

SITUATIONS

AUTRE

ROMANCING A WOUND: AN INTERVIEW OF ESTEFANIA PUERTA

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portrait and interview by Abbey Meaker

Estefania Puerta is a Colombian immigrant womxn whose interdisciplinary art practice transcends genre. Experiential installations featuring sculpture, video, scent, writing, and performance are steeped in layers of psychoanalytic theory, mythology, and profound insights into language, memory, ritual, and time.

In early fall, after months of trying to connect, Estefania and I caught up on my back porch, listening to the trees, watching the light change. The pandemic made it challenging to get together, but she was also busy in her studio preparing for her upcoming solo exhibition Womb Wound, opening this Sunday, October 11th at Situations in New York.

Hearing her describe this new body of work and the ideas investigated within it, I knew we had to sit down more formally—a perfect reason to delve more deeply into its transporting complexity. Her work evokes one’s own process of recollection which condenses, displaces, and plummets us abruptly into the forgotten (or misplaced) recesses of our past.

ABBEY MEAKER: You’ve titled this body of work and your upcoming exhibition *Womb Wound*. You explained in a recent interview with Rachel Jones that this title represents an extended investigation of healing, of birthing something, being the holder and nurturer that then becomes wounded. This is definitely a universal paradigm: what does it mean to be rejected by a society that relies on those who have been cast out to sustain itself? And what happens when the rejected refuse the parasite?

ESTEFANIA PUERTA: I’m glad you brought up the extended metaphors of wombs and birth. I am not thinking of the womb as an organ attached to a cis female but rather the womb as a place we all have within us, a place of making selves, of nurture, of “the animal within the animal,” and very much about a holding place and how that slippery sense of “holding” can become a place of containment, detainment, of being trapped. The wound aspect of it is that piece around

finding a healing place *within* the wound and not an escape or sutured repression from it.



MEAKER: Healing is an ongoing and sometimes unpredictable process, but ‘being healed’ of something implies a fixed state, yet all life forms are in a constant state of becoming. What value do you see in the act of nursing a wound, or ‘romancing a wound’ as you poetically put it, if it can never fully recover but instead continually evolves?

PUERTA: Many of the ways in which I describe what I’m thinking about in the work just ends up feeling web-like instead of linear. Even thinking about the idea of romancing the wound—what does it mean to ease pain in a way that’s not healing it but enticing it into submission. I think healing is a constant state of becoming empowered in all the complexities that a wound offers, whether it be rage, sadness, pain, forgiveness, empathy, resentment, trauma, acceptance, etc. If healing is a portal into these complicated states then the wound is this fountain, a source, an opening and a flowing sting that keeps us in the simultaneity of being animals and highly conscientious beings. I find that the wounds that I carry have also become what nurses me; they

mythological creatures to me that hold powers and different codes to a family history that then becomes a world.

MEAKER: Kind of a way to commune with ancestors.

PUERTA: Yes, but they are usually people that I have known or know. But they do still feel like ancestors to me because of that moment of unknowing them. There's something about, especially older family members, that feel like they are both here *and* in some deep past that I don't have access to.

MEAKER: This familiar/unfamiliar quality imbues your work with a sense of the uncanny. The sculpture titled *Mija* is particularly reminiscent of a body. It has an interior architecture, a bone structure. It has the qualities of an organism in that it's alive and dying. It has a vibrancy and vitality but also shows signs of decline: dying plants against glowing water, soft and fleshy material edged by muddy mop-heads. Can you talk about these provocative, paradoxical qualities?

PUERTA: Thinking of the too-muchness of all these materials, the excess in both ways of fleshy softness and the raggedy edges. I think of the mop heads as a filter, both in their material, cultured significance and also as a proposal and simulacra of cilia and other filters that exist in nature. My dad was a janitor for the majority of my life and I have a lot of love and fond connections to this material; riding on the floor buffing machine that felt like a giant, gentle beast as my dad was its tamer, guiding it across the floor. At the same time, I feel that sharpness in how immigrant labor can be almost fetishized in the U.S, how immigrants are seen as the filters, the holders, the purifiers of what others do not want to deal with. How these mops literally hold the muck and grime and how I think of them as tendrils protecting the soft interior of this sculpture. The guiding term I was thinking about for this piece was "creature comfort" and thinking of bodies that need regeneration, that are not just beat down and exhausted but are actually resting, re-generating, feeding themselves, finding comfort. Some referential inspirations are the feminine grotesque and the goddess of fertility, Artemis.

offer me a space to be truthful in the complexity of my experience being alive. The value I see in romancing a wound is thinking of it as taming a wild beast and knowing how to slow dance with it instead of trying to fight it away.

MEAKER: You have said that this work is very personal, especially with regard to the family history and mythologies you're mining. Even within this personal thread, the feeling of disconnect from family and the attempt to piece together fragments of an unknowable history is something I deeply connect with, albeit for very different reasons.

PUERTA: Yeah, I mean, unfortunately, I feel like it's something that many of us, if not all of us, can relate to: the erasure of our own history and these glimpses we may have: moments of vulnerable truth that are obscured by a murky mystery. In my family there are moments of clarity that I have about the ways in which we exist—the characters in my family and the mystery about who they are, who they were. These histories get erased but manifest in other ways. I romance around these murky mysteries and create different signifiers to dwell with a bit.

MEAKER: It's interesting, the function of remembering. Memory has so much to do with one's sense of self and the forging of their history. If we can't remember, we create stories, stand-ins.

PUERTA: Yes, for sure. But I think that's the thing about the self referential vs the identity politics around it all. That is definitely a part of it and inevitable because we are all political bodies in this society. But I realized a lot of what I was dealing with was a personal, familial connection and the way that has been impacted by politics, but getting more into the heaviness around it. In some ways I feel like dealing with the political was my way of avoiding the familial and realizing that it's something I actually want to deeply understand. I wanted to find a soothing place within that unknown. I'm always thinking about a family member and each of the pieces I make become homages to them and reflections in this really subtle way. There is a correspondence that I feel like I have with my family. In that they do become these



MEAKER: I'm thinking about flowers: they are prized for their external beauty and arousing scent (how they satisfy us); yet once picked, the flower wilts, browns, drops its pedals, leaving only a rotting, stinking tuft that is hastily discarded by its once devoted admirer.

PUERTA: We remember a beautiful flower but not the decaying flower. I've been thinking about the idea of a fruiting body. Fungus as a fruiting body, flowers as a fruiting body, the body having its own potential to fruit in these dark places. The operation of nature within all of that. Not just the appearance of it but what does it actually do and mean and how do we identify with these processes.

MEAKER: Your sculpture *Enrejada* is similarly dichotomous. Spilling out of a grid-like structure lined with ears made of wax, are tendrils of pink fabric, hair, and a coiled umbilical cord. This feels like a raw, traumatic memory. Bits and pieces disconnected and out of place, trying to find each other. The burden of remembering and forgetting.



PUERTA: Hmm interesting, yeah, as you know, I am really interested in psychoanalysis and its poetic and very real history as it relates to hysteria and women's experiences. Trauma is described as this type of repetition, a loop that you play over and over again but can never find the ending to it. I do think this piece plays with that notion of repetition, the over emphasis of something that cannot be forgotten. But perhaps for me, the pain attached to trauma isn't as present for me, I was thinking more of familial lineages (there is a spice blend in the sacks that my mother uses) and also what it means to be a sentient being. I made the ears during a time when I was in deep turmoil and a creative block. A friend read my tarot and saw an image of a tongue licking flowers and instructed me to get out of my head. I was talking myself in loops and what I needed to do was be present, to listen to the earth around me in a much more embodied way. As she read my tarot, I had this material in my hand with no purpose and instinctively started making ears, *they felt beautiful and cathartic* in my hands, they felt right and that just led me to other ideas of these pieces typically being seen as their primary sense of existence. We talk a lot about the gaze in a visual way, but what if a sculpture can hear you? What does it mean to have

empowerment through another sense? To have auditory sentience and being-ness in the room and offer the act of listening to the “talker,” instead of the “viewer.” In that way, this piece actually feels really therapeutic or healing to me.

MEAKER: What has it been like making *this* work during a time of incredible tumult, fear, sickness, unknown, radical uprising? So much of what has been hidden has now come to light.

PUERTA: It has been both my refuge and sanctuary, as well as the sharpest mirror reflecting the darkest parts of my soul. The part I may not have been ready to deal with. Making art always feels like you’re putting your hands into a void and hoping that whatever you’re holding onto or making gives something back to you that is nurturing. It was a hard, weird time to try to define what would be nurturing and whether it was even something worthwhile to define in this moment. And then coming back to the romantic and true feeling around art being its own space that, for better or worse, can keep us grounded in a different reality that isn’t always a hyper-politicized and materially cruel place. I realized that I am a valid person and that I am worthy of existence and expressing my existence. In that aspect, I feel so grateful I had this show to work towards; to have a mirror I had to constantly face, to ask the hard questions and get to the other side of it, where I feel more empowered than before.

*Womb Wound is on view from October 11 - November 15
with a reception on Sunday, October 11, 12-7 PM @
Situations in New York*