



Tatiana Garmendia

Shadowboxing

Installation on the High Wall at Inscape Arts
August 1 - August 4, 2019

Tatiana Garmendia is a professor of fine arts in the Humanities and Social Sciences Division at Seattle Central College. She has exhibited her work throughout the US, including such venues as The Bronx Museum of Arts, Art In General, and Stux Gallery in New York. Among the European galleries where Garmendia has shown are The Milan Art Center in Italy, Castlefield Gallery in England, and the Galeria Riesa Efau in Germany. Her works are in public collections in Seattle, New York, Washington D.C., Miami, Illinois, California, Ohio, and the Dominican Republic.

Synthesizing formal concerns and a humanist engagement with history and culture, the artist's figuration occupies fluid boundaries. Born in Cuba at the height of the Cold War and immigrating to the USA as a youth, the artist's practice deciphers myths, histories, languages, and tropes from different communal fonts. This variability is reflected in her use of interdisciplinarity and hybrid narratives reporting on lived experiences, real and imagined.

Interview with Tatiana Garmendia, DK Pan, and Britta Johnson about *Shadowboxing*

HW: Thank you so much for sharing this excellent work with us; can you tell us if there was an initiating event or thought process that led you to begin this piece?

TG: I began the animation shortly after Trump's election as a kind of daily ritual. I see myself as a visual Jungian, and my art practice as a way to channel different archetypes to heal myself and my audience. So I went old school, paralleling the tedium of drawing each individual cell with the daily battle against Othering that LatinX bodies are subject to most critically in this historic moment. I mean, let's be clear, bodies of color have been transgressed since the first Europeans disembarked and set foot on dry land. But soon after the 2016 election, I found myself battling against deracination from those I considered allies, in addition to racist bullying from predictable corners. And it shook me.

There are so many ontological assumptions about who is LatinX. In the PNW LatinX is largely defined by the Mexican and Mexican-American populations. And I'm Cuban. I neither fit the physical norms stereotyped in the PNW imagination, nor the ongoing black/white binary at the heart of the racial violence leveled at people of color and African Americans in specific. So this battle is embedded in and intersects a much larger struggle. Complicating matters is that as LatinX are quickly becoming the largest minority in the country, there's a move to divide and conquer us.

I remember when we were ALL defined as "brown" in census and data collecting forms. Which intuitively reflects the huge varieties in our skin colors. The Spaniards colonized very differently than the Brits. Spanish women were not allowed to immigrate to the "New World" so the Spanish took indigenous and African wives, who bore mestizo children. This is why all of Latin America and Latin Caribbean populations are so mixed. But now there's differentiations between White Hispanic, and other LatinX. What the hell is this?

I see this as a very calculated form of structural violence aimed at deracinating the LatinX populace while capitalizing on vestiges of colorism. It is aimed at fracturing the potential solidarity of such a large minority. Unfortunately, because we're not a monoculture, we herald

from many different countries and racial mixes, it makes us especially vulnerable to this insidious divisiveness. I've observed this gradual deracination for years, but it became really obvious after Trump's election. His incendiary racist language and immigration policies pry for that divide. Suddenly fellow PoC allies start calling me white out of the blue, denying my racial history, rendering me a foreigner in my own cultural identity. Meanwhile, my bank of over 20 years, calls me up to ask if I'm a citizen. Were they hoping to seize my accounts and call ICE? Meanwhile, I still get heckled to go back where I come from, whenever I'm overheard speaking Spanish.

I acknowledge that as a naturalized citizen I am heir to privileges that undocumented LatinX don't share, but I'm not ignorant of Executive Order 9066 which carted Japanese and Japanese Americans off to internment camps beginning 1942, many from this very community. I have colleagues at the college whose families were devastated by this mass internment. Generations later, and they're still dealing with the consequences. So I have privileges, and I have rights, but I'm also keenly aware these can be taken away at the flick of a pen. All it takes is a presidential order like in '42. Racist America does not embrace light, medium, or dark skinned LatinX. Or didn't Trump and his supporters just call for American-born Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to go back? Back where...to her district? No, to Puerto Rico where her family originated.

HW: I love the shift in the music, as the solo voice gathers others with it - it feels to me like an invocation of community, even as the struggle persists. Can you talk a bit about the music for the piece - who is singing, what is happening?

TG: I grew up in Santeria, which is a form of Ifa brought to Cuba by Yoruba slaves. I was initiated Iyal'Ocha as a child and consecrated with ashé when I was twelve. The musical chant in the animation follows the traditional devotional songs we inherited from those enslaved Africans, in which a solo voice calls on the deity and then the community joins in the singing. It's really beautiful, because the soloist is usually an elder petitioning on behalf of a member of the community, and then everyone joins in. So you are correct in intuiting that the structure of the song itself invokes the support of community even as it hopes to heal it. In this case, the song calls on Ogun, the quintessential warrior. He is the creator of tools and iron as well. What distinguishes our earliest ancestors from other primates was precisely our ability to create tools, so you could say, in mythic terms, Ogun is also the archetype for human culture itself.

I'm no longer a practicing Iyal'Ocha. I left my ministry in the religion for a variety of personal reasons, but mainly because I never saw my vocation in that space, but rather situated in my art practice. That's where ashé lives on in me. Still, I consider myself incredibly enriched because from an early age I was given the wisdom of those who survived the unthinkable with their souls intact. I mean, can you just imagine what it took for the Yoruba to keep their culture and beliefs

alive? That's the kind of transcendent strength and valor that we desperately need now. So for the animation and for my ritual, who could I call on, other than Ogun? On a visceral level, the song also hits home for me. The voices cry "Ogun o mogbe mogbe" an expression of great fear, anxiety, and need. I don't have anywhere else I can go. I can't go back to Cuba. I was put in a camp for political dissidents as a 6-year old, with my brother, mother, and father. My father was tortured. My brother and I we survived unspeakable violence. We were there two years and with the exception of a few terrifying memories that include molestation and witnessing the gang rape of an 8-year old girl, we literally have blanks. Gaps in our memory. Whatever happened to us was so traumatic that both my brother and I have disassociated and have amnesia. I can't go back there. So if the United States decides LatinX peoples are to be interned or deported, I get to be a refugee all over again. And yet, I know that in solidarity, in community there is strength.

The voices themselves are from a recording I found at the Ministry of Healing School SBC online. They were very active from 2016-2018 broadcasting devotional songs anonymously. They gathered a large following, and then just went silent. I check in on their channel from time to time, saddened that this fount of spiritual solace suddenly went dry.

HW: As an animator, I'm struck by the technical prowess of this piece - the sense of movement in space and time of (your?) body interacting with this skeletal phantom, the way the quality of drawing and the different kinds of marks bolster the movements, the pacing, etc. Can you share some of the techniques/processes you used to create this supernatural video?

TG: Wow, thank you so much! To be honest, animation is not my primary medium. I used animation because I wanted the act of daily drawing to ritualize how I reflected on what is happening to our bodies and communities right now. The majority of my art practice is focused on drawing and painting, but I take an interdisciplinary approach to how I use the human figure to explore identity, archetypes, and the stories we tell each other or whisper to ourselves. So one day I might take photos, the next edit a film, a month later create a sculptural installation, and in this case, embark on a ritual that took more than two years to complete.

So for this animation, I asked my husband, Scott Story, to record me shadow boxing. He's a photographer and videographer, and I trust his eye implicitly. I love boxing and kickboxing, and trained for months before I had the nerve to go in front of the camera. I wanted to look like I could hold my own. So when I felt strong enough, Scott set up a tripod and I went at it, and he would tell me when I was exiting the viewfinder, and we marked the floors with tape, so I could perform. It was a real collaboration. Afterwards, Scott sound recorded me hitting the heavy bag and sparring. I took the sounds and footage and rough cut it in my video editor to fit my script and storyboard.

I have this enormous desk that we found at Goodwill. It's a monster that took four men to carry up the stairs, and then we had to enlarge the door opening so we could fit it into my studio.

Anyways, this enormous desk has four desktops; three that pull out. I guess some big boss a hundred years ago had three assistants taking notes or whatever. It's a serious get to work piece. When I look at my animation it looks so rough. Maybe because I know how it was created out of sheer will with the leanest of means. I needed a new computer to handle the processing and applied for funding several times. Didn't get a dime. So we came up with this frankenMac scavenged from parts found at RePC, Goodwill, and Ebay. So my frankenMAC sits on the large desk, with my rough edit on the screen, and I pull out one of the smaller tabletops from it, and that's where I draw what I see. That's the set up.

I used whatever paper I could get a hold of. I had some legal size white copy paper at home and just started to draw with graphite and powdered charcoal, and ran out of paper quickly enough. Goodwill to the rescue. Whenever I ran out, my husband would pick up a ream of the stuff at the thrift store. So one day the paper is recycled, the next day it's a bleached sheet. I used whatever graphite pencils I had on hand to sketch a contour and then rubbed powdered charcoal on the figure to add some mass. A kneaded eraser agitated the charcoal. It's old school. Every day was different, I would look at the previous day's drawings to imagine what that shadow specter is going to do next, because I didn't want to work with a real body. It was important for the skeletal opponent to be slippery, immaterial, to disappear and then materialize and punch me. It's what we all experienced, right? When President Obama was elected, I remember how full of hope we all felt. It felt like we had entered a new chapter in American history. And then, here we are. And where I live, there are a couple of neighbors who have flown Confederate flags. And a fellow commuter who sports a #whitetrucksmatter bumper sticker. It's a slippery specter. That's just a fact.

Then in the summer of 2018 I photographed the drawings and imported them into the editor and suddenly realized I had to change the ending. So I returned to the drawings for another six months. This time I went more literal in my representation of epigenetic and communal suffering by layering the figurative elements. The more literal I went, the more symbolic the imagery became as I layered my actions, so that it could be Ogun entering my body, seeing through my eyes, or it could be my father who died at 36 because he couldn't recuperate from his torture, or another ancestor fighting on through me. Their genes reliving their struggle in my own. Or it could be my neighbor, my student, or my friend who is battling the Othering too and because we are all a part of each other, their hurt is my hurt, just as mine is theirs, even if they don't realize it. And then, one day, I stopped. The healing isn't done, but the animation reached it's ending in me. I photographed the new drawings and re edited, and that's the whole of it.

HW: Thank you so much for sharing your powerful video with us. Your words resonate deeply, give added weight; we're very grateful to you for the layers of history embedded in this work. Honored to project this piece which holds so much meaning at this current time and in this specific site.

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The High Wall is powered by Shunpike
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