

Noah Becker's

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I Come To This Place, Journey into an Exhibition



Blanka Amezkua, Vuela, Vuela, 2019

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By **LUISA CALDWELL**

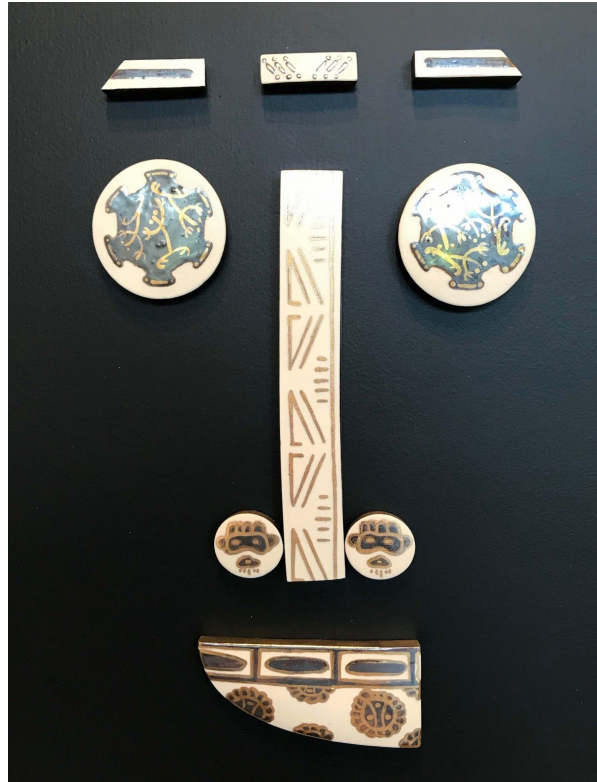
I Come To This Place at Smack Mellon is a materially inclined, sculpturally strong group show which combines the formal constructs of abstraction while utilizing traditional or invented craft melded with contemporary themes of ancestry and personal history. With a focus on the importance of honoring Indigenous knowledge, the exhibition exemplifies a continuity of influences and ideas. What we see is a diaspora of craft and identity, reinforcing the idea that nothing, whether art or tradition, exists completely in a self-made autonomous state. Curator Eva Mayhabal Davis draws her inspiration from the Spanish Uruguayan avant-garde artist [Joaquín Torres García](#) (1874-1949) whose theories included the idea of “the spirit of synthesis,” which he defined as the synchronization of the ancestral and the modern. *I Come To This Place* is the beginning of a

traditional phrase used as a greeting, to be completed with one's intent (I come to this place as a friend; I come to this place seeking inspiration; I come to this place to see art).



I Come To This Place, installation view, [Smack Mellon](#)

First one encounters Blanka Amezkua's *Vuela Vuela*, festive banners made in the traditional papel picado technique. Originally hung for celebrating religious holidays, they are now available for all occasions. It's interesting to think of party decorations as the first installation art. Amezkua worked with a papel picado master in Mexico who hand cut with chisels this set of banners tracking Amezkua's global migrations. Locations are depicted by standard icons such as the Chrysler Building and Golden Gate Bridge or city seals. But the location signifiers hang alongside phrases in Spanish from migrant worker folk songs, the combination making for a deeper paralleled connection between artist and worker. I attended a Saturday afternoon papel picado workshop at Smack Mellon hosted by Amezkua. The process is not for the weak of wrist, as it is quite an arduous process of manual labor.



Glendalys Medina, Taíno Emoji/Token Faces, 2018

Glendalys Medina exhibits finely crafted ceramic shapes (rectangles, circles, semi-circles, bars) arranged into various emoji-like faces and embellished with Taino motifs in delicate glazes of silver and gold metallics mounted on wood panels. There is a tension between the minimalist forms and the elegant ornamentation, as there is a tension between the banality of emojis and their seeming transformation into foreboding tribal masks.

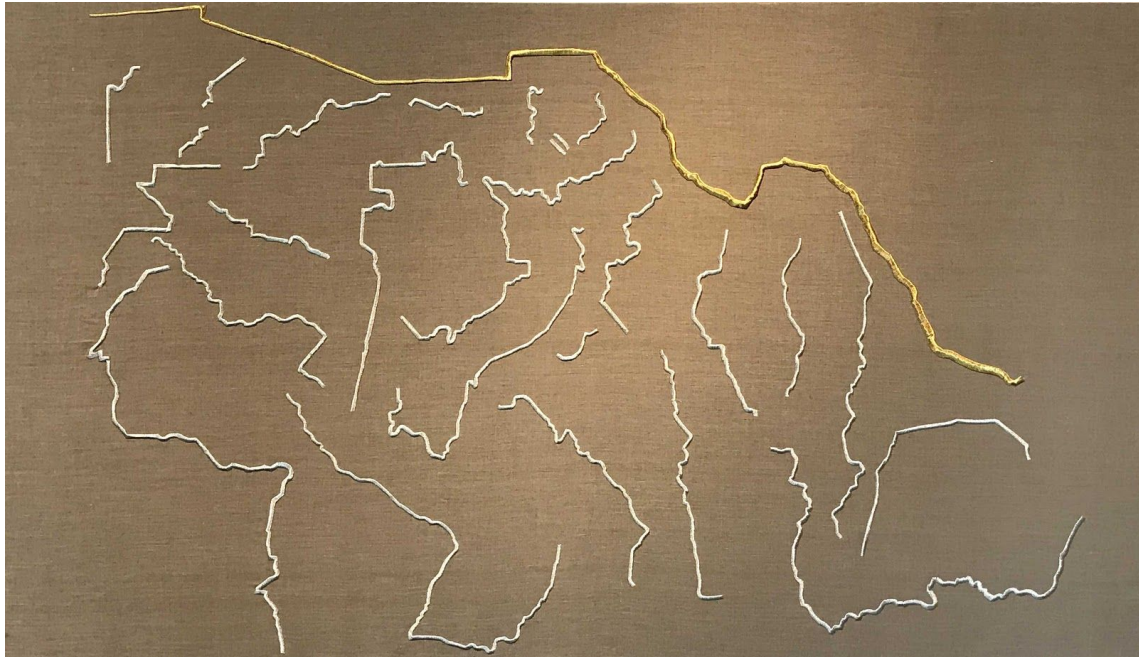
Marela Zacarias' painted plaster and found mirror wall-mounted sculptures seem massive in relation to the ephemerality or scale of much of the work in the show. They're quite amazing sculptural feats and could easily hold a much larger space. The solidity of the forms are accentuated with geometric patterns inspired by Mexican textiles in palettes inspired by Diego Rivera's Detroit murals. The undulating forms seem to be in billowing movement...and have an anthropomorphic character that affectionately embrace the gorgeous vintage mirrors. Classical drapery gone jazz!



Marela Zacarias, Entrance, North Wall, South Wall, 2018

Ivan Gaete presents three months of *The New York Times* cut and manipulated into four sculptures as one installation called *Unwoven (NYT)*. A participatory piece invites the viewer to take one of the many headlines cut from the paper and stapled into a corner as a fringed diamond shape. Once choosing a headline we were to read it aloud. As I did this during the packed opening night nobody heard me say, “Four Cats, Sharing a Role, Steal the Show”. I felt that was the point, not to be heard, as an analogy to media saturation and information overload. And taken out of context, a common media manipulation, the phrase I read aloud made no sense.

Curves and Points by Mary A. Valverde is an ensemble of painted bamboo slats, bent and woven and tied into large curvilinear shapes. The way they hang from the ceiling, in a half state of materiality is quite mesmerizing. The abstraction is uncanny and evoke for me butterfly wings. I want to believe they are representational of something, of anything. They are beautiful, while inducing curiosity.



Ana de la Cueva, Sueño Americano/American Dream, 2012

Ana de la Cueva presents us with an embroidered linen canvas elegantly depicting the natural lines of rivers and mountains, plus the angular man-made border between Mexico and the US in silver and gold threads. Also influenced by the landscape are Ricardo Cabaret's paintings and abstract digital interpretations, while Ronny Quevedo uses the notion of the body as something to map via mixed-media collages.

Burying White Supremacy (Radical Trust) is a sound collaboration between Ginger Dunnill and Demian DinéYazhi' offering whispered phrases such as "Restore indigenous knowledge", "Reject white supremacy", "You are a human being in this place" and "Pack your bags and return to your homeland and ask forgiveness". By whispering these provocative and poetic statements, there may be the realization in the unfortunate futility of its instructions.

The videos by Cannupa Hanska Luger, Ginger Dunnill, Dylan McLaughlin offer a more literal look at the land with beautiful aerial footage following the dramatic river contours and mountain peaks of The Dakotas, segueing into another video of rails and trains and the NODAPL encampment at Standing Rock. The overall effect, while beautiful, left me feeling a bit heavyhearted.



Cannupa Hanska Luger, Ginger Dunnill, Dylan McLaughlin, Between Water and Land, video still, 2019

But *Between Water and Land* depicts a continuous landscape horizon of dried golden fields, rolling hills and barren trees. The soundtrack pointedly speaks of returning to nature and the spirit of the land, that we are “borrowing the land from future generations” and we are “honored to be here” and to “express your gratitude”. To revere the earth in this manner, especially as an Indigenous people before the arrival of Europeans, must have been the most amazing and sensuous life. Even if romanticized, the culture was founded on an appreciation and wonder for this beautiful earth, where ownership wasn’t a goal, but the land was free, as was the warmth of the sun and breezes on the skin.

It doesn’t seem probable that contemporary society will make a return to the land anytime soon, but in a fitting gesture of gratitude and acknowledgement the exhibition curator, artists and gallery “acknowledge the traditional, ancestral unceded territory of the Carnarsie and Lenni Lenape peoples, among many other peoples, on which we are learning, creating and organizing today”. *I Come To This Place* works on many levels but ultimately is about our continued and complex human journey, be it spiritual, through time or over land.



LUISA CALDWELL is an artist working and living between NYC and Italy. Known for large scale public art works, with recent installations at Hancher Auditorium at University of Iowa using 17,000 found and collected candy wrappers. Permanent projects include commissions from NYC Percent for Art and NYC MTA Art& Design. Autumn of 2019 Caldwell has residencies through CEC Back Apartment Residency in St. Petersburg, Russia and Guild House at Guild Hall, East Hampton, NY.