

## The Magic of Memory: Reimagining Resilience in Diasporic Puerto Rican Art

By Jasper A. Sanchez

Tenderly placed in a corner of *Unaccustomed Earth* is a warm and welcoming assortment of items recognizable to many Caribbean Latin Americans: a wicker bowl of tropically colored decorative fruits, a hand-carved wooden mortar and pestle, and a sharp yellow package of Café Bustelo. I recognized these tributes to the exhibition from a studio visit with one of the show's two featured artists, Emily Rose, in East Boston. I was welcomed into her at-home studio with *cafecito* and the delicious smells of her sister cooking a celebratory meal for a family gathering later that evening. While that corner of Puerto Rican home goods was not labeled as an art object in her studio or in the gallery, its function as a conduit for feelings of home grounded me in the magic of memory that swirled around *Unaccustomed Earth*.

In the exhibition, Emily Rose and Beatriz Whitehill— both emerging diasporic Puerto Rican artists— use painting, sculpture, and malleable ideas of collage to tell stories of migration's impact on the construction of identity and the responsibility of ancestral inheritance across time and place. Yet, despite being deeply personal portraits of memories, stories, and places that each artist grew up hearing about or seeing through their families, the artworks in *Unaccustomed Earth* collectively present a dream-like sense of love, loss, and longing shared by many immigrant families. In the wake of being untethered,

paintings of family, friends, and self, together with lush landscapes and reimagined objects of domestic intimacy, show how Rose and Whitehill fuse memory and mythology as an act of resilience and self-discovery.

We can begin to understand both artists' creative practices by contextualizing them within the wider discourses of Latinx and Decolonial studies. Grappling with a sense of otherness in American culture as a first or second-generation immigrant has been theorized upon by various Latine writers, with luminary Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal text

*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* laying the groundwork for the concept of "border thinking," which has been further built upon by Argentine scholar Walter D. Mignolo. Border thinking suggests inhabiting a state of in-

between as a decolonial position that disrupts "the divide between a bounded self and the reality of multiple subject positions" (Morales 2018, 15). As Boricua diasporic creatives working from a place of in-betweenness, looking at Rose and Whitehill's artworks through the lens of border thinking helps us understand the possibilities of self-liberation and forms of resistance that emerge from their surreal imagery. Ed Morales, author and journalist from Columbia University's Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race, writes:



1. Emily Rose, Untitled Installation, *Unaccustomed Earth*. 2023. Basket, wooden fruit, mortar and pestle, Café Bustelo, cloth and mal de ojo bracelet. Variable dimensions.

*Rather than finding new paths to assimilation, they (Latinx and other people of color struggling to define themselves outside of whiteness) are discovering the other that exists within themselves, the one previously relegated to unconscious dreams of Iberia, Africa, Aztlán, and the Moors transferred to the New World. They are finding that the “otro yo,” the inner dialogue between indigenous and diasporic utterance and African origins and the media-reified urban Latino reality, is becoming foregrounded by practices such as hip-hop, jazz, and plena, folkloric retellings of syncretic religion, and work songs. These are counter-narratives that are forms of resistance (Morales 2018, 17).*

Rose and Whitehill’s individual practices can be viewed as counter-narratives to the anglicized American dream, merging influences of Caribbean folklore and spirituality into personal dreamscapes of family and the shapeshifting places we call home. Through it all, the indigenous and African origins of Puerto Rico as a colony emerge, connecting their stories and struggles to a wider history of globalization and migration.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Beatriz Whitehill’s magical realist-inspired paintings provide viewers with multi-dimensional moments that are at once dreamy, chaotic, and serene. Taking the above position of Latinx creation as counter-narrative forms of resistance, Whitehill’s paintings can be looked at as a dialogue between the internal self and multigenerational narratives that have been disrupted by geopolitical intervention in Puerto Rico and Latin America. In *Untitled* (2023) shadows of two figures illuminate a wall as they pass by. The shadow on the right of the composition contains a field

of sugarcane in night blue tones, a lone farmer, and hidden eyes among the plants as if surveilling the laborer. The second shadow, at the center of the painting, warps those blue fields in its arms and legs into a contrasting landscape of fiery reds, oranges, and accents of pink. The shadow’s torso tells a story leading upward: colonial officers, recognizable by their uniforms, ride horses while hunting on a coastline marked by palm trees and a Spanish galleon in the sea. The sunset-colored clouds above the coast travel across time and turn into the toxic fumes of a factory’s tall, cylindrical smokestack. The fumes then envelop modern houses and automobiles before the entire scene becomes engulfed in flames and floodwater. Finally, we are confronted with a face, perhaps a



2. Beatriz Whitehill, *Untitled*. 2023. Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 in. Image courtesy of Beacon Gallery.

victim, and the barrel of a gun held firmly pointed at the viewer. The weight of all this personal and ecological violence, and this entire history exists in the shadow of a single figure, darkly tanned and wearing a cap, connoted to be a Latine migrant. Whitehill's painting is a story of grappling with one's heritage as a post-colonial descendant and its inextricable relationship to the violent history of the United States of America. As Ed Morales noted in Juan González's *Harvest of Empire*, "Latin American immigration substantially differed from European immigration because it was caused by direct American military and economic intervention. The extraction and emergence of US imperialism was the main driving force behind Mestizaje..." (Morales 2018, 81).

As we uncover the layers of meaning in Whitehill's paintings, we begin to understand the nuance of diasporic narratives from a border-thinking artist. Take, for instance, the nearby painting *remind me what that fruit was called again* (2023), in which emerald and jade fruit-bearing tree branches entangle the sky and branch down into the foreground, obscuring the face of a lone farmer picking at the trees. Faces instead are found amongst the fallen fruit at the base of the farmer's boots, while sunglasses, eyebrow ridges, noses, and lips erupt among the fruit tree's bushes. Where the leaves meet sky, the humanoid fruit transforms into the mischievous folkloric masks of creatures called *vejigantes* in Puerto Rican folklore, a recurring feature of Whitehill's paintings. The work's title invokes a

question familiar to any bilingual person thinking between two languages: "Remind me what that is called again?" It recalls the feeling of remembering language or stories with family in a homeland—how enriching it is to harvest the fruit of our culture from our loved ones. Yet, when presented in relation to other paintings such as *Untitled* (2023), the scene also suggests harvesting as a metaphor reflecting Puerto Rico's ongoing resistance to American exploitation and the extraction of its resources.



3. Beatriz Whitehill, *remind me what that fruit was called again*. 2023. Oil on canvas. 30 x 40 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

A tenet of Whitehill's practice is her consideration of her paintings as collages reflecting the layering of stories in ancestral narratives. Much like quilting together the fragments of memory given to her by various family members to piece together her identity, the artist aims to replicate the experience of navigating layered pieces of stories through thoughtfully crafted details in her paintings, rewarding viewers who look closely. While some works like *Ya voy* (2020) and *chisme* (2022) incorporate traditional mixed media collage methods via the layered application of material

to the canvas, others use collage as a malleable metaphor for building dynamic compositions, such as *I was there* (2021).

Co-exhibiting multidisciplinary artist Emily Rose further pushes the boundaries of collage by repurposing objects associated with family and home. Archival photographs, handheld mirrors, satin headscarves, beans, coconut husks, and more are remixed into tactile portraits of Rose's heritage and memories, serving a similar purpose to Whitehill's

paintings as quiltings of multigenerational narratives.

The magic of Emily Rose’s practice lies in the manifestation of ritual, connecting the mundane to the holy in the artist’s search for belonging and healing in the wake of ancestral trauma as a diasporic Caribeña. Objects like *Cepillo de Coco* (2022), a hairbrush made of coconut husk, human hair, and wood on a seashell, and *Untitled* (2023), a desktop vanity mirror anchored by sand in a coconut shell, invoke the uncanny of Surrealist works like Meret Oppenheim’s fur-lined porcelain teacup, *Object* (1936). Unlike Oppenheim and other Surrealists aiming to invoke discomfort by toying with associations from the unconscious mind, however, Rose’s sculptures are grounded by feelings of connection and comfort hailing from familial rituals of care. Coconut oil is commonly used to treat hair in Caribbean cultures, and intimate associations inspire Rose’s use of coconut as a material capable of connecting her to her ancestral homeland in the everyday.

References to the culture of hair care are a common thread in Rose’s exhibited artworks. *Hairtiage* (2023) is an installation of hand-held mirrors and framed pictures of the artist and her family, arranged above *Mesa Blanca* (2023), a woven chair holding a crumpled resin-dipped lace doily that has an image transfer of a child in what appears to be a ceremonial, white satin outfit. As the namesake suggests, the work is an altar to Rose’s heritage. In another corner of the gallery, visitors encounter *La Doobie Doobie* (2023), thirty satin headscarves stitched together and dangling from the ceiling to the floor into a basket of curling irons and hair dryers lying on bunched fabric. Unseen are the timeless hours put into the hand-sewing of this 25 by 7-foot piece, Rose’s manifestation of the labor and care her mother put towards her and her siblings in a

nightly ritual she playfully called “La Doobie Doobie”—tenderly wrapping the long, curly hair of her daughters with satin scarves before bed.



4 Emily Rose, *Hairtiage*. 2023. Framed photographs and mirrors. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Sian Michael/ShowUp.

Emily Rose’s collaging of domestic objects into spiritually charged conduits for ancestral memory can be read as an act of resilience in the wake of migration and assimilation that is informed by “botánica awareness,” a term coined by Nuyorican legend and member of the Young Lords Eddie Figueroa. Botánica awareness is a worldview formed by diasporic experiences of botánicas, “Afro-Caribbean pharmacies that dispense religious medicine and counsel and serve non-Western others in barrios from the Bronx to Brooklyn,” and can also be found in ethnic Latine communities around the nation (Morales 2018, 115). In *Latinx: The New Force in American Politics and Culture*, Ed Morales further quotes Figueroa’s definition of botánica awareness as:

*the belief in magic, the belief in a multidimensional universe, the belief in simultaneous eternal time, that what we’re seeing is only a part of what it is, and that this is inside of something else, and that the real mystery, the real point of all of this is the investigation, the navigation of the self, of the heart, the spirit, because that is where the truth is* (Morales 2018, 115).

Rose manifests ritual beyond intimate practices of care in paintings like *Feliz Cumpleaños* (2022) and *Ocho Años* (2022), both depictions of photographed family gatherings around a table, like the birthday of the artist's grandmother and sister, respectively. In our studio visit, Rose shared how she remembered her family celebrating all the time and her house never being empty. After her father passed away, however, rituals of celebration became less frequent. In *Feliz Cumpleaños*, Rose's father is portrayed with a golden halo around his head, transforming the painting into a timeless and holy moment of communion. Rose's paintings reconcile feelings of grief and the responsibility of maintaining culture as time and people pass. In both *Feliz Cumpleaños* and *Ocho Años*, the family dinner table is a sacred site, and it is also one that Whitehill reimagines in her work *Sobre la mesa, lo que sobró* (2023), shown directly under *Feliz Cumpleaños* in the exhibition.



5. Emily Rose, *Feliz Cumpleaños*. 2022. Acrylic on canvas. 16 x 20 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

Whitehill's painting of the dinner table also presents it as a site of intergenerational community and gathering, yet instead of using people, she uses intricate landscapes to tell a story in embroidery. The white lace doily on the

edge of the table (a common Puerto Rican craft, also seen in works by Rose) shows a journey in miniature: mountains, palm trees, and rainstorms lead into an airplane flying across the ocean before arriving in a cityscape of American urbanism. Below the table, the stained-glass windows of a Catholic church shine through, marking the tale above as spiritual as well as physical.

Rose and Whitehill's paintings bring us to the dinner table as the culmination of a journey—one full of magic, loss, love, and transformation. Both artists use magical realism as a tool for investigating their heritage and finding personal truth. Their strength not only comes from enacting philosophies of border thinking or botánica awareness, but also from looking to the magic behind the memories and stories of their family, past and present.

*November 2023. Commissioned Essay for Beacon Gallery's Unaccustomed Earth (Exhibition Dates: November 3, 2023 - January 14, 2024)*



## References

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2012. *Borderlands/La*

*Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco:

Aunt Lute Books.

Morales, Ed. 2018. *Latinx: The New Force in*

*American Politics and Culture*. New York City:

Verso.