

LIBERATORY ADORNMENT

The Radical Potential of Aesthetic Seduction

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ, Ph.D.



©JEFF MCLANE STUDIO

Pamela Council, *BLAXIDERMYPink*, 2021, a whole room in *Sites of Memory* at UTA Artist Space, Beverly Hills, Calif.

*"I put on my jewelry just to go to the bodega.
And I keep it with me just so that I'm feeling safer."*

— BIA, "Whole Lotta Money"

When Chicana artist Judy Baca sat at a vanity table at the Women's Building art space in Los Angeles in 1976 and transformed herself into chola, she was creating a portal in time and space to connect her with other Chicanas, past and present, in the project of complex self-definition against the gendered tropes of mother, virgin, and whore. That makeup was her chosen medium is fitting given the well demonstrated power of Latinas in making faces.¹ This exhibition explores how, decades later, in a social and political context both radically different and the same, contemporary artists are mobilizing the rituals and aesthetics of femininity to

traverse and generate space. Pamela Council, Yvette Mayorga, and Kenya (Robinson) activate body aesthetics along with personal and collective memory to enact healing, pay homage to familial and cultural ancestors, and raise questions about how gender, race, and sexuality shape political visibility.

Liberatory Adornment can be described as an aesthetic practice of ornamentation that bridges the lived body and its representation, flesh and commodity objects, and the public and domestic, to value the self as a member of a wider collectivity. Through liberatory adornment, Council, Mayorga, and (Robinson) evoke embodied Black and Latina femme materiality to theorize and tell important stories about how racialized people negotiate power. The narratives and aesthetics of their work illuminate creative methods for navigating the charged political moment we are living. For

example, Kenya (Robinson)'s *BLACK of ENTITLEMENT* (2021) and *Patriot Games, No. 11022021* (2021) play on ASMR and self-help videos to suggest meditation and the study of Black femme genius as tools for well-being and political strategizing. The languid rococo-styled scenes in Yvette Mayorga's paintings and ceramics, such as *I Remember Eating Hot Chips When My Dad Got Deported, After J.H. Fragonard (The Swing)* (2017), center the world-making dreams of migrants and femme laborers who face enormous risks to cross geographical and gendered borders. Pamela Council's sensuous relief works and fountains in *BLAXIDERMYPink* (2021) offer deep engagement with the sensing body as an integral mode of queer, feminist, and antiracist investigation and recovery. All three artists gesture to popular culture, consumption, and entertainment as spaces of contradictory consciousness-raising that could be mined for power.

The social context in which the works in this exhibition have been created is one where the forces of history, generational vulnerability, and economic precarity have come to a head, and along with it, anger, protest, violence, and mourning, in addition to everyday forms of celebration and memorialization. The work of these artists provides an opportunity to address contemporary politics while simultaneously providing



Kenya (Robinson), still from *BLACK of ENTITLEMENT*, 2021

a respite from it through whimsy, humor, and visual pleasure. The haptic quality of the work uses sumptuous surface to get under the skin of exploitative power structures, declaring beauty, abundance, femininity, and leisure as entitlement for oppressed populations. Manicured nails, gold hair processing caps, and pink hair lotion function as signifiers of the everyday freedoms currently lived by Black and Latinx people, and they are also positioned as tools that can be activated for protest, protection, and care. Thus, the exhibition stages the material and metaphysical loops of racialized and gendered existence, subjection, and power that are always in process.

The sacred and the profane also become intermingled through each artists' exploration of the erotic. Here I draw on L.H. Stallings's insight from *Funk the Erotic* that Black sexual cultures can be spaces that

erect profane sites of memory for individuals who would dare accept sex as art (sexual magic); value aesthetics as much as ethics; lessen the influence of a singular black public sphere; have a different relationship to time, space, and geography; and sustain fluid androgyny so as to undo fixed binaries of gender that uphold work society's divisions of sexual labor. The cultural sites are deemed profane because of how capitalism's ideology of possession (accumulation of material things) structures the will to remember...²

The capitalist will to remember is one that demands sexual confession as a form of science and control. In contrast, through drawing on the erotic as a sacredly profane site of memory, the artists in this exhibition "reorganize the senses to detect sacred energies of others in relation to the self so as to produce a new metaphysics of political struggle."³ For example, the whirling oral sex toys in Council's *BLAXIDERMYPink* (2021) lap up the fragrant Luster's pink hair lotion that references the artist's childhood memory of defending themselves against violence. The toys lick psychic wounds through queer gestures.⁴ Trauma is treated through touch, encrusted rhinestone surface, and smell. The braid and



Yvette Mayorga, *I Remember Eating Hot Chips When My Dad Got Deported, After J.H. Fragonard (The Swing)*, 2017

cowrie shell rugs in the installation reference hairstyles that protect Black hair. BLAXIDERM is an Afro-Americana camp aesthetic developed by Pamela Council that emerged from their consideration of the consistent devaluation of Black life. The term BLAXIDERM merges blaxploitation and taxidermy, and signals the artist's methodology of re-presenting images of Black body aesthetics. Through their call to the sensorium and erotic valuation of self, Council declares Black femmes as subjects worthy of protection, softness, and pleasure.

Yvette Mayorga's voluptuous brown femmes, framed in the dominant imaginary as subjects of labor, desire, and excess reproduction, are exalted as precious in her thickly piped paintings that feature racialized figures delighting in their confectionary enfleshment. In *ICE ICE Lady* (2017) a nude femme lifts her arms in glee as she glides down a pool slide in a palatial home that is Mayorga's rococo version of a Polly Pocket toy interior. The figure is momentarily unaware of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent that emerges from the bottom edge of the picture plane, but escape hatches are abundant. The brown femme in *ICE ICE Lady* can be read as a rebel quinceañera ("sweet 15" birthday celebrant). As Rachel Valentina González notes, quinceañera practice "sits in the interstitial space between US Latinx peoples and wider US culture, a space separated by the border of the young, feminine, brown body. As such, young women leverage their bodies in the service of belonging to neither community fully, instead finding themselves in a space of constant vacillation, transition, and transformation."⁵ While often viewed as victims of machismo, Latinx femmes like quinceañeras are shapeshifters who make meaning as they negotiate gendered notions of worth, culture, and nation. Mayorga's *rasquache*⁶ visual language of celebration and girlhood evokes the ephemerality and power of these American rites of passage.

The gendered erotics of race and nation are also at play in the worlds inhabited by the Black femme protagonists of Kenya (Robinson)'s imagined urban fiction/sci-fi novels, *Hood Tales* (2014 -), narrated with truth-telling, tongue-in-cheek humor. In such titles as *He Doing It: The Legend of White Mike*, penned by the fictional Obamanisha Washington, they mobilize interracial relationships to creatively extract resources from a white heteropatriarchal system that continues to find new ways to use Black femmes for its survival and reproduction. *He Doing It* takes place in a

not-so-distant future where climate change has led white men to resource and seduce Black women in the hopes of breeding bi-racial, melanated children. As the back cover copy describes, "when global warming is real, only the brown will survive, and ain't nothing going on but the rent." (Robinson)'s comedic and politically prescient narratives highlight how the dynamics of exploitation and reparation continue to work through racialized sexuality under U.S. racial capitalism.⁷ The texts thus reflect upon what Sara Clarke Kaplan describes in her reading of the novel *Sally Hemings* by Barbara Chase-Riboud as "the violent logic of desire and dependence within the material-discursive structures of human chatteldom" and its afterlives.⁸ In *Fairchilde Publications (or Thots on Lady Elaine's Museum-Go-Round)* (2021), the kinetic library of (Robinson)'s *Hood Tales* envision a world where beauty salons and Black femme friendships hold the keys to radical futures. As in Octavia Butler's science fiction, the Black women protagonists in these stories shape change through creative strategy.

In referencing commodity objects like brand-name sneakers created in factories in the Global South and high-end liquor like Hennessy in their works, Mayorga, Council, and (Robinson) address the dynamics of exploitation, complicity, and limited choices that shape people of color's participation in capitalism as laborers and consumer subjects. Black and Latinx people have been racialized as commodities via chattel slavery, domestic and agricultural work, professional sports, and popular culture iconicity. Notions of racialized sexuality that have framed Black and Latinx people as deviant



Kenya (Robinson), *He Doing It: The Legend of White Mike*, 2020

structures the fetishization that has justified the abuse of their bodies and labor. As Karl Marx has argued, fetishization — the obsessive and arbitrary assignment of worth to perceived objects of desire — is a critical component of how



Pamela Council, *BLAXIDERMY Pink* (detail), 2021

commodities are differentially valued.⁹ (Robinson), Mayorga, and Council alchemize and disrupt these violent processes of racialized and gendered devaluation through altering and re-appropriating the fetish/commodity object (as en fleshed femme, femme of color aesthetics, and/or consumer objects). This transmutation of value is engendered in their work through aesthetics of adornment and hypermateriality, appeals to the sensorium, pastiche, bricolage, and camp.

The artists work from an intimate understanding, one shared by Black feminist theorists such as Hortense Spillers,¹⁰ that grammar and iconography play as much of a role in shaping oppressive power structures as bullets and ballot boxes. In privileging femme of color-to-femme of color gazes and practices of self and community recognition, they displace conventional aesthetic and political strategies that appeal to an outside gaze for respectability and humanization. Instead, their work invites us to activate our memories and our senses to confront and transform the pain and struggles of the past and present and in so doing, generate alternative notions of value that could fashion a different world. They envision adornment as a radical elsewhere, where they can, as Kenya (Robinson) has suggested, use the trappings of consumerism as creative material for liberatory transformation and “look good doing it.”¹¹

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep appreciation to Pamela Council, Yvette Mayorga, and Kenya (Robinson) for entrusting me with engaging their practice. I thank Jane Becker Nelson for her support of my vision for this exhibition, and am grateful to Mona Weselmann and Syona Rai for their assistance. This “high maintenance” exhibition benefitted greatly from the work of Steve Delwiche, Stephen Schroeder, Steve Zubik, Don Bratland, and the Flaten Art Museum student employee team.

NOTES

- 1 Anzaldúa, Gloria, “Haciendo caras, una entrada,” In *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990).
- 2 L.H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 177.
- 3 Stallings, *Funk the Erotic*, 178.
- 4 For more on the power of queer gesture see Juana María Rodríguez’s *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
- 5 González, Rachel Valentina, *Quinceañera Style: Social Belonging and Latinx Consumer Identities* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019).
- 6 Tomás Ybarra-Frausto has defined rasquachismo as a working-class Chicana aesthetic sensibility.
- 7 The concept of racial capitalism is put forward in Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
- 8 Kaplan, Sara Clarke. “Our Founding (M)other: Erotic Love and Social Death in “Sally Hemings” and “The President’s Daughter,” *Callaloo* 32, no. 3 (2009): 775.
- 9 Marx, Karl, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010).
- 10 See Spillers, Hortense J., “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81.
- 11 As shared in “Femme Figurations in Contemporary Art,” a virtual roundtable conversation with Pamela Council, Yvette Mayorga, and Kenya (Robinson) on how the aesthetics of femininity informs their practice, moderated by Jillian Hernandez and recorded in April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CV-3uRessMU>.

Curator Jillian Hernandez’s scholarship crosses the fields of art history, performance, gender, ethnic, Latinx, and Black studies, and is informed by her work as a community arts educator, curator, and cultural producer. Her book, *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment*, published by Duke University Press, traces how the body practices and art making of Black and Latinx women and girls are intertwined, and how their creative work complicates conventional notions of cultural value and sexual respectability. She is an Associate Professor in the Center for Gender, Sexualities, and Women’s Studies Research at the University of Florida.



Yvette Mayorga, *ICE ICE Lady*, 2017