



Trauma and Response

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*Annabel Daou, Audrya Flores, Heyd Fontenot, El Franco Lee II, Joachim West
Curated by Scott A. Sherer, Ph.D.*

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Curator's Statement

Relative to recent years of intense social and cultural trauma in the U.S. and globally, few circumstances nowadays maintain sufficient stability that we may easily continue the habitual expectations of the coordinates of even some of our more modest thoughts and undertakings. To be sure, historical frameworks forever influence subjectivity; nevertheless, the realities of demanding social, cultural, and political challenges have prompted new directions and possibilities. Rallying cries of the Black Lives Matter and #metoo movements, for example, have motivated a broad range of political speech; range of public speech and action and have furthered (however contested) positive awareness, change, and healing regarding pernicious experiences of individual and collective trauma.

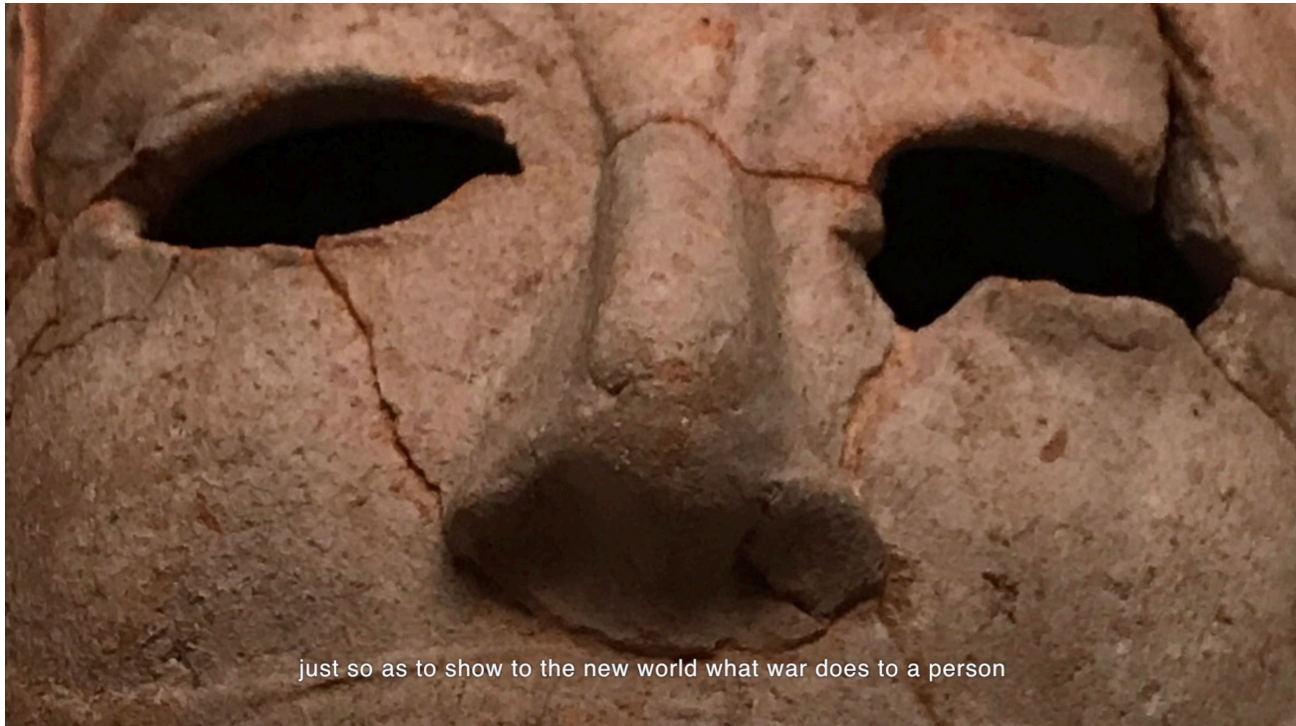
While critical frameworks that have been popular in academic circles in the last two-three generations regarding social and cultural discourses now seem to have entered generalist conversations, it is surely wise not to assume that the dialogue in rooms of

higher education have directly impacted community situations. Still, it is an encouraging trend that it has become widespread to recognize that the construction and policing of identity are fundamental concerns across a full range of political and cultural spectrums.

In *Trauma and Response*, the artists' contributions bracket a range of experiences and imaginings. Their projects correspond both to unique situations and to extensive contexts and discourses. They ask their viewers to consider their own relationships to the construction of histories and their own desires, dreams, and commitments.

I wish to thank these artists for creating opportunity for thinking about the character of how we live in and may push at the boundaries of the contexts of our lives and, further, for encouraging new ways to consider differently our own experiences, relationships, goals and fantasies.

- Scott A. Sherer, Ph.D.



Annabel Daou, *chou hayda/if you only knew*, HD color video with sound, RT 24:00, 2017-18 ©Annabel Daou;
 Courtesy of the artist, signs and symbols, New York and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin

Annabel Daou

Annabel Daou engages with multiple discourses and the relationships among spoken, written, and visual texts relative to the character of the construction of both cultural history as well as individual subjectivity. Now living and working in New York, Daou returned in 2017 to Beirut, her birthplace, to develop a project titled *CHOU HAYDA* for the National Museum. Functioning as a creative audio guide, the work reveals how the meaning of things is always constructed across their utility and aesthetic appreciation. Daou invited visitors, many of whom had never been in the museum before (no doubt due in great measure to years of war and violence) to consider objects from every period in the institution's collections. She asked these collaborators questions about the objects' origins and content. Without the influence of curatorial identification and explanation, individuals gave voice to their own thoughts about the artifacts, offering creative descriptions, imagining both the lives of the objects and

those who might have owned, used, or encountered them. These conversations fundamentally create new understanding both about the past and its influence in the present. Voices carry an array of tones, textures, and rhythms. Audience members see, hear, and read; in so doing, they develop their own thoughts and interpretations. For Western gallery-goers without the necessary language skills remains, it is significant to hear conversations in one language (Arabic) and to read their captions in another (English) as the dialogue functions as a marker of both of cultural difference and the processes through which explanatory discourses are constructed.

Daou's interest in the character of the construction of historical meaning inspired *WHEN IN THE COURSE OF HUMAN EVENTS* a 20' length of black ink-dyed microfiber paper covered with split lines of text that were hand-written with correction fluid. The work takes



Annabel Daou, *I just don't know*, graphite and gesso on paper, 2018



Annabel Daou, *Listen*, paper, graphite and gesso on paper, 2019

its title and first line from the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and is followed by other phrases appropriated from or gifted by artists, poets, writers, and activists from around the world that complete the sentence “When in the course of human events it becomes necessary to....” Reactions include: TO TAKE A STEP BACK/TO TAKE A DEEP BREATH/TO HOLD OUT YOUR HANDS/TO HOLD BACK YOUR TEARS/TO SCREAM IN THE NIGHT/TO WAIT FOR THE DAWN. Phrases skip over the boundaries of their lines, fracturing normative physical and conceptual boundaries to engage with other lines of text. Daou and her respondents/readers/viewers are all engaged in actions that are both personal and political.

Continuing her interest in changing contexts of meaning over time and across media, Daou’s *DECLARATION* is a sound piece based on a *WHEN IN THE COURSE OF HUMAN EVENTS*, created with Miriam Schickler,

in which Daou voices the written inscriptions as first person declarations—*I take a step back, I take a deep breath, I hold out my hands, I hold back my tears*—amid the context of disparate sounds percolating in built environments.

While working in Beirut, Daou became interested in the National Museum’s ancient stone mosaics. She created a series of works made of paper, gesso, and graphite that look like they have the presence of stone. Elements have unique dimensions and tones and are attached to thin mulberry paper that serves as their connecting skin. *I just don't know* is the first piece in the series and the only one that is wordless, and *Listen* is the last piece of the series, made after the end of its first public exhibition. Words take on meaning in their physicality and in the environment they share with viewers, demonstrating the links and differences between history and contemporaneous presence.



Annabel Daou, *WHEN IN THE COURSE OF HUMAN EVENTS*, Ink and correction fluid on microfiber paper, 2019-20 ©Annabel Daou; Courtesy of the artist, signs and symbols, New York and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin.



Annabel Daou, *WHEN IN THE COURSE OF HUMAN EVENTS*, detail, Ink and correction fluid on microfiber paper, 2019-20 ©Annabel Daou; Courtesy of the artist, signs and symbols, New York and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin.



El Franco Lee, II, *Fight or Flight*, acrylic on canvas, 2009

El Franco Lee II

El Franco Lee II's work opens a frame onto discourses of race in the US and does so in multiple ways. His work deliberates upon the horror that we have come to expect in a period in which headlines regularly announce incidents of racial violence. More broadly, Lee's work extends both to remind viewers of the potential for perseverance and to challenge us to consider the relationships between our own personal experiences, witnessing, empathy, actions, and contributions to change.

In *Fight or Flight*, Lee conjures the murder of James Byrd Jr. in Jasper, Texas. On June 7, 1998, Byrd, a 49-year-old Black man, accepted an early morning ride from three white men, including one of whom he had known for years and another who had joined a supremacist gang while in prison and was notoriously

covered in racist tattoos. Instead of taking Byrd home, the assailants drove to an unpaved road, beat him, spray-painted his face, urinated on him and dragged him behind their truck for a mile and a half on an asphalt road before his right arm and head were severed. The murderers continued to drag the body for another mile and a half before dumping his remains in front of an African-American church and driving off to a barbecue, actions that mimic the historic pattern of lynchings as community events.

In 2001, Texas signed into law the James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Act that was to be followed by the federal Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 that expanded 1969 federal hate-crime laws to extend to investigations and prosecutions for violence motivated by actual or



El Franco Lee, II, *Nightmare Katrina 3*, acrylic on canvas, 2010

perceived aspects of identity. The Byrd Foundation for Racial Healing is a non-profit organization formed to “promote racial healing and cultural diversity through education.” In his challenging work, Lee refuses to allow the horrors of racism to pass into history with forgetfulness or disregard.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina caused more than 1800 deaths and became the costliest storm in U.S. history with \$108 billion in property damages with low income and Black people suffering disproportionately. Forming as a tropical depression over the Bahamas on August 23, the storm made landfall on August 29. Eventually 80% of New Orleans would flood. By September 1, 30,000 evacuees sought protection in the Superdome and 25,000 more in the Convention Center. They faced shortages of food and water and

access to basic sanitation. Not until September 2 did military presence come to assist, and by September 6, less than 10,000 people were left in the city from an initial population of more than 480,000. Much tragedy could have been avoided if not for fatal engineering flaws in the levee system, difficulties in search-and-rescue, lack of preparedness, and poor federal government response. In *Nightmare Katrina 3*, Lee presents a scene in the middle of the horror. Amid fierce polluted floodwaters, two groups pass a child over a chain link fence, from one uncertain future to another. While secure from positions on dry land, police and military officers extend no help, instead pointing loaded guns on the sufferers as if they were culpable for their own desperation. Nevertheless, resignation and determination are palpable on faces with the fragility of life honored and protected in strong hands.



Joachim West, *The Torment of St. Anthony*, mixed media, 2013

Joachim West

Joachim West creates work that often shocks with an excess of grotesque images that pulse between fascination and repulsion. Fearlessly, West directs to attention to aspects of our lives that reflect base characteristics of human nature that may provoke inhumanity toward others as well as generate our own struggles with wants and needs and the security of our own self-identifications. While maintaining some recognizable foundations that reflect everyday experience, West's work extends into surreal imagination that conjoins human bodies, parts of bodies, insects, and machines. In so doing, both the images and the act of our viewing them are dimensions of normalcy on a thin slide into abjection.

In *The Torment of St. Anthony*, West faces temptations of contemporary life, of sexual and consumer desire. Following Michelangelo's first known painting, *The Torment of Saint Anthony*, 1487 (at the Kimbell Art Museum), West creates a scene featuring demons

composed with grotesque elements of humans, lizards, insects, and machines. The setting is an unremarkable living room with couches, a rug on a wood-grain floor and a white tile entry. The composition is fully active with a figure, representing the artist himself, in jogging shoes, jeans, and T-shirt occupying the center in a contorted pose, the sole of one shoe pressing out toward the viewer. A small brown dog looks in wonder at his master, somewhat oblivious to the excessive feast of sweets and junk food that appears to be rising in the air immediately above his head. At the left, a syringe is poised to pierce the man's leg and a humanoid insect behind a gas mask and with a stethoscope is examining the body with the interest of both examiner and consumer. To the right, a figure with multiple sets of breasts and two sets of legs and eyes floats upside down both drawing the attention of the eponymous protagonist and seemingly a threat to his life.

Halle-hoopla shows viewers a glimpse of a crowded



Joachim West, *Critical Mass 2*, graphite on paper, 2019

street and the mayhem of an ecstatic religious event. The faces are masks, grotesque caricatures reminiscent of the acid deformations of German Expressionism. Emphasis is on a street preacher who occupies the center top of the painting, with figures sprawling under his feet and on the ground who are themselves framed by the grasping hands of a reaching, robed figure, who has avoided an overturned podium and an older woman trying to get back into her wheelchair after just falling out of it. The work is a spectacle of attraction, deceit, and desperation.

Critical Mass 2 is an overflowing scene of an hysterical stampeding crowd, appearing like a human swarm of ants or maggots overwhelming their food source or—in an even more macabre comparison—masses of corpses discarded after genocide. In shades of grays and blacks, it is hard to maintain attention and focus, and when we do, we look with horror at facial expressions, angles of limbs, or clothing; meanwhile,

we risk becoming captivated by the grotesque spectacle.

In *School Days*, West indicts frameworks of institutional education that ostensibly provide foundation for a collective, ethical social contract but so often fail to do so. From above, the viewer sees the mayhem of a classroom where the instructor has transmogrified into an insect and monstrous vegetation threatens to engulf the room. The teacher, whose human characteristics seem to be reduced to the shoes she wears, holds in some of her arms a nude woman who she is using to lure her students to their deaths. Throughout the room, students appear stunned, dead, or in processes of assimilation into grotesque life forms. On the front chalkboard, a lesson on Ethics lists deplorable activities that could be understood as a banal checklist of normative depravity. Here, the establishment engages students not to offer them benefits but to receive them as prey to serve its own needs.



Joachim West, *Halle-hooplah*, mixed media, 2011



Joachim West, *School Days*, graphite on paper, 2019



Heyd Fontenot, *Tim with Outstretched Arms*, graphite and ink on paper, 2010

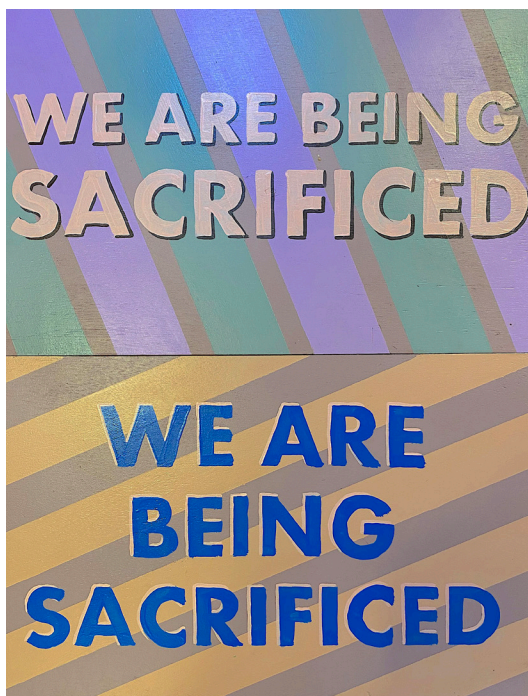
Heyd Fontenot

Heyd Fontenot's work considers how meaning lives in the body. Sexuality, especially queer sexuality, is engagement that is both organic and pressured by the influence of norms, magins, and their construction of relative differences. While we may take pleasure in our unique characteristics and circumstances and the joys of sexuality, constant negotiations influence these arrangements.

Fontenot's intimate portraits are disarming as the humanity of the sitter, the artist, and the viewer are triangulated. Outside the influence of extraneous contextual clues, these images are fundamentally simple and direct, with fluid line and subtle color implying personality, private thoughts, and connection with others. Personality, a lifetime of experience, and intimacy coalesce in the character of a single glance, gaze, or pose, with living motion made quiet

through the settling of pigment into paper fiber. Always, Fontenot gauges his own actions and takes seriously the responsibility to respect others; indeed, vulnerability, especially in work with nude figures, is unrelenting strength. *Brian Looking Through Keyhole* shows a figure gesturing to an unseen objective while looking directly out toward the artist and viewers while *Tim with Outstretched Arms* approaches with an air of expectancy. Their bodies are exposed, soliciting the care of the other, while their faces and expressions emphasize their individuality in intersubjective engagement.

Double Bust Doodle is a monumental 9' x 10' drawing. It is indebted, however, to the immediacy of sketchbook studies, at once being coded as being spontaneous and unfiltered while also showing evidence of the careful study of individual figures. The images appear



Heyd Fontenot, *We are Being Sacrificed*,
housepaint on panel, 2020



Heyd Fontenot, *Just Say No*, housepaint on panel, 2020

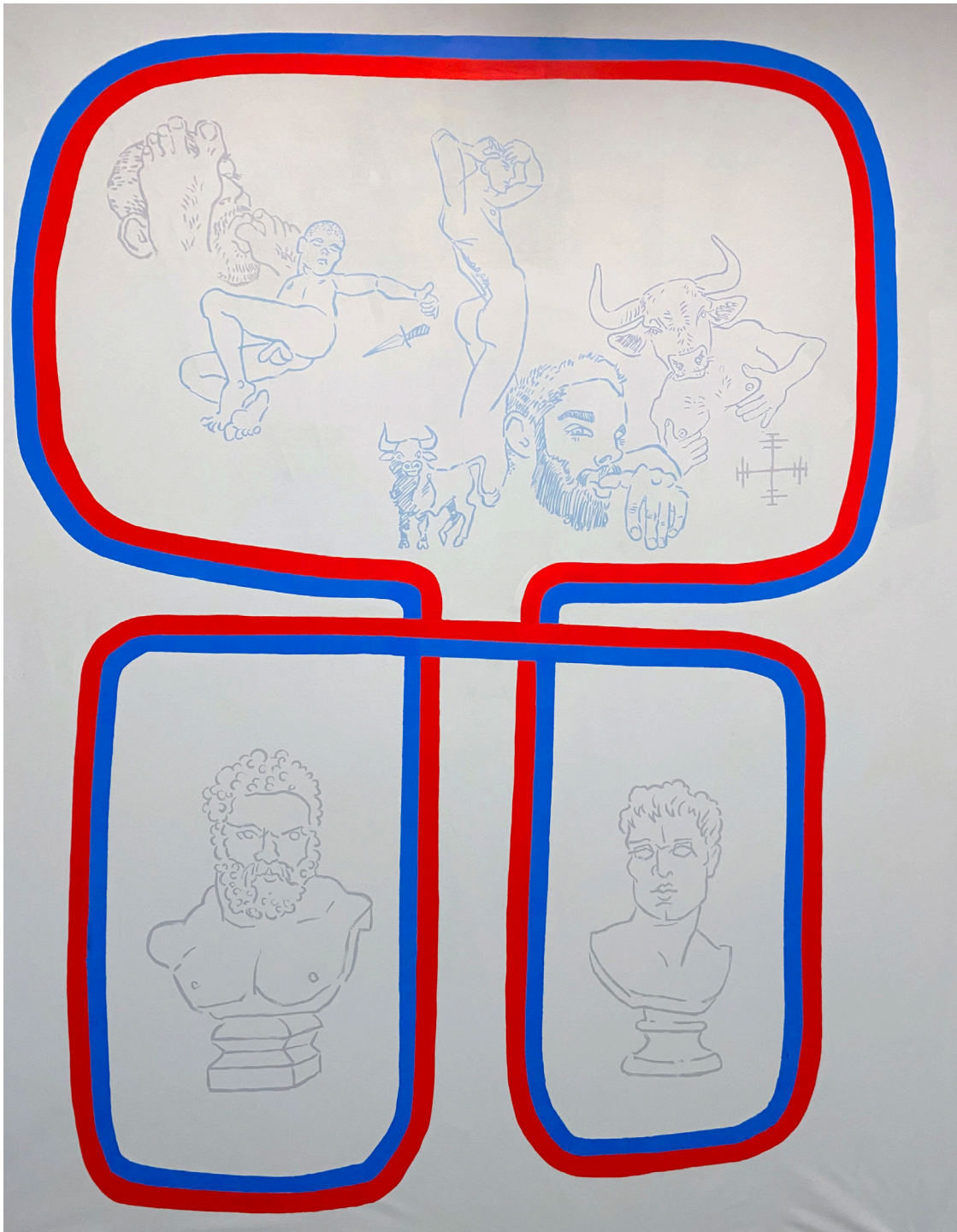
like private notes-to-self; now shared with others, they suggest the presence of the self within broader social frameworks of gender and sexuality. A stylized design creates a 3-part structure with a large horizontal area above two pendant sections each containing a drawing of a classical portrait bust. The stylized design, in its sinuous shape, links these references to idealized masculinity and connects them to an idiosyncratic composition of sexualized imagery that includes a bearded face sucking on a thumb, a bearded face sucking on a toe, a reclining nude male, a nude male in rear *contrapposto* pose, a bull, minotaur, and a good luck mark. This structure recalls Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* [1915-23] that suggests sexual drama with figures representing men ostensibly vying for the attention of a female figure. The bull is a symbol for Fontenot, as it is for others, of masculinity and male

sexuality that is at once produced and policed relative to a host of discourses of gender and sexual presentation. Overall, Fontenot's work has the structure of traditions of Western religious painting. Its creation and its summons to viewers recalls the hierarchy, limitations, and repetition of prayers in mainstream religions. Here, bold sexuality insists that sexuality is a central element both of daily life and fantasy.

Cultural and political themes in Fontenot's figurative drawing continue in his text-based work. The demands on—and responses of—individuals is piercing in works like *We are Being Sacrificed* and *Just Say No*, either presented as single phrases or ones that repeat and echo. Verbal discourse has great power, but viewed in relation to representations of experience, we are reminded of history as being always lived and actively in processes of being written and re-written.



Heyd Fontenot, *Brian Looking Through Keyhole*, graphite and ink on paper, 2015



Heyd Fontenot, *Double Bust Doodle*, graphite and ink on paper, 2010



Audrya Flores, *Cascabel* [body detail], cacti, agave, cascabel chiles, marble chips, lava rock, river rock, wheat, 2020

Audrya Flores

In her creative studio work, Audrya Flores focuses on individual healing by addressing trauma, mental health, and issues of identity. She develops inspiration from her daily life, dreams, and family traditions and from deep connections to spirituality and the occult. Exploring and documenting her own healing through dream states and inventive storytelling, Flores avoids reliance on constructed cultural narratives, and she summons spirit and nature to guide her and offer healing and protection. The generosity of her work offers opportunity to witness and learn from transformative processes with the hope that others will benefit in their own journeys.

The imagery and materials Flores use derive from her understanding of multiple meanings that inhere in repurposed textiles, natural stone, and organic materials such as cactus and corn. Her site-specific installation

Cascabel borrows its name from a type of chile known for the sound of its rattling seeds inside the dried bell of the fruit. Corn husks possess sacred connotations. Cactus reminds Flores of her grandmother's garden, and it has protective spines, can heal itself, and regenerate from smaller pieces.

Overall, the work takes the form of a coiling serpent. Snakes are truly remarkable creatures. Their bodies change as they assume new shapes as they move throughout the day and as they grow and shed old skins in the course of their lives. They are shapeshifters both in the commonplace and in spiritual realms, being symbolic for many relative to a range of circumstances. Suspending negative connotations (being scary or monstrous to some), serpents are symbols of on-going rebirth. Like other creatures, they transform substance



Audrya Flores, *Cascabel* [rattle detail], cacti, agave, cascabel chiles, marble chips, lava rock, river rock, wheat, 2020

into energy; moreover, they go into dark places to devour longstanding issues and other monsters. This exhibition at UTSA is the first time that Flores has added a rattle to her application of snake-inspired figuration. Rattles are not just warnings for predators; they are signs of growth as the creatine that remains from eating protein remains as a life record on the serpent's tail. Flores's use of the *calavera* (or skull) connects death and re-birth, processes of generation and re-generation. *Cascabel* is powerful and fearless, sent out in the world to consume difficulty, shame, pain, and to neutralize negativity and violence and their lingering effects.

Retrieving Audy takes the form of a *lechuza* (or owl), a new reference and shift in Flores's practice. Like serpents, barn owls are also shape-shifter creatures. Owls peer into darkness with their remarkable vision

and hearing. Feathers moderate sound, and talons grab and retrieve and heal the inner child. Over the past year, the isolation of COVID-19 distancing and quarantine has put many ordinary activities on hold and prompted much watchfulness and stillness. For some, this unprecedented period has enabled opportunities for self and family nurturing and, in broader contexts, for negotiating tremendous changes in political discourses and for producing positive energies in individual and shared cultural imagination and identity.

For her viewers, Flores's sculptures encourage visualization and meditation as creative acts that cleanse and transform anxiety and past trauma. Each time Flores and her viewers re-animate iconic imagery, spiritual forces become more defined, powerful, and helpful.



Audrya Flores, *Retrieving Audy* [feathers detail], corn husks, tea-stained corn husks, wire, chicken wire, cardboard, tree branch, cotton fabric, 2020



Audrya Flores, *Retrieving Audy* [talon detail], corn husks, tea-stained corn husks, wire, chicken wire, cardboard, tree branch, cotton fabric, 2020

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