

# HYPERALLERGIC

Clare Rojas: "What Can Art Do for Women?"

By Lauren Moya Ford

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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, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, and Night Gallery, Los Angeles, photo Pierre Le Hors)

AUSTIN, Tex. — When the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022, it left nearly [22 million women of reproductive age](#) without access to safe abortions. Texas has one of the most severe bans in the country: There are no exceptions for cases of rape or incest, and [medical exceptions are restricted to grisly, life-threatening extremes](#). Medical professionals who perform abortions now face felony charges punishable by up to life in prison. A diverse but [heavily-gerrymandered state](#), Texas's political conservatism has taken a rapid turn to the far right in recent years.

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For countless women here, these changes have put our survival — to say nothing of our well-being — on the line. What role can artists play at a time like this? How can culture and its producers respond to and even shape such real, daily problems? Can art do anything in the face of such a situation?

It's hard not to think about these questions when viewing [IN A DREAM YOU SAW A WAY TO SURVIVE AND YOU WERE FULL OF JOY](#) at The Contemporary Austin. The group exhibition takes place just seven blocks from the Texas Capitol building, our clearest symbol of state power. Though none deal with abortion specifically, artists Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, Adriana Corral, Ellie Ga, Juliana Huxtable, Tala Madani, Danielle McKinney, Wendy Red Star, and Clare Rojas all work with themes of identity, the body, and control that resonate with the current climate.

"The curatorial framework is directly positioned against the political context, broadly speaking, but especially with Texas's leading role in right-wing conservatism moving toward the mainstream and restricting all kinds of rights," curator Robin K. Williams told Hyperallergic on a recent tour of the exhibition. "This [show] was conceived 18 months ago in its initial phase, and now it feels, unfortunately, much more urgent than it even did before."



Installation view of *IN A DREAM YOU SAW A WAY TO SURVIVE AND YOU WERE FULL OF JOY* at The Contemporary Austin - Jones Center (2022); Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, "Get Home Safe" (2022), UPBGE interactive video game, dimensions variable (© Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, photo by Alex Boeschstein, courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles / New York)

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The exhibition's artists take on that urgency in a number of ways. Works like "Infertility Industrial Complex 4" (2019), a wall installation featuring near-nude, posed photos and a political-style poster by Huxtable and "Shit Mom Animation I" (2021), a video that follows a figure made of feces around luxurious rooms by Madani, take on the weight and apparent futility of our political moment with a sardonic shock factor. More affecting and inventive is an interactive video game by Brathwaite-Shirley called "GET HOME SAFE" (2022). The piece, which requires the viewer's physical engagement to function, immerses the user in a dizzying world of black and red obstacles that endanger a Black trans figure returning home at night. "I USED TO BELIEVE THAT IT WOULD BE ON MY WAY HOME THAT MY LIFE WOULD END," reads a haunting text in the game.

But it is the show's quieter pieces that have the most staying power. The exhibition opens with Danielle McKinney's graceful, intimate painting "Dreamer" (2021), which shows a sleeping woman tucked up in bed with a large seashell against her ear. She is resting to the sound of the sea, transported by this simple but slightly surreal presence. McKinney's works feature young Black women in thought, often with a cigarette in hand. They are painted over a black base coat, lending the figures and their environments a richness of tone but also a sense of transparency and ephemerality: In "Dreamer," the woman's orange blanket begins to dissipate into thin strokes at the bottom right edge of the painting, as if it too is being carried off to another realm. In a moment like ours, the calm in McKinney's work feels radical.



Clare Rojas, "Tired of thinking" (2021), oil on linen, 50 x 40 inches (collection of Angella and David Nazarian, © Clare Rojas, photo by Phillip Maisel, courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco)

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Stillness pervades Clare Rojas's large paintings, too, though it's infused with a sense of tension. In "Tired of Thinking" (2021), a woman gazes out at the viewer from the edge of her bed, her chin resting on her fist. Again, a bed appears as a place for processing psychic material, this time in a self-reflective mode. The book, pen, and glass of wine nearby imply a moment of journaling, reading, and reflection. Women have so much to worry about these days; she could be tired of thinking of many things.

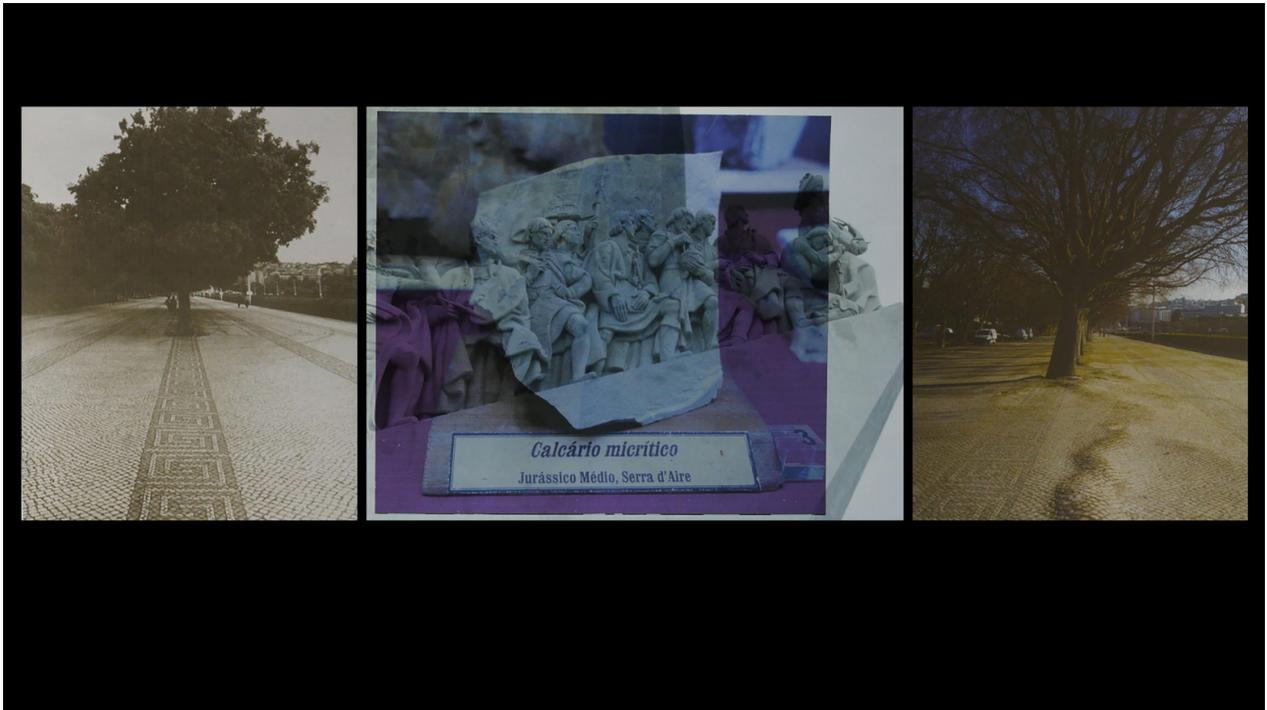
The exhibition takes its title from Jenny Holzer's 1935-1985 Survival series. The phrase, emblazoned on one of the museum's exterior facades, feels strikingly pertinent. Holzer's message is hopeful in a measured sense: By turning inwards, we can find routes to survival and joy – even if it's only in dreams.



Installation view of *IN A DREAM YOU SAW A WAY TO SURVIVE AND YOU WERE FULL OF JOY* at The Contemporary Austin - Jones Center (2022); (left) Juliana Huxtable, "Interfertility Industrial Complex 4" (2019), wallpaper, two inkjet prints on Dibond, printed paper, and buttons, dimensions variable; (right) Juliana Huxtable, "Interfertility Industrial Complex 2" (2019), wallpaper, CNC-cut and mounted inkjet print, and printed paper, dimensions variable (photo by Alex Boeschstein, courtesy the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York)

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Ellie Ga, "Quarries" (2022), HD video, sound, duration: 40 minutes (© Ellie Ga, courtesy the artist and Bureau Gallery, New York)



Adriana Corral, "Latitudes" (2016-2019), blind debossed etching (© Adriana Corral, courtesy the artist)



Tala Madani, still from "Shit Moms Animation 1" (2021), single-channel animation, running time: 07:55, edition of 6, 2 AP (© Tala Madani, courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles / New York, image courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles / New York)

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Installation view of *IN A DREAM YOU SAW A WAY TO SURVIVE AND YOU WERE FULL OF JOY* at The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center (2022) (photo by Alex Boeschenstein)

[IN A DREAM YOU SAW A WAY TO SURVIVE AND YOU WERE FULL OF JOY](#) continues at The Contemporary Austin (700 Congress Avenue, Austin, Texas) through February 12. The exhibition was curated by Robin K. Williams, curator, with Julie Le, assistant curator at The Contemporary Austin.

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