



**IN THE  
STUDIO**

**LAUREN  
SCHELL  
DICKENS**



## In the Studio

Though the practice of collage can be traced back hundreds of years, in a western art historical timeline its origins are in the wake of World War One when artists embraced the medium's disruptive potential. Dadaists and Surrealists ripped apart materials like newsprint, magazines, and photographs, literally and conceptually dismantling wholeness. They composed scenes built of jarring juxtapositions and fragments, evocative of the discord of their war-torn Europe. In 2022, our understanding of the world as shattered and fractured is palpable. Any sense of an imagined community bound by shared events in a daily newspaper has been dispelled (either recently or long ago), as fake news, ideological echo chambers, and rampant inequities shape entirely different contemporary experiences. Each of us are left, either to be swept up in the algorithmically shaped reality of our social media feeds, or to attentively, deliberately pick and choose which archives, if any, uphold meaning in our lived reality. Today's challenge is to learn to live with fragmentation, to build with these shards, and suture a self together.

The range of material references and contexts that converge in Felipe Baeza's practice is wide and personal. Tacked to his studio walls are images of Mesoamerican Aztec gods, icons of Catholic devotion, a reproduction of Graciela Iturbide's portrait of a muxe Zapotec person, images of Pre-Columbian stone figurines, reproductions of self-portraits by artists David Wojnarowicz and Kerry James Marshall, a portrait of James Baldwin, human ana-

tomical studies, images clipped from fashion and pornographic magazines, dried botanicals and drawn botanical studies, books on Pre-Columbian terracotta and ceramics, and vintage copies of *Your Physique* magazine. Each of these sources resonate richly within Baeza's practice, and several come from larger collections. *Adiós a Calibán*, as well as several other collage series, are drawn from an archive of Pre-Columbian terracotta art objects that was catalogued and published by the Mexican government to substantiate a nationalist identity, and a collection of fashion and vintage pornography magazines, some of which were gifted to the artist by a professor at Cooper Union. The figures in these archives are each bound by particular constraints, but when layered atop one another—an act at the heart of Baeza's practice—their clarity blurs. Images and bodies piled together, emerge as radically hybrid figures that straddle temporalities, histories, and genders in an ungraspable complexity.

The fragmented body is central to Baeza's practice. His studio has dishes of body parts cut from magazines—hands, arms, legs, feet, chests, faces, eyes, and mouths—of all genders and expressive gesture. In some works, Baeza uses sections of monoprint like puzzle pieces, anatomically piecing together one knuckle, one finger joint, one muscle section at a time, spliced together with a precision that emphasizes the seams to stained glass-like effect. The figures have an otherworldly aura. A sketch in the artist's notebook shows a grainy black and white news-

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print photo of three men tucked into a car trunk. The artist has covered (protected?) the figures' torsos, faces and arms with a material resembling gold leaf, suggestive of religious iconography and ex-votos. It is one from a collection of media images of Mexican migrants crossing the border that Baeza has collected. In this study and related works, he confronts the limited representation of border crossings in the media, but through layering, fragmenting, and obscuring resists replicating the same systems of violence and power.

Layering is fundamental to printmaking, which at its roots is a process of building up colors and images with multiple passes of a printing press. Baeza focused his undergraduate studies on printmaking techniques, in part inspired by the history of Mexican muralists' use of prints as a tool for disseminating political and social ideologies. While this and other histories of printmaking are premised on the power of widespread circulation bolstering heightened visibility, Baeza instead concentrates on the printmaking process, and the steps by which an image is affixed to paper.

Baeza frequently uses collagraphy, a collage-like printmaking technique of adhering diverse materials to a substrate to create an embossed, textural surface that can be inked and printed on paper. He makes such textured grounds by gluing together layers of magazine pages (think figures atop figures) then etching or sanding into them, or imbedding embroidery or twine, to outline a figure. In tra-

ditional printmaking, the substrate is then inked and pressed to paper, revealing the materially imbedded figure as a printed mirror image. But frequently Baeza stops short of this final flattening, he stops short of eliding material complexity, stops short of the inky translation required to print a legible image. Instead, the heavily textured and pigmented figure hovers barely discernable, undefined, untranslated. Baeza's *Untitled (so much darkness, so much brownness)*, 2016-18, is one such collagraphic matrix, built atop a map of the contiguous fifty states, which the artist found in a dumpster. Baeza layered the map with glued magazine pages and embroidered haunting figures and faces of undocumented people drawn from media imagery. In other instances, the artist completes the printing process, but pushes it beyond the point of legibility, with over inking and multiple pressings creating murky, ghostly figures.

The stakes of visibility are high for undocumented people in the U.S. like Baeza, where non-detection can mean safety and survival. So the artistic processes of material layering and fuzzy printing support a conceptual tactic of visual suspension, of holding incompleteness. Some of Baeza's figures are representationally shielded within the image—shrouded in blankets, concealed by flames, botanically engulfed, or hidden by embroidered nets. They are bodies cared for in their opacity and fragmentation. These "fugitive bodies," as Baeza calls them, speak to many types of instrumentalized and litigated bodies—queer, immigrant,



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brown—identities that he liberates from stifling categorization. Much of Baeza's work reckons with this simultaneous grief and possibility. Abstracting, layering, and imbedding are artistic tactics that "defer the gaze," as the artist says, providing a respite from surveillance and the weight of performative identity.

Yet such liminality is never romanticized—an existence free of legal nationality is not freedom—but it is a space of unknowns. Many of Baeza's figures hover in ethereal monoprint landscapes of blues and purples, colors suggestive of the early dawn skies, under which many Mexican immigrants make their crossing. Made with color pigments and water layered onto paper on the studio floor, these monoprints are to some extent aleatory. The artist can guide pigment placement and density, but water moves and mediates intention. It too resists boundaries and knowability.

Among printmakers and conservators, a "fugitive pigment" refers to impermanence, a color pigment that changes its appearance when exposed to environmental conditions. Like nature's ability to adapt in adverse situations, Baeza's fugitive bodies are made new to survive. From confinement—whether physically, legally, or psychologically—their bodies bloom and change. They shed consumable identities, instead choosing whether to reveal themselves or not. From deep within the heads of many of these empowered figures, collaged eyes stare back at us. The power structures have shifted: the sur-

veiled body is now the one who looks.

There is a stereotype about the ingenuity and resourcefulness of immigrants in piecing lives together from scraps, yet Baeza's work is not about repair or restoration. Regeneration is at work here. Old, shredded archives, mulched to create fertile grounds of liminality. When the hopes you have cannot be held by existing bodies and structures, you must create new landscapes and new beings. Baeza's imaginaries are of neither here nor there, neither documented nor undocumented. There is repetition in his material process, as the work recycles itself, figures build their own histories in endless giving, giving life to new bodies, bodies in bloom and flux.

Lauren Schell Dickens  
Senior Curator, San José Museum of Art

