

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Clare Rojas: "IN A DREAM YOU SAW A WAY TO SURVIVE AND YOU WERE FULL OF JOY"

By Amelia Saul

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Danielle Mckinney, *Dreamer*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 inches. Collection of Sarah Hendler and Vinny Dotolo. Artwork © Danielle Mckinney. Courtesy the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Pierre Le Hors.

IN A DREAM YOU SAW A WAY TO SURVIVE AND YOU WERE FULL OF JOY, opened recently at The Contemporary Austin, has an evocative title, if misleading: the work and the moment of Robin K. Williams's lyrical and intimate curation otherwise align with a no-caps aesthetic. All caps encourages the brain to read loudly. Capital letters grab at identity; but like bell hooks, who's uncapitalized name leaves her demarcation of selfhood gently edgeless, the artists in this show tend towards identities that spill over and beyond traditional boundaries; the humor, sadness, dissolution, joy, plasticity, the lost and found of this more liquid existence is all in evidence. If one were to write, in contrast, 'in a dream you saw a way to survive and were full of joy...' you'd get the feeling. Jenny Holzer's sentence of course wants the irony in its design.

The show begins with rest: Danielle Mckinney's *Dreamer* (2021) is a luscious small painting of a woman tucked deep in bed. She sleeps. A conch shell hovers over her ear, grey against her rich

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brown skin, held by nothing. The women in McKinney's paintings smoke, lounge, stretch out, arms over head. This is their own pleasure, unobserved. The touches of surrealism—the shell, and in *Bystander* (2022), a flock of seagulls—are not rendered with the crabby insistence and precision of older Surrealism, but use a more painterly line—the figures at ease, the painter at ease painting them. Here, the inexplicable just is, and McKinney doesn't have to prove it to you.

This existence in the pause continues with paintings by Clare Rojas, and dogs enter, and more birds, and introspective, black-haired women, but also a few flies. San Francisco-based Rojas's range is extraordinary—the paintings vary widely in tone, texture and pictorial space, but also in time. *Bird #1* (2019) is cosmic, floating upwards in a white-paint sky, as if just assigned a constellation in which to live. In *Patriarchy walking the dog with an extend-a-leash* (2021), the scene falls half way into narrative, with mountains and scenery reminiscent of Tove Jansson stories, and a white clad figure, and absurd tangles of leash. Still others offer complete narrative: supported by Williams, Rojas made her first sculptures: in *Swan Mother* (2022), the arc of the wing is calligraphy in air, wide from the side, narrow from the front. The figures emerge and fold into themselves as one circles them.



Installation view: *A Float for the Future*, The Armory Show, New York, 2021. Artwork © Wendy Red Star. Courtesy the artist and Sargent's Daughters, New York.

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In the same gallery, Juliana Huxtable's 2017 video, *A Split During Laughter at the Rally*, questions the agency and history of protest in America, unpacking the rhythm of protest chants. Here is the saddest part of the show, the most American and the least dreamy: in it, protesters lose their enthusiasm, their chanting slows and stops. Their signs sag. A man explains that the chants were Black and will always be Black; which is to say anyone using them for other purposes participates in cultural appropriation. Huxtable's mood is dramatically different—funnier, but just as urgent—on the adjacent wall in *Identity Industrial Complex 2* and *Identity Industrial Complex 4* (2019). Her alter-ego, Midnight Macumba, is in the process of becoming half-bat. The full crotch shot vinyl clings and wallpaper-cum-transition-surgery-diagrams juxtapose a purple cast and orchid-porn sensibility with spoof right-wing tabloid headlines. 'BIO-GOTH BODY MOD UNHINGED: EXPERIMENTAL SURGERIES TURN YOUTH INTO MUTANT CREATURES OF THE NIGHT.' For Huxtable, gender is more than half untied already.

Directly above Huxtable's work on the second floor, the danger is made explicit by Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's video game installation, *GET HOME SAFE*, which is installed with a full-wall projection and a joy-stick in a mind-bending, immersive black and red space. Brathwaite-Shirley's game and adjacent interactive video (made in collaboration with Meta) define and delineate a Black-Trans space. It's not expressed as a space of ease: the black-and-red, the caution tape, and the fear in the video game all disperse only if you manage to get your virtual self to select YES, meaning you support Black Trans people. If the program works, a cloud-chested angel comes to hug your image.



Adriana Corral, *Unearthed: Desenterrado*, 2018. Site specific, stainless steel flagpole and embroidered golden and bald eagle white cotton flag. Installed, flagpole, 60 feet; flag, 18 x 30 feet. Installation view, Rio Vista Processing Center, Socorro, Texas, 2018. Artwork © Adriana Corral. Courtesy the artist. Image courtesy the artist.

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I could have watched Tala Madani's *Shit Moms Animation 1* (2022) forever. In what must be one of the more slip-sloppy animation techniques ever employed, Madani uses wet paint to send a pathetic brown and white paint mom from one room to the next in pointless putzing.

Unfortunately, mom's business mostly spreads shit everywhere. Sometimes she really gets into it and flings her shit around, and then she masturbates on a velvet chaise-long, which gets covered in shit. This is the best masturbation scene in all of art. It culminates in her slamming her head into a dining table and reforming the goo with her own hands. Then she stalks off to the next room. What isn't to love? Motherhood isn't that different.

The second floor begins with Wendy Red Star's *Never Slips (cause it's a real good one)* (2021), a sculptural installation created after the float her family uses for the Crow Fair each year in Montana. A grey pickup is adorned with a truck-sized honor bonnet. Red Star's work celebrates her Apsáalooke heritage; photo collages behind show other family floats, each with distinct style, each gloriously rich with significance. I was struck with Red Star's playful and destabilizing use of scale: the truck is about one-fourth, making the truck bizarrely small (not useable for kids, either), and leaving the honor bonnet oversize (for a head); the wall drawing behind is large, as if zoomed-in. The whole Western notion of perspective is side-stepped, and the viewer finds herself betwixt and between recognizable physical relations.

Filling most of the upper floor is Adriana Corral's huge *Unearthed: Desenterrado* (2018), a cotton flag embroidered white-on-white with resplendent golden and bald eagles struggling mid-flight. The work was made in memoriam of the Mexican migrant workers in the Braseros program, which was guest worker program the US created to find agricultural workers when American soldiers were away fighting World War Two. While not directly explaining the cruelty of the program, the work exudes ethereal sadness. On the wall behind, Corral's ongoing *Latitudes* (2016-19) a series of blind emboss etchings, duplicate the complete Declaration of Human Rights in four languages, visible only by dint of the slight shadows; no ink was used. In Corral's insistence on texture rather than visibility, the transference of information, humanity, and kindness must be felt, not seen.

At the back of the top floor, Ellie Ga's *Quarries* (2022) offered its meditative, drawn-from-chance narrative. A glamorous Austin crowd showed up for the opening in neon silks, metallic sheaths; I saw a sword necklace: women glowed. There were men too but it's hard to remember their faces. Don't forget—Contemporary Austin is a mere three blocks down from the capital building of Texas. It felt like a joyous, if anxious, frontline.

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