

# SIGHT LINES MAGAZINE

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### BODY MEMORY: IN “FIGURES,” A QUARTET OF WOMEN ARTISTS EXAMINE TRAUMA AND THE BODY

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Photo Courtesy DORF

Two large vessels perch on top of cinder blocks in the entryway of DORF, the new Austin house gallery. Each urn is earth toned, a deep reddish brown hue reminiscent of the desert, the color nevertheless offset by the detailed engraving of words painted in concentric circles.

The words carry a significant weight — they are the poems of artist Gabo Martini, and in both English and Spanish, tell the stories of her history, her formation as a person, and her family. The vessels — “Untitled (Mis Demonios)” and “Untitled (Querido Hermano)” — share a very personal history of pain in vibrant, colorful lettering in contrast to the vessel’s warm tones.

The pair of vessels serve as the introduction to “Figures,” an exhibition of work by four women — Martini, Barbara Miñarro, Teruko Nimura, and Maja Ruznic — who explore history, memory and trauma.

Some psychologists have recently argued that the body reacts and retains certain moments of extreme traumas in the body which then becomes imbedded in the DNA. This trauma is then passed down through generations through familial lineage just as much as the shape of one’s nose, or the color of one’s eyes.

“Figures” uses this concept to illustrate how these four artists in particular communicate this generational memory through references to the body while maintaining a

formal, art historical reference to the figure itself. Uniformly, that idea is communicated organically between the artists and the physical objects they made. Yet it also becomes politically charged as each of the four women use references to the female figure, memory, and transgenerational trauma to illustrate moments of a past pertinent to the present, thus reliving traumas that unfortunately seem to recycle themselves openly in public political spheres.

Miñarro's soft and supple forms drape and fold dramatically, and hang from the ceiling. Vaguely anthropomorphic, they seem like they'll explode from their own casings and their fleshy toned fabric has an organic sensibility. But a considered look makes clear the flesh tones are placed in a strategic and thoughtful manner.

"No Entiendo (I Cannot Understand)" is a woven piece reminiscent of a flag in its shape and form, but takes reclaimed clothing from women beloved to the artist. It's a quiet comment on nationalism, patriotism, and the subsequent movement of bodies — specifically female — between borders, and Miñarro's voice reinforces the political sentiment underlying this exhibition.

Each of these four women is either a first- or second-generation United States citizen. And each uses nuance as well as a formal visual language to connect their histories and memories into a collective identity — a radical gesture in our current era of binary identity politics.

While the politics of the exhibition remain a thread through the work, the formal elements of the work also tie the show together. Ruznic's soft sculptures and paintings remain within the visual vocabulary of the exhibition while adding a strong voice in the exhibition. Ruznic's small figures speak with Miñarro's large scale works, but here the body has been mutilated, and Ruznic's visual language speaks to generations of history through which the female body has been objectified and vilified.

"One Arm" is a small and delicately created soft sculpture with one of its arms missing or incomplete. The tiny piece is a contradiction of traditional standards of beauty, it is a work so carefully crafted yet intentionally disfigured, a nod to the impossible standards and expectations for beauty in general, but especially for women.

The work in "Figures" vacillates between formal references and political ones and between histories and memories that seem to have become irrelevant or forgotten.

Nimura's smaller, site specific sculpture, "Black Wave 1, (1000 cranes for Fukushima)," for example, monumentalizes the story of the nuclear disaster at Fukushima following an earthquake in March of 2011. In the yard adjacent to the gallery space, one thousand blue paper cranes clump together in an organic, twisting wave that's perched atop a blue plinth. Employing the visual presentation of traditional historical monuments, Nimura's delicate sculpture is an alternative reminder of repeated histories. Yet in her monument, the geographic place of the trauma is as important as the human figure, the land's physical damage bearing scars just as the body does.

And it's that idea that is the show's fundamental premise. If history does indeed repeat itself, then the body is literally a vessel that holds onto trauma as it is experienced, and the summation of that trauma is lived generationally.