

Felipe Baeza: Unruly Visions

by Gayatri Gopinath¹

At the heart of Felipe Baeza's work is the body: abstracted, dismembered, remembered, obscured, suspended, floating, drowning, sprouting wings, feathers, leaves, both human and celestial, entrapped and expansive, unbound and unruly. In his series of collages *Gente del Occidente de México II*, for instance, Baeza renders the body grotesque and monstrous. Human limbs, torsos, and mouths are conjoined with photographs of pre-Columbian art objects to create totemic, hybrid entities that straddle multiple temporalities. They are at once more-than-human and anti-human as they scramble logics of self and other, male and female, subject and object. Disjointed, hyper-sexualized human body parts both male and female, replete with stereotypical gender markers (long painted fingernails, garter belts, jewelry, stilettos, sneakers) are attached to the heads and torsos of the pre-Columbian figurines. Baeza culls the images of the pre-Columbian art objects from a 1946 book, *Arte Precolombino Del Occidente de México*, published by the Mexican Secretary of Education. That Baeza titles his series as he does – substituting the word “Gente” for “Arte Precolombino” in the book’s original title – is significant. By collapsing “Arte Precolombino” into “Gente,” Baeza references the ways in which ancient art objects come to stand in for contemporary people and communities. The indigenous artifact, in other words, serves as a substitute for indigenous bodies and lives.

Baeza thus astutely comments on the decontextualizing ethnographic gaze through which these art objects are typically seen, and through which contemporary indigenous lives and struggles are effaced. These objects, sutured to images of body parts sourced from contemporary porn and fashion magazines, demand a reckoning with the fraught location of indigeneity within the Mexican national project. The Mexican nationalist gaze consumes, objectifies, an instrumentalizes indigeneity that it locates comfortably in the past. It simultaneously devalues living indigenous cultures and communities, and effaces their agency and autonomy. Baeza's monstrous, unruly bodies speak back to this fetishizing nationalist gaze, and refuse to be passively consumed and contained.

In the series *Unruly Suspension*, Baeza's bodies are similarly made up of fragments, refusing totality and wholeness. Here however the bodies are rendered translucent and almost marbled, and the paintings ask what it means to inhabit a state of indeterminacy both spatially and temporally: the space in-between here and there, now and then. Even the color palette of



Felipe Baeza, *Gente del Occidente de México II* (detail), 2017-2019. 20 double-sided collages on paper, unique in a series of two, each 8 3/4 × 6 3/8 inches.



Felipe Baeza, *Fragments, refusing totality and wholeness*, 2021. Ink, embroidery, acrylic, graphite, varnish, and cut paper collage on panel, 16 x 12 inches.

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moody, mottled, muted blues, purples, grays, and pinks with the occasional shock of blood red, evoke the moment of transition from day to night. This is often the moment when crossings happen, over borders, fences, bodies of water. We can understand these works as a response to the dominant binary through which US national citizenship and belonging are meted out, one that distinguishes “good” from “bad,” “deserving” from “undeserving” migrants. Baeza’s delicate, layered paintings, replete with painstaking detail that includes twine and yarn embroidered into the paper, repudiate this binary and instead suggest what it means to dwell in a state of suspension. The works intimate the ways in which one works the traps that one is in, in order to not simply survive and endure, but thrive and live fully.

Baeza does not romanticize the difficulty of this location: the violence, pain, and hardship of fugitivity is evident in the deliberate ambivalence and ambiguity of his images. Are these bodies landing or lifting off? Are they entrapped or expansive? Does the webbed netting that obscures their faces and torsos ensnare them, or enable them to soar? Rather than settling these questions, both *Gente del Occidente de México* and *Unruly Suspension* instead present us with a capacious queer, indigenous, migrant imaginary: one that demands not belonging or inclusion in the nation-state (whether in the US or Mexico) but rather what Edouard Glissant terms “the right to opacity”: the right to refuse the transparency and knowability required of racialized, migrant, indigenous, queer subjects that is the precondition of their regulation, surveillance, and capture.

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