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Twilight

by

Britzél Vásquez

A non-thesis project submitted as partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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College of Visual and Performing Arts
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Words and images are like shells, no less integral parts of nature than are the substances they cover, but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation... -George Santayana

In childhood and early adulthood, I had no qualms with identifying myself as a “Puerto Rican woman”. The past few years, I reevaluated what my family understood as absolute truths when it came to gender roles, cultural identity and class. I also began to question what it means to be a “Puerto Rican woman” today? How has living in North America the past 25 years changed how I view my identity? Also, what would happen to traditional cultural, gender, class identity if the boundaries among ethnicities, between genders and classes are blurred? How would roles be redefined? Who would be redefining them? Will these roles be categorized differently? If so, then how? Who would be redefining boundaries? If there is a collective language amongst this neutralized Identity, what language would that be? Who would be authorized to make that decision? These are some of the questions I am exploring in my work.

For many years, I have been living between two identities, Puerto Rican and a North American. This experience is similar to twilight, a place in between light and dark. For the past two years, my art has been about deconstructing and reconstructing identity. I deconstructed my Puerto Rican cultural identity by removing any evidence of that cultural heritage in my work. I then adopted the notion of, “I am what I allow myself to consume”, i.e. meaning from the time of the deconstructed Puerto Rican cultural identity, a new identity transformed into *that* which I allowed myself to consume and *that* is defined as I am the sum of my experiences and of choices I have made. Next, I attempted to deconstruct gender in my work. Choosing/placing myself as the subject, I began to transform myself to appear androgenous. The subject in some of my images, began to appear androgynous. I then placed myself in neutralized spaces, void of any material goods that may indicate any reference to social class. I used my own body as subject and site in which to illustrate these investigations on Identity. I am fascinated in the visceral object/abject body, transforming itself through exaggerated or subtle body distortions and manipulations. For me, this transformation is reflective of how I visualize the transforming

or morphing of identities.

My latest work is an attempt to reflect on transformations of identity, through a fabricated persona. This imaginary person is universal, neutralizing gender, class and race. What would be the common imaginary language of this imagined identity? I purposely designed a common visual communication associated with the expressive qualities of emotion.

The process began while taking images of my own facial expressions, using a digital camera. I am simultaneously the spectator and the spectacle in my work. I use my physical form as the subject in my work, because it is easier for me to conduct myself in front and behind the camera, rather than have someone else do it. Ultimately, I am most comfortable using my own self in my work as subject. I feel free to express myself, rather than if someone else was physically in the space with me. All of my images are produced as prints created with a digital camera. The digital camera functions as a tool, a recording device, a digitized memory of trace. I prefer to shoot images digitally, rather than on film for the reason that digital technology allows me to create prints instantaneously in a “lightroom”, as opposed to going through the chemical process of developing photographic prints in a darkroom. I manipulate my images digitally, some more than others by exaggerating and/or saturating formal elements by use of scale, light, color, and layering images or placing them in categories. All of this is done to create emotional emphasis and impact. Large scale is about the power of the notion of “I am *that* in which I consume”. Small scale intentionally creates an intimate space between the viewer and the image. The element of power is represented when these small scale images are numerous and exhibited together.

*“As we move into the digital, the aesthetics of form become more and more involved in aesthetics of mutable form.” Peter Lunenfeld,
Director of the Institute for Technology and Aesthetics*

My work is about identity and transformation. In the space, my work will be exhibited in, I am interested in the viewer experiencing my work in an unconventional manner, i.e. having the

work exhibited from the ceiling and/or on the floor, in a corner, on the underside of a chair, etc, etc. My work is about identity, but also I feel that my emphasis is on transformation, transmutation, flux, and the inevitability of change . I am interested in the viewer having to physically transform themselves in order to view the work. That way, I feel they may be able to experience the work more directly.

My latest work will be small digital prints presented side by side in a segmented grid format. One of the works will go in a directional line. This piece will read like a mutative narrative. At one end of the piece, the color is light and the other end of the piece, the color is darker. From one end to the other, each frame will be slightly modified from the next. An image can be seen in the middle of the directional line piece. *Twilight* is the name of this piece. This work as well as my other pieces are about loss or morphing of identity and being “stuck” or perhaps lost in between one identity and another.

My other works are earlier pieces, created a year or so ago and will be shown along with the *Twilight* piece. These earlier works are large 2-dimensional digital prints of morphed images of my face, caught in midst of a transformation. Each large print is monochromatic, in red, purple, or blue. For me, each of these colors, particularly in large scale, create strong emotional emphasis. I believe, during the time, my work began to read as “caught” between one identity and another. For me, being Puerto Rican living in the United States, sometimes feels like a tug-of-war, with one culture at one end and another culture at the other end and I’m in the middle being torn apart. This led up to my latest work, titled *Twilight*.

Twilight will consist of segmented small scale images. This work may be read as a visual typology presented in a grid form. This grid has narrative characteristics removed. Each image is a face with minimal lighting. The androgynous face in the images is to be experienced empathetically and essentially. The main function of the light source is to illuminate the facial expression. The light also works as a source which draws a bridge of communication between the image and the viewer. I am hoping viewers will experience the work empathetically. For me, the grid signifies systems, i.e. social systems, class systems, etc. It is constructed by links and

connections that human beings need adhere to for acceptance, acknowledgment and belonging. Simplistically put, the grid interconnects. One strand of the grid would not hold up without the other. I sometimes look at systems as categories in life. I believe, we categorize in order to identify things outside of ourselves, so then we can justify identity we give ourselves. I believe, we in society are forever seeking systems that we can identify with and/or exclude others, in order to have a sense of belonging to something.

Through my explorations in issues concerning my identity, I have become aware that through what may seem a loss of my identity may be a morphing of identity. At times, elements of one identity may become transmuted into another identity. I tried to represent the in-between phase in my work. At times, I feel as if I am caught between one identity and another and I felt it important to represent that in this work.

Many artists influenced my latest work. One artist is Nancy Burson, a digital artist, who suggests, “there is only one race, the human one” in her 2002 work entitled, *Human Race Machine*, a viewing-booth apparatus that can transform the user’s photographic image with the facial characteristics of six different races (similar to the digital morphing seen in Michael Jackson’s 1991 music video, *Black or White*). Other work which inspired me are the North American and Venezuelan artists, Anthony Aziz and Sammy Cucher respectfully. They created *Dystopia*. A series of digital portraits in which the heads are devoid of any expressive feature or orifice, representing a loss of personal identity.

As an artist, my purpose is to communicate. It is important to me that the viewer be impacted in some way by my work. Although, it does not answer questions. I hope the work will engage others to think further about issues concerning identity. It’s also my hope that my audience sees themselves extended through my work as I sense a part of myself, my identity within each of them.

