

The Land Between The Sea

Farah Salem, Juan Molina Hernández, M_m<M, Saranoa Mark

Curated by Noah Hanna

In the indigenous Nahuatl language, the term *nepantla* denotes a land between two bodies of water, a middle ground. In its most literal sense. However, the definition and application extend far beyond tangible space and is, perhaps, most often associated with the writings of Chicana cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa. For her, the term became a means to conceptualize both her multiethnic and geopolitically fraught identity, as well as the emotional and spiritual process she experienced when writing.

“I call the space where I struggle with my creations ‘*nepantla*.’ *Nepantla* is the place where my cultural and personal codes clash, where I come up against the world’s dictates, where these different worlds coalesce in my writing. I am conscious of various *nepantlas*—linguistic, geographical, gender, sexual, historical, cultural, political, social [...] *Nepantlas* are places of constant tension, where the missing or absent pieces can be summoned back, where transformation and healing may be possible, where wholeness is just out of reach but seems attainable” (Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality 2015, 2)

Understanding in-betweenness beyond physical space is critically important when addressing the work of artists whose existence have been traditionally outside of the Western art historical canon, whether due to cultural, geographic, or heteronormative neglect. The identities of these artists within this grouping are often perceived through absolutist methodologies; that is to say, the work is to be read as representing a singular unchanging discourse or location; a Latinx artist who speaks to their experience between the United States and Central America is inherently tied to the border; or a queer artist’s work is always to be perceived through the sole lens of queerness. While these readings are valid, they pass over greater opportunity to consider space as ambiguous, nonliteral, and open to the labors of the individual within it. In the case of this exhibition, the desert embodies this ideal and serves as both an active collaborator and present force within the action of the artist.

One reading of the desert is as a geographic *tabula rasa* in which an individual is free to exert both substantial gestures of visibility while also remaining concealed within the vastness of the space. From an art historical perspective, the landscape has provided inspiration for artists who have sought to explore and express their own existence, such as Laura Aguilar and Georgia O’Keefe, as much as those who have used the desert as the embodiment of personal entropy, such as Ana Mendieta or David Wojnarowicz. However, the desert, while vast, should not be considered unoccupied or free of preconceptions. Because the land provides little for human sustenance, labor is perpetually required and with labor comes the complexities and conflicts of our past, present, and future.

The desert’s role as both a blank slate for one’s personal labors, as well as a deeply codified space is present in much of the work in this exhibition. In her three works on display, **Farah Salem** makes use of the desert as an extension of personal visibility and concealment and as a location to offer homage to the labors of women in her home country of Kuwait. In her video work *Caustic* and its accompanying audio, which was produced as part of a poetry collection with collaborator Manisha AR, Salem recounts the protests of Kuwaiti women in the 1960s for whom recent national sovereignty had not provided congruent independence. In defiance, women burned their abayas, the traditional concealing garment for women, in an effort to make their presence known; and through their destruction create a visible body of resistance. However, Salem notes that power can also be obtained through concealment as the garment allows the woman to exist unseen and unquestioned, their intentions and motives remaining autonomous. In dyeing her abaya in the Arizona desert, Salem attempts to purify the garment of its assumed

connotations returning the fabric to the land. Similarly, Salem's images from her series *Temporary Deformations*, composed of photo collages of geographic land formations and textiles, speak to the relationship between the body and the land. The fabric, distorted and seeped through the cracks in the stone, encourages us to question our ownership of the environment around us. At what point does the autonomous human and natural body begin and who determines such a barrier?

Like Salem, **Juan Molina Hernández** approaches the desert from a point of ambiguity, history, and symbolism. Closely tied to Anzaldúa's writings in its emphasis on indigenous tradition and cultural amalgamation, their work seamlessly embeds layers of religious, gendered, environmental, and literary iconography into forms that speak intensely to the realities of life between the United States and Mexico, as well as personal vulnerabilities, family structures, and the ongoing desire for a complete and true self. Molina Hernández' use of plants, human hair, and natural materials like cactus thorns elicit a number of readings including life, death, pain, protection, and personal embellishment, all existing synchronously in the work in an effort to avoid a singular interpretation or assumption. Rather the multitude of materials and inspirations afford a sense of freedom found in the landscape of the desert and open sky. As Sandra Cisneros writes in her most well-known coming of age novel *The House on Mango Street*; "You can never have too much sky. You can fall asleep and wake up drunk on sky, and sky can keep you safe when you are sad."

M_m<M (pronounced "EM" or any combination of vocalizations produced from three "M's") aims to "declassify" personal and ethnonationalist mythology. A former promotional photographer for NASA, M_m<M's images serve as densely packed visual and archival research, often evoking the propagandist roots of the American military industrial complex of the 1950s and 1960s; as well as the ways in which such discourse continued to fuel hypernational and hypermasculine perceptions of exploration and innovation often to the detriment of the environment and disadvantaged populations. In their ongoing series *Space Race: UNCLASSIFIED*, M_m<M explores the desert as a sacred space for human development in which promises and dreams are often tainted and left unfulfilled. In *Space Race UNCLASSIFIED: (Astronaut) Ed Dwight*, M_m<M recounts the life of Ed Dwight, a decorated pilot selected to become NASA's first Black astronaut. An instant celebrity to Black Americans, Dwight was met with disdain from colleagues at NASA before his prompt removal from the program without explanation. He would eventually leave NASA and become a sculptor. *Space Race UNCLASSIFIED: Freedom 7 to Artemis II [NASA: 1961 to Present]* evokes the excesses of military and space development. A venture of the wealthy and White, space travel has often closely followed war and colonial expansionism from White Sands missile testing of the 1960s, to Elon Musk's digital monopoly, to the cost of the future which is often placed heavily on the shoulders of the most vulnerable.

If M_m>M's work considers the desert's future in human hands, **SaraNoa Mark** looks to the past and the remnants our labors there have left and continue to leave behind in the landscape. Often inspired by memory and disappearance, Mark's works made of unfired and hand carved clay undergo the process of extreme drying, exacerbated by regular wetting which causes the clay to crack and flake, furthering the desertification process. After embarking on a water pilgrimage in Turkey and witnessing the effects of resource extraction on the landscape, Mark has worked to emphasize the long term consequences of severe drought over an extended period of time. However, while such phenomena are the result of human intervention, Mark encourages the viewer to consider the autonomy of the living desert in which cracks and erosion form and evolve to their own design. Our past actions form future changes for which we have no control.