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YOU WON'T LEAVE THE WAY YOU CAME. IN CONVERSATION WITH BONY RAMIREZ

By Angela N. Carroll

Not A Priority to the Careless

"WHEN I SHOW A LOT OF THE MORE QUEER CARIBBEAN & LATIN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN THE WORK, A LOT OF THOSE COMMUNITIES ARE CLOSE-MINDED, SOMETIMES ITS TRICKY TO OPEN UP ABOUT THOSE THINGS."

Is there a nation free from the blood of its dissidents? Few, if any. We normalize and minimize that uncomfortable truth. We pathologize critical engagement with the horrors of history and downplay the ways the forefathers of empire have marked all generations. The body and the land bear witness. History is now. Lifetimes of trauma and healing are rooted in the crane and crook of our genetic code. The arch and bend of Bony Ramirez's painted bodies embolden this truth. History scars, deforms, and mutates everyone it touches. Memory is never fixed. The passage of time, as it's recalled by the evidence of now, is always in flux. Who will inherit the histories of the world? Our blemished bodies and the scorched earth.

Is it odd to think about Ramirez's work as a restorative practice? Even as the limbless protagonists in his paintings pose dead-eyed for our consumption? Queered caricatures of grief and desire. Distortion of the perceptible body, what we observe and what the artist wants us to read, is a strategic aesthetic recurrence. Ramirez doesn't identify himself as a collagist, but his conceptual approach to painting employs collage techniques. He mines history, piecing together embodiments of the Caribbean and her people in ways that unsettle an apathetic propensity to exoticize Black and Brown bodies.

In one recent collection, *The HomoTropical* series, Ramirez created small collage works on marble that critique sex tourism in the Caribbean. These pieces shed light on the exploitation and closeting of Caribbean and Latin American experience.

"When I show a lot of the more queer Caribbean experience or queer Latin American experience in the work, when a lot of those communities are obviously homophobic or close-minded, sometimes its tricky to open up about those things in the work." Ramirez explained."... There's a lot of performance of masculinity that comes into that space that I sometimes do put into the work...As I become more comfortable with just talking about it more, the more that I put it in the work, and the more that I feel myself a little bit more."

Ramirez's references are relatively obscure, suggested rather than clearly defined, but his depiction of violence is cutting. The barbarity of history leaves visible traces on the body. In many ongoing series, his subjects are disembodied haunts. Literal amputees. It's difficult to digest the cannibalized forms Ramirez paints. This is intentional and compounds the way he renders his figurations and how viewers receive the scene. The exchange is always disturbing. Histories too unhinged to be forgotten.

RAMIREZ PAINTS THE CARIBBEAN AND ITS PEOPLE AS BEINGS WHO TRANSMUTE THEIR TRAUMAS AND EMERGE TRANSFORMED.

How does one depict the pathologies of self-hate conjured through calls-to-action like “Mejorar la Raza,” an intergenerational push to erase all traces of Black blood? Fever dreams. Contorted torsos with elongated arms and fingers. A people dwelling in the alienness of excommunication from their own homes, like Haitian descendants in the Dominican Republic. Ramirez’s resilient portraits romanticize and reject the spectacle of colonial violence that pronounces itself in the melee of postcoloniality. His portraits’ unflinching eyes are wild awake.

In many paintings, the beings are surrounded by protective emblems. Horns, machetes, and daggers chronically penetrate fleshy canvas, uneasy domesticity, and the dense soil of cane fields. The surrealness of their condition complicates the legibility of the incident. The protagonists are often emboldened warriors who upset their presumed position as victims.

“I like to look at history a lot.” Ramirez continued, “I feel like a lot of people don’t understand or know much about the Caribbean or how the Caribbean became what it is today. I think that’s where the idea of showing that history as it really was, that was important in the work. I didn’t want to sugarcoat in any kind of way. I think that’s where the violence plays a bigger role in the work.”

The folkloric traditions of the DR, African traditional religions (ATRs), magical realism, and the iconography of Catholicism remain clear transfiguring influences. In *Feeding a Child of the Ocean* (2020), Ramirez portrays a blue-duraged brown Madonna. A Yemoja conch shaped like a nipple suckles a Black baby cradled in the Madonna’s crooked arms. The Madonna is larger than the abstracted ocean at her back. Her head rises above the waves into a bright yellow horizon. Weary-eyed, the Madonna turns her gaze up toward the sky.

Ramirez paints the Caribbean and its people as beings who transmute their traumas, and emerge transformed, odd, and fantastical. Empowered even while dismembered, they are totems unto themselves. In some iterations, when the bodies of his protagonists are mutilated, the absent extremities are reconstructed into budding vines or the appendages of animals. So too are the parts left unmarred rejuvenated. Like the ears on his portraits that are rendered as colorful helicoid portals. A radical imagining that testifies to the truth that they are all tuned into something more ancient than empire.

Oro Fino (2022) is an otherworldly portrait of an ethereal being, leopard legs and tail, a conch shell torso, and the head of a woman. It postures against bright pink. Poses in its oddity unashamed and unflinching. It reminds me of the trickster legends, El Bacà and La Ciguapa. Both shape-shifters, creolizations of the

I TRY MY BEST TO BREAK THAT SEXUAL APPEAL OF THEIR BODIES. THE NIPPLES TWISTING AND BENDING, ...THAT IS ONE WAY THAT DISTORTED BODIES TURNS INTO PLAY.

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RAMIREZ'S PAINTINGS EXPLORE THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE, MIGRATION, AND FAITH ON THE INTERGENER-ATIONAL PSYCHE AND BODY.

ancient and the new world. One curses the lands of those who live where exploitation has spoiled what once was. The other devours those who would corrupt nature, and confuses their hunt for her with feet always oriented in the opposite direction.

"Even with the body not being completely anatomically correct. I try my best, of course, I can't control how the viewer sees a lot of times, but I try my best to kind of break that sexual appeal of their bodies. For example, the nipples twisting and bending, because that is something that is very sexual all the time in nude paintings. So that is one way that distorted bodies turns into play."

Ramirez's paintings explore the impact of violence, migration, and faith on the intergenerational psyche and body. To the memory body and the ways our corporeal forms learn to cope with that remembering. We spoke at length about the ways he tries to honor women. He shared a story about his mother and the ways she had to sacrifice and strengthen herself to migrate to America with her two children. He is adamant about presenting women with reverence, even when they are portrayed violently.

"Women figures, [I] always try to put them in positions of power or higher positions, depending on the painting. A lot of times, I may do something that may critique something that has to do with the figure. But for the most part, I try my best to always be as respectful as possible," Ramirez affirmed.

The threatening triumph of Ramirez's work is that his subjects maintain their magic despite devastation, brokenness, and the unspeakable abuses they have survived. This glitch in the empirical timeline asserts new possibilities beyond the spectacle of violence that is normalized against women and people of color. Honestly, I am unsettled by Ramirez's work. He is not pleading for respectability. The triggers he induces challenge us all to be present and earnestly review our collective scars from inheriting known and unknowable haunting histories. Discomfort has always been a catalyst for evolution. It's impossible to observe Ramirez's work and leave the way you came.

Bony Ramirez (b. 1996, Tenares, Dominican Republic) is based in Jersey City, NJ. His work appears in the collections of ICA Miami, the Newark Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Pérez Art Museum Miami. He was named to *Forbes'* 30 Under 30 list in 2023.

Visit: www.bonyramirez.com
IG: @bonyramirezz

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