivalry between them because of colorism. It's pretty common in the Caribbean and is based on the history of colonization. I conceived of making this work with the idea of using twin sisters in order to create equity between the characters. Their skin color, however, would be the inequity, giving them more access to social mobility and prosperity, or not. It was a lot about how one could have more access to privilege than the other through the lens of colorism. I perceived it that way, partially because that's how the stories were told to me when I was growing up, and I was trying to illustrate how the stories were passed on to me. It's just these moments of privilege, of having lighter skin and being able to marry a wealthy man, being considered more beautiful.

The work is about these issues of race and class that persist, but it was also supposed to be a portrait of my mother in order to talk about all the internalized feelings that I felt in her. It's very subjective, and it's a very subjective portrait because it's really my lens of seeing her internalized conflicts around these issues of race and class.



Rachelle Mozman Solano, *La piscina*, c print, 22×26 inches, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

Providing Truth

She floats in the clear blue water of the pool. Her eyes are closed, her face calm, her arms outstretched, the white smock of her uniform floating up and rippling softly with the water. The brown of her uniform,

and her skin, contrasting with the crystal blue of the water. She is alone. She is alone in her reprieve from serving others.

RMS: I just watched James Baldwin's *I'm not your Negro*, and there's a part of the movie where he talks about the white need for purity, but in the Caribbean or anywhere in Latin America, really, it's also about class and wealth. You're trying to prove that you are purely white and that you don't have any of this past, and of course, many people can't negate that.

In my family—in many families in the Caribbean—there are black ancestors, and there's this desire to negate it. There's this whole white supremacy ideology about the idea of authenticity and this false sense of authenticity. There are so many gradations of racism that exist there. In Panama, we have these families that are white, upper-middle-class, and come from these older families of the oligarchy that has persisted since the Pre-Columbian history. Within them, there's this idea that racism just doesn't exist there, and that's just not possible. When you have a place that murdered (I don't know how many) thousands of indigenous people, that's just there in the fabric, in the psyche.



Rachele Mozman Solano, *Las Damas*, c print, 22×26 inches, 2010 Courtesy of the artist.

The Present in the Past

The two women stand in the room together. Her silky pink dress compliments her buttery pale skin, and her dark hair wrapped up on top of her head in a perfectly placed updo. She stands in a three-quarter pose, her forearm resting softly on the dresser as she looks confidently at the other woman in the room.

The other woman also stands with the back of her elbow against the dresser, her hands resting one in the other in front of her, her body facing forward, her eyes looking respectfully at the flow, her face, and head in a gesture of deferential subservience.

RMS: My mother did an interview with my grandmother right before she died in the 80s, and I remember this interview being recorded when I was playing around her. It was startling that whenever my mother asked her a question about a family member, she would answer based on how they looked. She would describe people as “she was dark with straight hair” or “she had bad hair.” It was the first thing she thought when she had to think about what to relay. So I wanted to use that. Then I did an interview with my mother about her experience moving to the United States. I whittled both interviews down because I wanted it to feel like an important portal to provide some context for the photographs without too much text.

It’s about how one is perceived. But the thing about Panama is that it lived through segregation that was brought to it from America. Panamanians were segregated from the canal zone. Although they had their own part of the city, there was a feeling of being made to feel inferior and not have autonomy of one’s own canal or country because of the American presence of domination. That was there.

It took a long time for people outside the Latino or Latinx communities to understand or care about the work. Anyone with a binary way of seeing race just between black and white—or very much how the US culture can’t see gradations and complexity—they had a hard time reading it.

It’s as though if it isn’t their experience, it’s another language, and they are avoiding race at any cost. It’s like they aren’t comfortable, so they would instead make futuristic work, something that’s more positive—they love that—where it’s all about pretending positivity, of the imagined and not the historical. I’ve always been interested in history.



Rachelle Mozman Solano, *El niño*, c print 22×26 inches 2011. Courtesy of the artist

A Likeness

The little girl rests easily in their arms. She is the next generation born into a world of unspoken hierarchies maintaining the cultural heritage of subjugation granted by history and her skin color. She has been born on the right side of the spectrum. The other woman stands behind them on the left of the picture plane, holding a blanket and a stuffed toy for the infant. She is never far away, always ready to serve, to be of assistance. That is her occupation.

RMS: I think I chose to move to Panama as an adult, because I felt like it would be a relief to live without the projected ideas of how people perceived me. I don't think I've talked with anyone who has grown up with Latino parents who didn't feel some inherited feeling of shame. That you had to feel ashamed because that's what we're told, so it was a relief to escape that, and by the time I was an adult and did move to Panama, I had worked through some of that shame. It's definitely something that one has to work at it doesn't just vanish. You have to recognize that's what the feeling is because you've been taught that for so many years. Then I think about right now, and I think, "here we are again," and it's just really insane.

Stillness is never Stillness

The two women continue to sit in their stillness, looking at one another. Their quiet is interrupted by the silence of all the history that has brought them to that place, to those roles, of employer and employed, of lighter skin versus darker, of class and wealth subjugating the other. Their photograph is the story of colonization, movement, and history manifest in the multiple layers of abject stillness, frame upon frame, one on top of the other.

RMS: The first place I showed this work was in Panama, and because it's the art world, most of my friends who went to the show were mostly white. So they're looking at these pictures which are about them, and they have all this history in their own families, but they choose to ignore it. Or they are very conscious of trying to marry up, like white, like "hacer la raza mejor" [make the race better] or "purificar la raza" [purify the race]. Things like that.

There are also these internalized fears about how I am perceived within my own identity. Like being in a room and feeling like you are fitting in one way or another, and how that gets shifted because it's a different experience because of time. But it's happening now, too, in this intense segregation. This has all been about going into my mother's life, getting more information about what it was like for her to move here in the mid-sixties, which had to have been hard.

About the artist: Rachele Mozman Solano grew up in New York City and works between New York and Panama, the country of her maternal family. Starting often from her biography and family history, Mozman explores how the intersection of history, class and race forms individual experience. Her work is concerned with the convergence of ideology, mythology, economics and the psyche, through photographs and films that explore narrative as inherent to humanity and shaped by perception. Mozman's art is deeply informed by her clinical work in psychoanalysis. In 2020 Mozman will release her monograph, *Colonial Echo* with Kris Graves Projects. In 2019, she had a solo exhibition, *Metamorphosis of Failure* at Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY, and in 2018 she exhibited *El espejo opaco de Gauguin* in Arteconsult, Panamá, Panamá. Mozman has been awarded residencies at LMCC workspace, Smack Mellon, The Camera Club of New York, and Light Work. Mozman has been awarded the NYSCA/NYFA Artist Fellowship, the NYC Film and Media Grant from the Jerome Foundation and others. Her work has been published in the Light Work annual *Contact Sheet*, *Presumed Innocence*, *Exit* magazine and numerous other publications.

Mozman is a Fulbright Fellow, and has exhibited at El Museo del Barrio, the National Portrait Gallery at Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C, the Americas Society, New York, New York, National

Hispanic Cultural Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, New York, the Chelsea Museum, New York, New York, The DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts, the Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, California, the Shore Institute of Contemporary Art, Long Branch, New Jersey, Festival de la luz at the Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, Argentina the Instituto Cultural Itau, São Paulo, Brazil, the Friese Museum, Berlin, Germany, the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Santiago, Chile, Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales, Montevideo, Uruguay, Centro Cultural de España, Mexico City, Mexico, Festival Biarritz, Biarritz, France, as well as the IX Bienal de Cuenca, Ecuador.