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Child Pose. © Rachelle Mozman

Rachelle Mozman Solano Disarms Gauguin's Predatory Gaze With Absurdist Wit

A new exhibition uses photography, collage and video to reimagine – and defuse – one of art history's most famous misogynists.

Artist Paul Gauguin was a chauvinist, a colonialist, and, [like many celebrated painters](#), a pivotal perpetrator of the historical male gaze. His portraits presented native peoples as a sometimes barbaric, often sexualized fantasy. And if that doesn't bother you, perhaps his taking of underage brides in on the South Pacific Islands of Hiva and Tahiti in the late 1890's, infecting them with syphilis and other diseases might make you twitch. Despite being widely recognized and exhibited in most major institutions since his death, he was, like many men of art history, a predatory scumbag.

And here lies the jumping off point of Rachele Mozman Solano's latest exhibition [Metamorphosis of Failure](#), on view through February at Smack Mellon in Brooklyn, NY. In Mozman-Solano's series of films, staged portraits, and collages, she removes Gauguin's power, reimagining the mythology behind his conflicted French / Peruvian identity and satirically lampooning his search for subjects.

Mocking Gauguin's process with captions like "I Could Not Find The Authenticity I was Searching For," and " Here I am in Panama, In Excellent Health as Always," Mozman-Solano creates a sardonic narrative of Gauguin's process that empowers the women who were his muses. In no-frills studio setups, Gauguin's imagined conquests as well as an anonymous male figure dress in pseudo-nude body suits beside fake "native" plants in Home Depot buckets labeled "Let's Do This" and various other signs of perceived exoticism. Mozman-Solano's photographs and videos push the stories we know or imagine about Gauguin's life and quests into absurdity that is light-hearted without simplifying or overlooking its history.

I spoke with Mozman-Solano to learn more about her show and interest in Gauguin.

Jon Feinstein in conversation with Rachelle Mozman Solano



Installation view at Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard

Jon Feinstein: What inspired this work and exhibition?

Rachelle Mozman Solano: I became overwhelmed at Museum of Modern Arts' exhibition, *Metamorphoses* a show on the prints and sculptures of Pual Gauguin while living in Polynesia. The narrative that was being perpetuated by the institution (a narrative that Gauguin told of his work and life living in Polynesia) was a story rooted in fantasy. I felt he projected this fantasy onto his subjects; a story about being immersed amongst a people that were primitive, racially pure, and closer to "animality", that he claimed impacted and changed his art.

I began researching and was surprised to learn Gauguin was of mixed identity. His mother was Peruvian and he had spent several of his formative years living in Peru. I began to look at his work as that of a person in conflict with his dual identity and a possible reason for his obsession with racial purity, although he may also have been influenced by Darwinism and eugenics. I also began to see his work as a potential projection of what he may have internalized of Peruvian art and craft as a child, rather than any real influence of Polynesian on him.



Lay Pose and the Barbaric Source © Rachelle Mozman

Feinstein: What sparked your interest in Gauguin as a launchpad for this series/ discussion?

Mozman-Solano: I discovered Gauguin had visited Panama before Tahiti with the hope of staying there. Panama is the country of my maternal family, so this was fascinating to me. Gauguin struggled in Panama, and was forced to work on the canal and grew ill. I began to read letters he wrote to his wife from Panama, where he speaks of his disappointment with Panama and this lead to my fantasies of what he might have experienced had he stayed to make work there.

I began to imagine the women he may have encountered and their experience with him. In reading Noa Noa, I thought, was Panama too diverse for Gauguin who was in search of racial purity? Were the people too savvy from centuries of dealing with colonization, pirates, the French and North Americans who wanted to build a canal.

In some ways I view this work as an intersection of his fantasies with my own fantasies that ultimately attempt to shift the narrative. In addition, upon discovering that Gauguin used photography to represent his subjects I became fascinated with speaking about photography and portraiture in particular, which has a complex and problematic relationship with ethnography. When we photograph, we project ourselves onto our subjects. In the end portraits reveal the photographer and the photographers desires. There is an element of fantasy inherent in all photography.

Feinstein: This work (in my mind) continues your discussion of dual cultural identity from your earlier series. Can you talk about this?

Mozman-Solano: My interest in his internal conflict about his duality spoke to my interest in general in duality in identity. The Caribbean is a place where duality and triality of identity and mixing is very common. And my own family reflects this, within my Caribbean family and also the union between my parents. In my previous work made with my mother I attempted to address the complexity of this duality or even triality of identities in the Caribbean, in many ways this new work on Gauguin is a continuity of this fascination.



I Could Not Find the Authenticity I Had Been Searching For © Rachelle Mozman

Feinstein: Some of the images are clearly studio portraits, while others are more contextual and environmental. Can you tell me about your decision with each?

Mozman-Solano: I wanted to use elements that speak about artists working in the studio to construct a photograph and how portrait photography in particular is often a construction that speaks to the photographer's projections. I also wanted to address Gauguin's interest in his own identity construction or reinvention, which is how he saw his departure from Europe to Panama initially.

In allowing the home depot props and other props to be apparent it was a way to counter the perception of "primitivity" of Panamanian culture and women who may have been his subjects, to counter the idea that what one finds in Panama is not advanced or contemporary, which is always how colonizers see the place they are colonizing. I believe after reading his letters from Panama that this is what bothered him about Panama (before he became sick and impoverished). It was too contemporary and didn't fit into his fantasy of what he would find in the Caribbean tropics.



Soledad y Natasha Por el Castillo © Rachelle Mozman



I Had Wished For a Long Time to Make a Portrait of One of My Neighbors © Rachelle Mozman

Feinstein: I'm curious about your use of the Home Depot props as well as the various body suits. What's going on here?

Mozman-Solano: The body suits were a way to speak about primitivity, humanity as well sexuality through humor and satire. Throughout Noa Noa, Gauguin references his nudity as well as other's nudity obsessively. He seemed to find it a sign of coming closer to animality that he was now running around partly naked, which he saw as part of his identity transformation away from repressive Western tradition and what he felt influenced his work.

In using the body suits and props that look like they are straight out of a hardware store, I could address Gauguin's ideas that were so fundamentally racist and based in his feeling of superiority to the people of Panama and Polynesia in a way that was empowering through satire. Satire and humor are a great way to work with material that might inspire anger because there is a lot of control and empowerment in humor. Without using satire, this story would be just too deeply disturbing to me.

Feinstein: How does this work riff on, break from or expand upon what we know about Gauguin's cultural and gendered gaze?

Mozman-Solano: Within this project, the film and photographs attempts to alter the story of Gauguin, in that in my iteration Gauguin's women are empowered and turn from passive object to active director. They become photographers who create their own stories.