
The Presence of the Body

Interview with Rosemary Meza-DesPlas by Viola Arduini, 516 ARTS Education & Outreach Coordinator



As we put 2020 behind us, we all are deeply affected by a year full of distances and silences due to the pandemic, as well as a time when diverse voices about social justice have been raised and continue to resonate in the streets. At 516 ARTS, we have been thinking about how to make space for some of these voices. When we invited curator Andrea R. Hanley (Navajo) to curate the recent *Feminisms* exhibition, the idea was to create a show in which a variety of voices and ideas about gender, identity, and self-determination could coexist and be in conversation.

To this end, I reached out to *Feminisms* artist Rosemary Meza-DesPlas from Farmington, New Mexico to ask her about her views on feminism, the politics of the body, her family history as a Latinx artist, and how art can help visualize the tensions and conflicts around these themes.

VA: Your practice directly uses the female body as a medium, in the form of your own hair. What do you see to be the role of the physical body as a political force in relationship to what you see happening around us?

RMD: Physical bodies became human walls of resistance during the protest marches of 2020. The controversial *Walls of Moms* in Portland, Oregon gained national attention; notwithstanding, linked arms during demonstrations were a standardized maneuver of solidarity. Bodily poses of resistance, taking a knee and the raised arm with clenched fist, were ubiquitous images in mass media. Globally, marching was the simplest use of the physical body as a political force.

The vast numbers of clamorous bodies in motion translated to a robust show of strength and determination. Tenacious and recurring protest marches forefronted racial injustice; they swept across metropolitan areas and agricultural communities. The longevity of the marches reflected body endurance. Across our southern border, Mexico's surge of demonstrations highlighted the increase of femicides in 2020. Women painted their hands red and protesters covered in fake blood lay down in plazas. Their bodies became canvases railing against gender-based violence. Art historically, there are women performance artists who have utilized their bodies as political forces such as Regina José Galindo. Her performance *Quien Puede Borrar Las Huellas (Who Can Erase the Traces)* involved a bloody footprint path from Constitutional Court to the National Palace in

Guatemala City. Galindo sought to bring visibility to thousands of disappeared indigenous people during Guatemala's civil war.

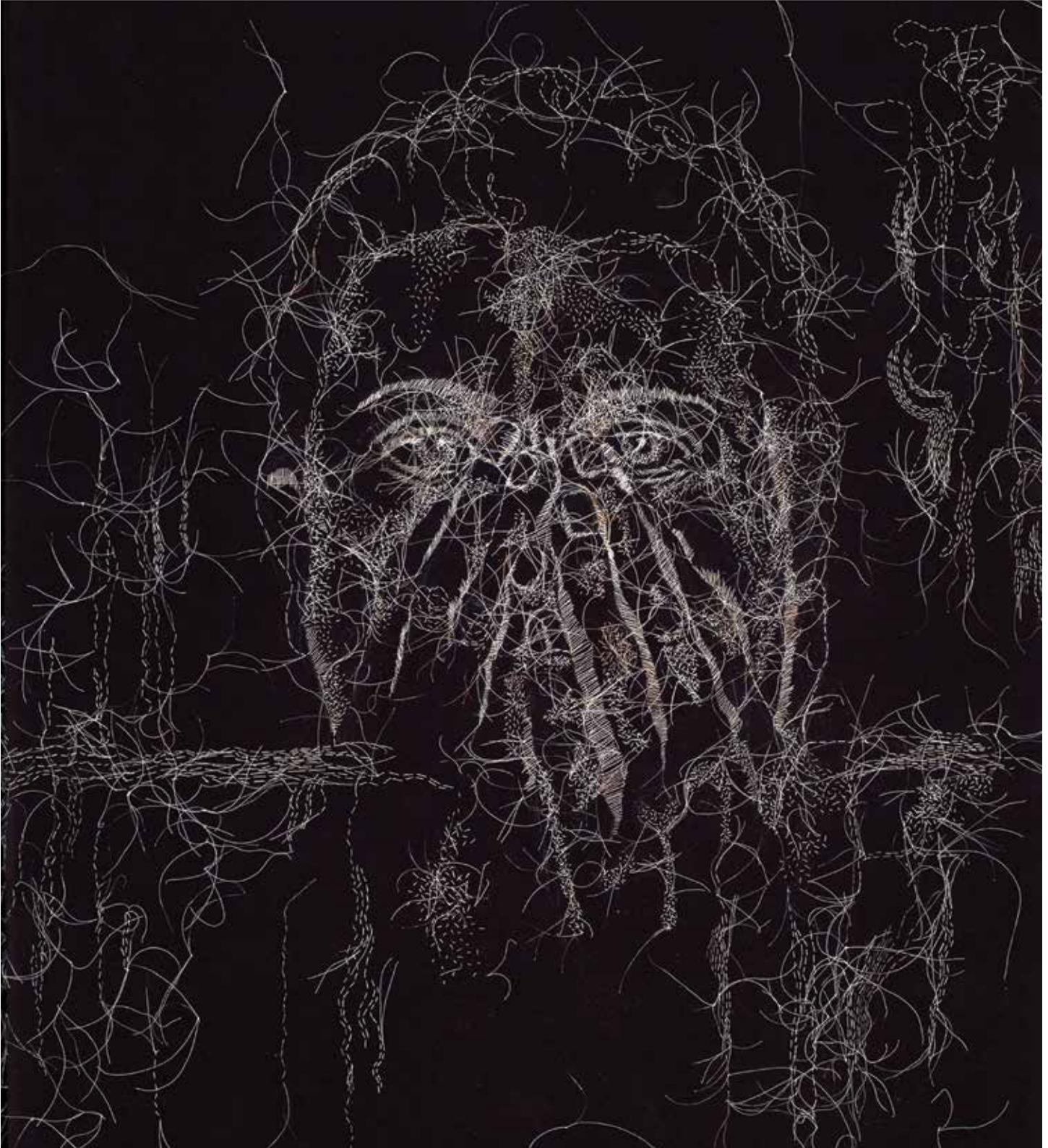
VA: In your hair drawings, the dichotomy between beauty and repulsion is explored and used to engage the viewer. What is the role of this tension in your quest to express ideas around gender-based conflict?

My artwork is created within the framework of a series. In response to gender-based conflict, I center my ideas upon contrast. Logical social structures rely on a complementary system of opposites; stereotypical gender roles presented in images are part of this system. My ability to engage the viewer is predicated upon drawing them into my work with provocative images all the while advocating gender equality. This strategy was inspired by Robert Colescott's "one-two-punch." Colescott, a visiting artist for my graduate program at MICA, presented painful cultural truths and recast them in humorous scenes of playful, bright colors. This maneuver of enticing the viewer in tandem with delivering what can be unpleasant messages became the fulcrum of Colescott's artistic practice. In 2014 I wrote and published an article titled *Chicks with Guns: The Links Between Violence, Sexuality, and Femininity in Images*. The series of artworks which correlated to the article juxtaposed the soft female body with hard steel weaponry. By exploring the visual perception of female empowerment in contemporary film, I questioned if femininity and sexuality were power sources or merely eye candy reinforcing gender stereotypes. Did female action heroes undermine coherent social structures and challenge gender roles?

VA: 516 ARTS often investigates the complex stories and histories of the US/Mexico border region. Your personal history is also rooted in and deeply connected to the border. In your statement, you mentioned that you are descended from eight aunts who faced tragedies and adversities along the US/Mexico border. How do you see your roots affecting your practice and viewpoints, in particular regarding art, identity, and the female experience?

RMD: While growing up in the seventies I wore shorts and shirts, based on Simplicity patterns, sewn by my mother. My childish eyes gazed longingly at the cool clothes in the local Kmart, but instead I resolved myself to wearing hand-sewn apparel. Years later, as an artist in my studio, I am sewing: my hand grasps a small needle and moves in a choreographed fashion in and out. I sit, stitching feminist imagery related to socio-political issues. The process of sewing to create or embellish images

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Rosemary Meza-DesPlas, *Yo También*, 2018, hand sewn gray hair of the artist on black twill fabric, 25 x 21 inches



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corresponds to cultural background. Sewing, as a functional craft form, has a long history in Mexican culture. Its handiwork can be seen in many forms within the community, such as on quilts, *huipil*, and *quechquémitl*. *The seam es una linea visible de union entre dos partes.* (The seam is a visible line that unifies two parts.) In a metaphorical manner, I think the seam is the hyphen in Mexican-American, conjoining two cultures. The female experience is multidimensional: the experience spans different social spaces such as the society, the community, and the household. As I move through these spaces, I am a Latina and an American.

VA: You are also a prolific writer and performer. How do your writing and spoken word practice relate, nourish, and shape your visual art practice and vice versa?

RMD: The inception of any given theme is rooted in my investigation of socio-political issues. Part of my studio process involves researching a potential theme and examining it from a multiplicity of viewpoints. Hastily scribbled impressions in my sketchbook launched my initial quasi-academic writing. Eventually, I formally composed these ideas. By 2013, I wrote and published my first paper *Desired: The Norm of Imperfection for MOD Art'13 Beauty and Ugliness Conference* (Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul, Turkey).

Researching the female image in Western art history served as a catalyst for my own self-reflection. Retrospectively, how did my approach to depicting the human figure evolve and transform over the last two decades? Based on this experience, I became aware of how writing is the window into the gears and cogs of my artistic persona. Likewise, haphazard verses of poetry in my sketchbooks morphed and shifted into staged performances. A poem might be a signpost for a specific artwork, while another poem may correlate to an entire series of artworks. Threads of thematic continuity link poetry and visual artwork. As I designed my spoken word performances, it was evident that visual presence was as important as articulated words. My spoken word performances involve the creation of costumes, memorization, choreography, and rehearsal. Performances become frank

vignettes of tempos and characters. The characters bespeak the socio-political issues in my artworks.

VA: Finally, as one of the artists in the *Feminisms* exhibition, how would you describe your particular feminism?

RMD: For me, feminism is resilience and courage. One of my favorite quotes is from Clementine Ford's *Fight Like a Girl*. She says, "Faith in the feminist identity can feel like pushing shit uphill while having more giant buckets of shit fired at you from a cannon constructed entirely out of shit." As a Latina, I live day-to-day in a racist, patriarchal world. My successful navigation of this world is dependent upon using these resourceful tools: visual art, academic writing, poetry and spoken word performance. As a feminist, I belong in this world and I have a role in society.

Rosemary Meza-DesPlas currently lives in Farmington, New Mexico. The cornerstone of her artwork is the female experience within a patriarchal society. She earned a MFA from Maryland Institute, College of Art (Hoffberger School of Painting) and a BFA from the University of North Texas. Her artwork has been exhibited at numerous galleries and museums throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia. Her work has been written about in the Huffington Post, Dallas Morning News, The Durango Herald, Wall Street International, and Interview Magazine. Ms. Meza-DesPlas parallels the themes in her visual artwork with the written word and spoken word performances.