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BOMB

Cassandra Mayela Interviewed

The Venezuelan textile artist on mutual aid, reclaiming narratives, and tracing home.



Cassandra Mayela, *Maps of Displacement*, 2021, repurposed fabric. Courtesy of the artist.

We moved. Behind the red, yellow, and blue mass guiding the procession, we chanted, drummed, and carried an idol draped in flowers, stopping periodically to dance. When Roe v. Wade was overturned, I was marching across the Williamsburg Bridge with a group of Venezuelans on an inauspicious day that coincided with the Festival de San Juan. An Afro-Venezuelan coastal celebration with deep roots in syncretism, San Juan beckons motion. Passersby stared, some asking if we were protesting. Halfway, I asked main organizer Cassandra Mayela if I could hold our flag and lead the procession as she made sure to leave no one behind.

I learned of Mayela through her ongoing project *Maps of Desplazamiento* (2021–present). Taking clothes donated by Venezuelan immigrants, she collects data about giver and garment, cuts the clothes in strips, and threads the pieces together. The clothes come with histories and include pieces iconic for complicated

reasons, such as the red cap worn by pro-Chavez supporters and the redesigned flag his government officialized in 2006. Mayela takes everything she's given and crafts textured tapestries of life stacked atop itself. I came to participate in the project by donating knitwear left by my abuela Belkys. More recently, a studio visit last fall found us sorting trash bags and suitcases full of clothes, a flood of donations meant to aid the wave of Venezuelan migrants bussed to New York City by Republican governors.

These efforts manifested as the Free Store inside *Nesting/Anidaciones* at EFA Project Space, which displays works by Mayela alongside Amy Khoshbin + House of Trees, Naomi Shihab Nye, Daniel Ramirez, Alena Lipa, and joropo musician Mafer Bandola. The Free Store doubles as a site of mutual aid organized as a store. Donations are carefully folded, hung, color-coded, categorized, and curated. Those who need take as needed at no charge.

Mayela was raised on the island of Margarita and has been in the city for nine years. Despite finding her through her art, we connected not as creative people but as young Venezuelans building lives in New York, making stories from fragments, trying to lift as we climb.

—E.R. Pulgar

E.R. Pulgar

I've seen you create spaces now in multiple capacities, from making a place for the Venezuelan diaspora in New York City to the actual envisioning of the Free Store within EFA Project Space, which was based on the idea of nesting. What does that mean for someone far from home?

Cassandra Mayela

While preparing an exhibition for the Venezuelan embassy in Washington, DC, I grappled with the idea of the third space. The theory is that when you're from one place and you've relocated, there's going to be a moment where you've assimilated and adjusted so much to the host place that you no longer identify with the original home, but you never fully adapt to the host home. After nine years of living abroad, my home is the non-home, and that's why it's important for me to create one. *Estoy muy gringa pa 'sentirme 100% Venezuelan in Venezuela, but I'll always be muy venezolana to fully feel New York is home.*

ERP

A big part of your practice is mutual aid. I'm thinking right now of the Free Store at EFA and how well-located it is in Times Square, which has always had a houseless population that needs these resources.

CM

My hat's off to Eva Mayhabal Davis and William Chan, the facilitators of this exhibition. It was their idea to create a show where the space could be activated instead of remaining empty most of the time. They reached out to me; I was excited but overwhelmed because I was taking all my work to Mexico at the time for my recent solo show, *Works in Gress*. I knew I could commit to making small works to display in the space. This became *Contrastes*, but I couldn't make several pieces for a solo show. I proposed turning the gallery into a house, with rooms that each serve a purpose.

ERP

Going back to the third space idea, I got to this country when I was five years old and was raised in a suburb of Miami which never felt like home. Moving to New York City made it a fourth space, a migration that I chose. It got me thinking about the drama of our diaspora, the inherent trauma points no matter our context. You faced one head-on at the Venezuelan Embassy in DC when someone damaged a piece that threaded the red Chavista hat in its fabric.

CM

Somebody threw ink at it! The intention of *Maps of Desplazamiento* is not just tracing our diaspora but telling our story from our own point of view. It's an invitation to make amends with everything that's happened, which is still fresh. Our migration is young; it's been unfolding in just the past twenty years. The Venezuelan displacement is equal to Syria and Ukraine, but it's overlooked because there is no war. I just read that the Venezuelan government introduced a bill to make nonprofits fighting for human rights illegal. It is already illegal to protest there—is that not a war on our people?



Detail of Cassandra Mayela, *Maps of Displacement*, 2021, repurposed fabric. Courtesy of the artist.

ERP

I get frustrated with leftists who have told me Venezuela is a glowing example of socialist utopia when Maduro's doing things like that. I read that he recently motioned to prioritize funding the Catholic Church when Venezuelans are struggling to eat. It's fueling conservative fascism.

CM

He's anti-gay, anti-abortion, and, when you think about the Amazon, anti-environment. All the illegal mining wrecked Indigenous territories. The Chavez hat was dropped off anonymously at Olympia gallery in New York City when I had a show there. It has a lot to do with what the object is. I was talking to a Venezuelan woman at my exhibition in Mexico City who said that she was forced to wear that hat and go to pro-government marches in order to keep her job. There was some sort of embarrassment and peace in her tone as she told me this. To her, that hat

represents a key part of her life that she's now at peace with. Others are traumatized and hurt. They can't stand the sight of it.

ERP

I've always thought of you as a nonfiction artist, especially because of the way you use clothes, which carry history. That uniform, those colors . . . Whether we like it or not, they're a part of Venezuelan history.

CM

The work is sharing facts. You interpret them however you want, but they exist. I like the idea of nonfiction art because a lot of people see the work as political art, and I struggle with that. It is inherently political since I'm studying a migratory crisis, but I want to focus on the humanity of the garments.



Installation view of Cassandra Mayela, *Free Store*, 2023. EFA Project Space, New York City. Courtesy of the artist.

ERP

I recently spoke to the poets Eleonora Requena and Guillermo Parra about some new works and their intention to consciously move away from the realm of Venezuelan art as just being viewed from a political standpoint. I also want to highlight the emotion in what you're doing. I remember that day that I gave you my abuela's knittings; they were just sitting under a table in my parent's house, and you gave them life again.

CM

Talking to what you said about these poets, I'm not interested in the "*ay, porecitos nosotros*" story. We're going through shit, and it's real; but I'm not interested in telling the "we are dying" story. The work brings you down if you focus on the displacement or uplifts you if you recognize the resilience. I feel the same way about the Free Store, which offers the possibility for a joyous experience while picking up donations. Most people don't realize it, but when you go to a donation center items are placed in boxes and piles. It's understandable because these efforts are volunteer-run and resources aren't abundant, but there isn't dignity in the process. Presentation is key to how people are treated and how they treat a space. I wanted to create this donation center where people didn't feel like they were getting leftovers.

ERP

Back to the idea of nesting. When you're in a situation you're not comfortable in for a long time, you begin to feel unworthy of comfort. What you've done is to give a chance to folks entering your space to get clean clothes, sit calmly, use the Internet, maybe apply for jobs. Comfort is not a luxury that should be unavailable, no matter your tax bracket. I recall a sweet conversation with Basie Allen about how you insisted he help you build your studio in the backyard because you didn't want to pay more rent in New York. Very stubborn Taurus of you, but you made such a beautiful space. That afternoon I was there with you as you threaded my abuela's clothes was so healing.

CM

I think there's a fear of investing in a space when you're renting, but we've saved so much more than we would if I had a separate space. It's a portal that doesn't feel like New York at all. It's my little *chiringuito*, and it feels like Margarita: a little slice of my own non-space space. I find it important to make a home out of a house. I do see myself as a feminist, but I love domestic life, cooking, hosting, and so on.



Installation view of Cassandra Mayela, *Home*, 2023, mixed media. EFA Project Space, New York City. Courtesy of the artist.

ERP

On the day of the San Juan march when we met, after everyone was done dancing in the rain you gave me a bag of dry black beans that fed me for two weeks. I felt such care from you in that moment, and there's so much to be said about care of others, regardless of how those roles have been delegated in society. I'm grateful for you.

CM

Thank you. I believe that if everyone brings something to the table, wonderful things can happen. My friend MPeach and I produced that event; Tambor y Caña had the best music; those beans were donated by Food with Fam and other offerings by Caracas Arepa Bar, Ensenada, and Santa Salsa. If I thrive, my community will too.

Some of this conversation has been translated for clarity.

Cassandra Mayela's Free Store is part of the group exhibition Nesting/Anidaciones at EFA Project Space in New York City until March 4. The project was supported, in part, by a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant.

E.R. Pulgar is a Venezuelan American poet, journalist, and translator based in New York City. Their criticism has appeared in Rolling Stone, i-D, Playboy, and elsewhere. Their poems have appeared in Changes Review, Epiphany, b l u s h, ANUS Magazine, and elsewhere. They were selected as a finalist for the 7th Rafael Cadenas Young Poets Prize. They teach at the Craig Newmark Graduate School Of Journalism at CUNY, run the monthly queer reading series Endless Blue at the Bowery Poetry Club, and are a member of the Ugly Duckling Presse working collective, who will publish their first translation in 2023.

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