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Jenny V. Castañon

Illinois State University, jennyv.castanon@gmail.com

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SOY NADIE (I'M NOBODY)

JENNY V. CASTAÑON

20 Pages

In my past paintings, I tried to figure out why my subjects had me empathizing with strangers. Looking back on my Mexican-American upbringing, I realized how society and my communal culture are influencing the way I think and process information. So, for this body of work, the physical fragmentation of the figure alludes to a psychological fragmentation. In this case, it is as if the figure cannot withstand the tension and is barely able to remain whole and recognizable. What remains of the person is trying to repair itself. The pressure in my mind is between the values of general society and my family community. I am trying to choose the best traits from the contradicting moralities of each. These two forces are very much alive in my actions in life and affect the way I think in my artwork. Although I was born in both lifestyles, and both are familiar to me, they continue to compete without resolution.

KEYWORDS: Figure; Abstraction; Fragmentation; Whole; Psychological; Society; Community; Tension

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JENNY V. CASTAÑON

A Thesis Supportive Statement Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Wonsook Kim School of Art

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SOY NADIE (I'M NOBODY)

JENNY V. CASTAÑON

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

James Mai, Chair

Nathania Rubin

Tyler Lotz

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For my immediate family and friends, I don't know what I would do without you. I especially want to thank my mother for teaching me about compassion. To all the peers, staff, and artists that I have come across during my years at Illinois State University, thank you for letting me learn from you. For John Phillip Abbott for always giving me the best advice and getting me this far. For James Mai for your endless patience, wisdom, and teaching me about color. Nathania Rubin, for your encouragement and helping me stay relevant, and Tyler Lotz for seeing my potential and pushing me to go the extra mile. And lastly, for God, who has never let me down and has brought the right people in my life.

J.V.C

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CHAPTER I: THE IDEAS

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us - don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know!

How dreary to be somebody!
How public, like a frog
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!¹

Ordinary happenings, unconscious and subliminal thoughts, experiential and sentimental moments are experiences that stimulate my work. Certain moments leave deep indentations in me, and I have come to notice that instead of staying tucked away in my unconscious, they surface in my conscious mind. I reflect on these seemingly irrelevant situations because I believe they have much to impart. I find these moments very "sincere." By sincerity, I mean subjects that make no pretense by hiding their vulnerability. An example is a boy I saw sleeping on a bus. I decided to make paintings of him because he appeared very vulnerable, asleep in such a public setting. My reaction to seeing his vulnerability made me very uncomfortable, and I worried for his well-being. These moments take down a wall between the things we pretend to be and an honest depiction of our struggles. When I see occurrences like these, my first response is to ignore them like everyone else. However, when they occur more than once, I become more

¹ Dickinson, Emily. *Emily Dickinson Collected Poems*. Philadelphia: Courage Books, 1991.

consciously aware of their meaning. I meditate on these situations and try to interpret why these moments stop me. I try to think about them and whether there is something more to understand about these situations.

I'll tell you how the sun rose,-
A ribbon at a time.
The steeples swam in amethyst,
The news like squirrels ran.

The hills untied their bonnets,
The bobolinks begun.
Then I said softly to myself,
"That must have been the sun!"

But how he set, I know not.
There seemed a purple stile
Which little yellow boys and girls
Were climbing all the while

Till when they reached the other side,
A dominie in gray
Put gently up the evening bars,
And led the flock away.²

In this poem, Emily Dickinson talks about how the sun rises and how its rays pass through the landscape. The poem ends with a description of the sun setting. In the second stanza,

² Dickinson, Emily. *Emily Dickinson Collected Poems*. Philadelphia: Courage Books, 1991.

the poet emphasizes her fascination with the sun on the hills. She focuses on this moment as I do in those moments of sincerity and vulnerability that stop me. Dickinson notices the wonder of the sun; I take small moments that resonate with me and try to interpret why this was so important to me. Making paintings about these states of observation brought me to a better understanding of my thoughts. I find explaining my process vital because I don't necessarily intend to keep using my current subject matter. However, I do expect to continue this method of observing the world around me to reach more conclusions. Without exploring these instances, like the boy on the bus, I wouldn't have reached the content I am now developing: how the values both of my family upbringing and contemporary society create tension and conflicts in my experience of the world around me.

CHAPTER II: PAST PAINTINGS AND SOCIETY

In my earlier paintings, which depict subjects such as the boy on the bus described above, I am a spectator. I only can interpret what is in front of me with little or no information about what the people are thinking. Looking at my earlier paintings, I've realized that I was projecting my feeling onto my subjects. In other words, I assumed the specific emotions to originate in the people I observed, but on reflection, I recognize them as my own emotions. The paintings I make now arise from a recognition of my sentiments and how they color the ways I see the world. What I have come to notice is my internal conflict between the values of society and those of my own family and community (a rural town in New Mexico).

These influences have continually caused a psychological struggle for me. The values of society differ significantly from the way I was raised. I try to take from opposing values what I believe to be true, contribute to my character, and make me whole. I thought that individualism tended to be selfish, and it can occur under certain circumstances. However, individualism could be a way to become whole, and it doesn't mean to trample over someone else. Individualism can be thought of as trying to find your purpose in life. In Carl Jung's book, *The Undiscovered Self*, he discusses the importance of the individual.

"In both cases [science and religion], the will to individuality is regarded as egoistic obstinacy. Science devalues it as subjectivism, and the Churches condemn it morally as heresy and spiritual pride...Hence the development of the self acquires a significance whose full implications have hardly begun to be appreciated because too much attention to externals blocks the way to immediate inner experience. Were not the autonomy of the

individual the secret longing of many people; this hard-pressed phenomenon would scarcely be able to survive the collective suppression either morally or spiritually."³

The unfortunate plight of individualism is if you don't have a balance between your ambitions, you forget the needs of others. What I value about a community and loyalty to your family is the importance of relying on others and of them counting on you. Even if there is animosity, you won't abandon them. But the individual can also become lost in the community or society. Instead of forming your thoughts, your own beliefs, a crowd's intentions could be more relevant to you than your own. After much thought, I concluded that individualism could be more than thinking of yourself. It benefits others because you find where you belong.

³ Jung, C. G. *The Undiscovered Self*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957, 1958.

pg. 47-48

CHAPTER III: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

My perspective on society is as an outside spectator looking in, but when it comes to family, I am inside looking out. My family comes from a Mexican heritage. To summarize how I was brought up, I was taught to respect people older than me, Spanish was spoken in the household with my mother, I visited my big family of aunts and uncles and their children. As well as being taught to be selfless and to help the family, I was brought up practicing Catholicism. Also, my family wants to stay together or close to one another. I remember that two of my uncles, my three cousins, and two of my aunts lived together in my grandmother's house. They made sure to stay together to save money and to help each other out. A lot of girls in my family decided not to pursue higher education and already are building their families in their twenties. They either still live at home or live close to their immediate family.

My family, of course, does want me to pursue higher education, but they hope one day I will make a family of my own and decide to live closer to them. I reject this because what is most appealing about living in the world beyond my family is trying to find myself in it. I also feel like I've had the chance to raise children when I've helped my sister with her two girls. I know that being a parent takes time, and that is why I don't have an interest in building my own family yet. These conflicting influences have been pulling my thoughts in opposite directions. Since they are actively shaping my thought, I want to explore how they can shape my paintings.

CHAPTER IV: CURRENT PAINTINGS

In my current work, some paint strokes are so rushed they appear to have their agency. Although the paint strokes and shapes are active, even aggressive, they always want to find a balance in the composition. By balance, I mean that while there is a compositional fragmentation of shapes and brushstrokes, there is also a convergence or a resolution as an abstracted human figure. I want the fragments to counterbalance the recognition of a whole. I choose to outline the figure only in some places because if I added detail, it would seem the figure was the main focus when it is the action that I am most interested in. These formal strategies reflect the way I see life as always changing the way I am growing and changing my mind.

In the paintings, the physical fragmentation of the figures alludes to a psychological fragmentation. It is as if the figure cannot withstand the tension and is barely able to remain whole and recognizable. What remains of the figure is trying to repair itself. The pressure in my mind is between the values of general society and my family community. I am trying to choose the best traits from the contradicting moralities of each. These two forces are very much alive in my actions in life and affect the way I think in my artwork. Although I was born in both lifestyles, and both are familiar to me, they continue to compete without resolution. That is what I want the paintings to convey visually, but I don't want the paintings to be fixed only on my internal struggles. I want my paintings to be relevant to other observers. Others may relate to this differently than I do, with different particular dichotomies and conflicts. I'm sure that many of us are battling our adversities and that there may be various competing factors trying to prevail in our personalities.

CHAPTER V: INFLUENCES



Figure 1. Cecily Brown
Untitled (Paradise), 2014
Watercolor, ink, and ballpoint pen on paper 14 1/8x 20 1/8 in.
© Cecily Brown. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Two artists that have been influential in my painting process is Cecily Brown and Chris Hood. I've always abstracted the human figure, so I find Cecily Brown's work very pertinent to my own. She grapples with the figure and also balances traditional and contemporary approaches in her paintings. Her greater emphasis on the figure amid the abstraction is something that interests me. In her much later work, she becomes more illustrative with the figure while also retaining some abstraction. Like Brown, my earlier work was very abstract. It was abstract because I did not want imagery that was too literal and illustrative to limit the interpretation of other psychological experiences that might arise from abstraction. However, I have found that

the human figure is essential to my current paintings because it helps point to fragmentation as a human experience. Although it appears to be physical, it is an analogy for the feeling of being pulled apart psychologically and emotionally. The use of the figure is to symbolize wholeness, while the deformation and relocation of the body parts are the feelings of psychological displacement and fragmentation.



Figure 2. Chris Hood, *Dizzy Spell*, 2017, 90 x 72 in. Alkyd on canvas

Like Cecily Brown, Hood uses traditional painting styles; however, in this case, he has references from Post-Impressionism. What I find interesting about Chris Hood's work is the playful imagery of what appears to be cartoon references alongside depictions of the figure and landscape. The paintings remind me of my current work in the way many elements compete for attention. As much as there is room for humor in these curious landscapes, there also could be an underlying psychological conflict in *Dizzy Spell*. Repetition of the figure and distribution of images throughout the painting create a field where everything competes for our attention.

CHAPTER VI: EXAMINING THE PAINTINGS



Figure 3. *A Veces Si, a Veces No (Sometimes Yes, Sometimes No)*, 2019, 32 x 32in. acrylic on canvas

In my painting, *A Veces Si, a Veces No (Sometimes Yes, Sometimes No)* (Figure 3), the lines and shapes are directing our attention towards the center-right of the canvas. There is a large round shape, possibly the top of a head. The colors, detached shapes, and brushstrokes contradict a recognition of a figure. The shapes also look like they could be forming a type of mountain. The many fragmentary shapes seem to be either converging on or moving away from the figure near the center. The shapes relate to my feeling of pressure. The painting is about

feeling the weight of personal experiences. Is it better to rise and face what is in front of me or to lie dormant like a mountain?



Figure 4. *El Mundo (The World)*, 2019, 24 x 20in. acrylic on canvas

In *El Mundo* (Figure 4), there is much more recognition of a figure from the collected brushstrokes on the right. The figure appears to be leaning into the picture frame while everything else in the background has less emphasis. However, the darker green in the background competes with the figure because of the darkness. The figure seems to be out of focus because of the broken shapes and the more muted colors surrounding the face.

In this painting, figure and ground exchange roles. The white area below center is a ground for the blue and red shapes painted on top, but the white strokes above center and in the face are more particular. These white shapes change thickness and have sharp edges. These act

as figures, they are attended to actively. The shifting attention is like my psychological tension. The painting represents a mental state of being pressed down by the weight of a heavy burden. It is as though the person is undecided on what matters more, either herself or the abstracted shapes behind. In this case, I think the burden of indecision as being between my needs and the needs of others.



Figure 5. *Untitled*, 2020, 30 x 30in. acrylic and marker on canvas

In this painting, *Untitled* (Figure 5), light green shapes emerge in gaps between the different variations of shapes. There appears to be an orange foot on the upper left and a green hand below it. An image of a face seems close to the middle on the right. Green strokes are loosely outlining features of the face, like eyes and an open mouth. Shapes are crumbling below the face, and there is a hand on top of some of these broken shapes. The broken-up forms are being gathered up by the hand, but it has little control of keeping them together. The

fragmentation of the composition and the body convey the feeling of someone trying to gather herself up and keep herself whole. My approach to composition, color, and recognizing a figurative subject is to find a point between fragmentation and association. The viewer's experience, like the human subject in the painting, is the struggle to clasp the parts together. I don't want to represent the fight of coalescing fragments, but to create the conditions where the viewer experiences this struggle visually.



Figure 6. *Several Personalities*, 2020, 38 x 36in. acrylic and marker on canvas

In *Several Personalities* (Figure 6), a highly abstracted figure is in the middle of the composition. The light blue and the yellow-orange are outlining the figure. The green lines show

the shapes of the figure's face and legs. Recognition of the figure is helped by layers lighter of color that occur in the middle more than at the edges. In this painting, multiple small and large shapes form layer upon layer. I am making the recognition of the human figure difficult by extreme abstraction and disintegration. The reason for this is to suggest the different variations of personalities someone can have in different environments with different people. People change characters with the type of people they are around. People act differently with friends, family, or coworkers, but they are the same person. One changes depending on the environment and people one encounters, so the painting shows many various components of this one individual.



Figure 7. *Mamá y Hija (Mother and Daughter)*, 2020, 32 x 32in. acrylic, marker, and ink on canvas

In the painting *Mama y Hija (Mother and Daughter)* (Figure 7), the human figure is taking up most of the composition. There is a female figure with upraised arms. Her face is visible left of center, and outlined with yellow-orange at the upper left and right are her arms. She looks as though she is fixing her hair. This is a self-portrait. There is more confusion on the right toward the top where the hair seems very abstract compared to the face at the left. The face has recognizable features outlined in green. The colors are mostly analogous: blues, purples, and greens, but with accents of yellow and oranges. They resemble colors of nature, like something you would find in a garden. The thinner lines that are made by the marker are overlapping with thin paint strokes.



Figure 7. *Mamá y Hija (Mother and Daughter)*, (detail)

A close-up of this painting reveals the second face in purple marker. This face is not as visible as the self-portrait and could only be recognized from close-up rather than from far away.

The face is not tilted and collides with the left eye of the painted figure. The drawn right eye is also underneath the painted nose. The outline is a portrait of my mother when she was younger. The painting is about how we see the characteristics of our parents in ourselves. Clearly, the painted face is more visible than the one drawn with a marker. I inherited traits and characteristics from my mother, but I decide how to look and who to be. In this case, the figure is determining how to appear while she gathers her hair.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

My work is becoming more direct. At the beginning of my process, the images of the human figure were more general. The last painting of the self-portrait finally arrives at a painting that is about me. The self-portrait can still relate to other viewers because I am using my image only to reflect my experience. In essence, my feeling of indecision is subsiding. Others can mirror this experience when an opinion they once had changed because they look at a situation differently. I think paintings like this have us meditate on the similarities and differences between our experiences. They only intrigue us if we find some value relevant to us.

The reason for including the poems by Emily Dickinson relates to seeing similarities between Dickinson's observations and my own. Her poems, although personal, also reflect my own experiences. The continuation of painting my internal thoughts and psychological conflicts still interests me. And I continue to be interested in the relationships between fragmentation and integration. These have new possibilities in future paintings of human figures and self-portraits.

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APPENDIX A: FIGURE DETAILS

Figure

1. Artist: Cecily Brown
Title: *Untitled (Paradise)*
Date: 2014
Medium: Watercolor, ink, and ballpoint pen on paper
Dimensions: 14 1/8x 20 1/8 in.
2. Artist: Chris Hood
Title: *Dizzy Spell*
Date: 2017
Medium: Alkyd on canvas
Dimensions: 90 x 72 in.
3. Title: *A Veces Si, a Veces No (Sometimes Yes, Sometimes No)*
Date: 2019
Medium: acrylic on canvas
Dimensions: 32 x 32 in.
4. Title: *El Mundo (The World)*
Date: 2019
Medium: acrylic on canvas
Dimensions: 24 x 20 in.
5. Title: *Untitled*
Date: 2020
Medium: acrylic and marker on canvas
Dimensions: 30 x 30 in.
6. Title: *Several Personalities*
Date: 2020
Medium: acrylic and marker on canvas
Dimensions: 38 x 36 in.
7. Title: *Mamá y Hija (Mother and Daughter)*
Date: 2020
Medium: acrylic, marker and ink on canvas
Dimensions: 32 x 32 in.
8. Title: *Mamá y Hija (Mother and Daughter), (detail)*
Date: 2020
Medium: acrylic, marker and ink on canvas
Dimensions: 32 x 32 in.