

The In/Visibility of Domestic Workers through Contemporary Art.

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“Housework reflects the universal human need for material and emotional sustenance. As such, its general content is predictable, but the elaboration—who does the work, for whom, and how—is historically and culturally specific.” Maria de la Luz Ibarra, 2000.

Domestic work is an ancient labor force that indicates hierarchy, patriarchy, slavery, and dominance. Due to the increase in the reproduction of labor, the market for domestic labor has grown. For instance, it is not only the upper class that hires domestic workers but also the middle class and the working class. Therefore, as Rhacel Salazar Parreñas says: "Domestic work takes multiple forms, ranging in her case from au pair to child care worker to all-around cleaner; is a long-term career for migrant women."¹ With globalization, migrant workers are more racially and ethnically diverse coming from different social classes and educational backgrounds. This paper presents artworks by artists whose personal stories are linked to illegal immigration and domestic labor. The visibility of domestic workers indicates that they learn to navigate a system in order to survive by making this country their home while living in certain levels of invisibility. My intention is to portray the invisibility of Latino workers and why artists have chosen to showcase undocumented workers and their labor as a capital force and as a form of slavery.

¹ Salazar Parreñas, Rhacel. 2001. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 2.

Through Gomez's Work

Jay Lynn Gomez, formerly Ramiro Gomez, portrays domestic labor as a cheap commodity that hides behind the polished space of a family. His Mexican parents arrived in California in the 1970s and became American citizens during Reagan's amnesty —Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Being born in 1986 to undocumented parents, Gomez's art has been influenced by his mother working for almost 20 years as a janitor and his father working as a truck driver for over 20 years. Domestic work throughout one's life can easily span countries and generations, like that of Gomez's life. According to "In the United States, policies implemented at national and international levels, as well as demographic changes, help mold social reproductive experiences in households and contribute to a growing demand for Mexicans and other immigrant domestic workers."² (Bluestone and Harrison 1986). While looking at his artwork we can perceive a sense of intimacy between the domestic workers and their employer and the psychological stress that the workspace imposes on them. For example, *Las Meninas, Bel Air*, 2013 is a reinterpretation of Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, 1656. Made of a cardboard cutout, this piece has been reproduced as photography by David Feldman. Due to the servitude of the female workers represented by their position kneeling on each side of the *infanta* to fix her dress, this is perhaps his more powerful work. We see an artificial setup that makes us wonder where reality begins. The fixed gaze of the *infanta* in contrast with the overshadowed maids, who lack features makes us reflect on their invisibility. They are allowed to touch the fine clothes of the young lady but cannot look at her or us, Ibarra convincingly argues that "a crucial determinant of the extent of employment in paid domestic labor in a given location is the degree

² Ibarra, María de la Luz, "Mexican Immigrant Women and the New Domestic Labor" in *Human Organization, Society for Applied Anthropology*, Winter 2000, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Winter 2000), pp. 453. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44127241>

of economic inequality there." ³ There will always be inequality between domestic workers and those who employ them. Despite domestic labor and reproductive labor is extremely crucial to the lives of the employers, employers often fail to appreciate this vital work. One can perceive their slavery while at the same time it is possible to feel their camaraderie as if they were following the servitude code and playing the role of being invisible by wearing discreet clothes. Interestingly, the maids carry their identity wearing discreet jewelry. For example, the hoops, which are often worn by Latina women. The skin color is emphasized, so the viewer can understand that labor is racialized. Who are domestic workers? Often, people of color are associated with domestic labor, and women are the ones who perform as maids. Could the lack of features indicate that any undocumented immigrant can end up working as a maid? Is Gomez encouraging us to imagine the character's gestures? Here we can see hierarchy and race as a form of symbolic violence.

³ Ibarra, María de la Luz, "Mexican Immigrant Women and the New Domestic Labor" in *Human Organization*, Society for Applied Anthropology, Winter 2000, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Winter 2000), pp. 453. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44127241>
Ibarra notes Milkman, Reese, and Roth (1998:486).



Las Meninas, North Fairing Road, Bel Air, 2013, (2018), archival pigment print on Epson Professional paper 31.25 x 31.25 x 0.9375 in Jay Lynn Gomez (Ramiro Gomez) David Feldman⁴

⁴ *Las Meninas, North Fairing Road, Bel Air*, 2013, (2018), archival pigment print on Epson Professional paper 31.25 x 31.25 x 0.9375 in Jay Lynn Gomez (Ramiro Gomez) David Feldman

<https://www.artworkarchive.com/profile/university-art-museum-at-new-mexico-state-university/artwork/las-meninas-north-fairing-road-bel-air-university-art-museum-at-new-mexico-state-university?artist=jay-lynn-gomez-ramiro-gomez-david-feldman>

Though Hacmon's Work



Zac Hacmon, *Hernando*, site-specific installation, 2020.

Zac Hacmon is an Israeli artist based in New York. Since his father was born in a refugee camp, he understands the struggles and difficulties a refugee has to go through. His sound sculpture, *Hernando*, is the artist's new site-specific architectural intervention: the displacement of a lobby pillar to the gallery space. Concealed with 24x12 in marble tiles, the structure is subject to regulations and equipped with fire furniture, an air vent screen, and a service door panel in the back. From the air vent, we can hear Hernando's voice, a doorman working at the

Museum Tower located in Midtown Manhattan, next to the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). The sculpture stands as a fine column connected to the wall horizontally. Hacmon attracts our gaze to the red extinguisher making us wonder why we see it on a sculpture. The metamorphosis of the marble accentuates its most impressive quality: camouflage. Once inside the gallery space, it seems as if it has always belonged to this place. The site-specific installation resembles solidity, while its verticality evokes dignity. The industrial architectural elements invite the viewer to approach the installation, walk around it and transverse its arch.

Hernando is the name of a fifty-year-old man from Colombia narrating his experience as a doorman and artist during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sculpture's sound is calm and engaging, the viewer is now listening to the doorman's voice. The doorman arrived in New York as an immigrant as a child, he got his degree in arts and is now an American citizen. However, he has worked at the iconic Museum Building in a position of servitude. Hacmon's oeuvre is tactical, he makes noticeable what seems to be obscure. He places his viewers in the spot of the other one. By introducing industrial and safety elements, he is showcasing the necessity of being alert and being seen. The pillar is more than an element for support, it is a witness that listens and remains silent, just like a doorman. *Hernando* is a receptacle that assimilates the everyday dynamics, and he has his art to transform it into abstraction. The symbolic violence of this job has an impact on his personal life. Today his artwork is hidden from the public eye.

The symbolic violence for a doorman, especially for a Latin American migrant responds to daily interaction with wealthy mostly white people who they open the door for, receive and deliver the packages for. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the doorman risked his health. The doorman's body strength stretches throughout 12-hour shifts. Even when he is not fully aware of

the emotional stress, it is expressed in the invisibility of his artwork. Hacmon allows us to have an intimate conversation with *Hernando*. Who is the doorman in the sculpture? Hernando Restrepo, in his words: is "a doorman or building employee" who "doesn't care about exhibiting his artwork."



Zac Hacmon, Alexa Chinandega, 2022.



Zac Hacmon, *Unit 6*, 2022. 84x72x74 in. Wood, aluminum, PVC, wire, flat-screen, ceramic tiles, grout, plexiglass, with the recorded sound of Alexa's voice reciting poems by Ruben Dario & Claribel Alegría, photo credit: Etienne Frossard.

The sound-sculpture *Mia*, named after Alexa's daughter, is made of wood, aluminum, PVC, glass, wire, flat-screen, ceramic tiles, grout, and plexiglass. Alexa is a transgender woman from Nicaragua. She had to flee her country due to political reasons after the 2018 protests. From the ventilation ducts, we can hear the recorded sound of the ocean and Alexa's voice reciting poems by Ruben Dario and Claribel Alegría. Resembling a crescent moon form, the sculpture evokes femininity, fertility, and an urge for protection. It also portrays a different situation concerning gender and dispossession by conceptualizing the case of Alexa, an asylum seeker

waiting for her immigration status trial in New York City. When Alexa arrived in the US as a refugee, she was homeless. Hacmon highlights an unfair system that makes it impossible for asylum seekers and refugees to sustain themselves financially. However, this sound sculpture presents how an art & healing workshop becomes a resilience tool of creativity. Through the RDJ Shelter, Alexa was compensated as an artist and was able to send remittances to her daughters in Nicaragua. At some point, Alexa was cleaning the house, and cooking for her partner. In exchange, he paid the rent and provided food. Alexa is restricted to the informal economy, and her asylum status impacts her inability to secure a job as a domestic worker. Therefore, Alexa engages in reproductive labor, that is not compensated financially. Often she cleans in return for housing or food. Similar to other cases, women take care of other peoples' homes and children but can only provide mothering at a distance to their children.

The selection of artworks in this paper contextualizes Latin American workers and their invisibility in a global system that demands their job as household workers in the US. Through Gomez's painting, we can conclude that immigration policies make it impossible for domestic workers to claim their rights and have a life of freedom. On the contrary, due to their life in isolation, there is always a feeling of anxiety and fear, while performing their job with devotion to an employer, to whom they serve loyally. The interpretation of *Hernando* reminds us that the work performed by a doorman has become essential labor even before the COVID-19 pandemic. With *Unit 6*, we can conclude those female immigrants mainly respond to gendered violence in their home countries such as femicide, and political persecution. As a consequence, immigrant female workers are particularly vulnerable.

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