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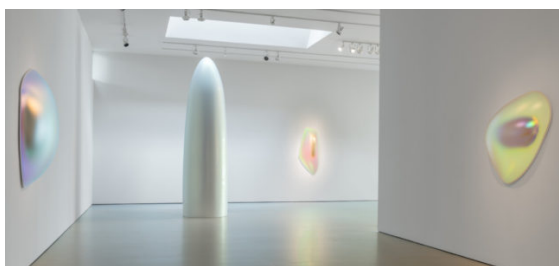
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Meghan Hendley-Lopez

(<http://www.freepresshouston.com/author/meghan-hendley-lopez/>)

VISUAL VERNACULAR: GISELA COLON



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Gisela Colon, "Atmospheres" at McClain Gallery. Images courtesy of the gallery

An otherworldly exploration of color, form, light, and surface all vibrantly resonate in the latest exhibition at McClain Gallery (<http://www.mcclaingallery.com/>). The dimensionality, the layering, and the quiet beauty combined by artist Gisela Colon (<https://www.giselacolon.com/>) all speak to her vast understanding of the balance of the masculine and the feminine through her impressive sculptural work. As one moves around the pieces, each tuned to a different vibration in colors and feel, one can see the subtle changes within the blow-molded acrylic that show forth both a luminous glow and thoughtful mystery.

These pods, which both hang on the wall and stand by themselves within the light-filled gallery, draw you in to look at the work from all angles but at a slow, purposeful movement. At the rate you traverse around Colon's work, you truly are led by the hand, the heart, and the mind while pondering the effects these pieces have in a physical and conceptual form. Colon graciously answered questions about her background, her work and her creative process.

Free Press Houston: Do you have any particular memories from your youth that pushed you into the direction of art?

Gisela Colon: I had quite a few moments in the early years of my childhood — from around the age of 4 to 10 — that were seminal to the realization that art was something special and transcendental. My mother was a painter and I spent a lot of time working hands-on as her young

assistant. We spend many long hours creating oil paintings of quotidian subjects my mother would lay out for us, such as sugarcane fields, tropical flowers, maracas, guiros, clay pots, ceramics, bohios, rolling green country landscapes, the rainforest, and numerous other natural subjects indigenous to Puerto Rico. We would frequently use as a source of study and inspiration master painters such as Van Gogh, Renoir, Rembrandt, Matisse, Monet, Gauguin, Picasso, Miro, Calder, etcetera. As a young child I was taken by the colors of Gauguin, the movement of Van Gogh, the light of Renoir, the humanity of Rembrandt, the poetry of Miro, the intensity of Picasso, and many more feelings of wonder, as we studied how all these were different and how we could make our own worlds with paint. I learned that knowledge to create comes from within, that what they all had in common was their own language, their own unique way of seeing the world, and I could see the world my way, too. I learned the power of being an autodidact, which to this day has positively permeated my whole life.

I was particularly mesmerized by how the colors in many of Gauguin's paintings did not match the reality of what the eye might see, but rather what the mind might see, or choose to see from a variety of options. There was a painting of two women sitting in a field with flowers in their hair and vividly colored dresses, on a grassy meadow with a backdrop of purple-blue mountains and trees. The painting is titled "When will you marry," 1892. I remember thinking, "why are the mountains painted purple and blue," when I knew mountains were not really purple or blue, but they looked fantastic in these hues of purple-blue to convey to the mind of the viewer a feeling that the mountains were of significance because they were of such an unusual color.

The purple conveyed a feeling of monumentality, of physical presence beyond the earth. The choice of the color purple made a big difference. It made them special, unusual and almost other-worldly. Then I focused on the grassy meadows, and I noticed that they were all painted wild colors of oranges, bright yellows, and even a large section of an indigo blue. They looked so radically different to me than what I knew to be real grass colors, which then led me to ask, "why would he choose those colors?" And then in my young child's mind I thought to myself, "because they look real to him, the painter." I realized they looked real to the mind of Gauguin and they were drawn from an extrapolation of reality. In addition, they were converted into the artist's reality, which is then conveyed to the viewer as an alternate reality, that is just as good and perhaps in some instances even better than the actual reality that exists before you.

That was the turning point for me, the realization at the age of about 5, that magic could be made. That an artist could possess that special ability to change the world, one person at a time, one perceptual experience at a time, one moment of connecting to another human mind through time. And this connection would be a deeper connection that might not be expressed in words, but in feelings. Color, material, space, light, everything that an artist uses can be twisted, turned, altered, changed, morphed, to convey a feeling, an idea of an alternate reality, an alternative reality that people might not possess individually, but can be communicated as an artist outward. I realized that an artist had the power to alter reality and the alteration of reality could become a meaningful thing.



Courtesy of McClain Gallery

FPH: How did you come to love working with light and sculpture in a minimalist fashion?

Colon: Minimalism is a misnomer because the term is used broadly to imply that the art is devoid of elements or pared down. However, most minimal art is quite complex and possesses numerous qualities that act together to provide an experience of purity. Minimalism provides an antidote to turmoil, noise, information overload. The key point for me is to invoke an experience of simplicity, silence, calmness, clarity of thought, complex thought, principled thought. Each individual ultimately lives in his own mind. Art is for the individual. That moment when the individual can reckon with his own thoughts, and have a moment of awareness and clarity onto itself. I strive to create objects that invoke some form of rational order, alignment, balance, aesthetic beauty, activating a person's inner discourse.

I got to where I am today by making objects I want to live with, by making art for my own inner self. Throughout this pathway of discovery, the function of light became more important. Light, actually, is the most essential aspect of any work of art. Light is material, matter, and substance and it makes everything real. Without light we would not be here. It is that elemental. To be able to see something requires light. We take it for granted. We assume light is a given. Light is an essential primeval element that surrounds us all and makes life what it is: Light in its most basic form is the provider of existence. Light through the eyes tickles the brain and provides quasi-tactile functions and sensory pathways that are activated, creating the feeling of being alive. Light is an essential part of my work as it works synergistically with the other sculptural materials to generate a feeling of life-like qualities in the work.

FPH: Seeing that you have heavy influences from both Puerto Rico and California, how have you merged different design aspects from both worlds?

Colon: Both worlds embrace dynamic energies that can be channeled to effectuate growth and transformation. Puerto Rico provides the original spark, a vital, visceral source of energy. Southern California has an ethos of freedom and creativity; with hard work and perseverance, it is the perfect place to pursue your dreams —anything is possible and everything is achievable. Los Angeles has a long history of being a land of opportunity and freedom of expression from the pre-columbian days of the Cahullia Indians, through the early days of pioneers in the Wild West, to the golden era of Hollywood, this bountiful land has allowed people from all over the world to settle here and become part of the significant and growing creative milieu. I merge both sources of energy, applying a philosophy of transformation

to my life and my art, conceptualizing and creating sculptures with chameleon-like qualities, exemplifying the female power of creation and embodying the spirit of renewal and re-invention that is part of the history of Southern California life.



Courtesy of McClain Gallery

FPH: Pondering on the title *Atmospheres*, how does this show encompass some of the pillars of your work and what new techniques did you use for this exhibition?

Colon: The word atmospheres comes from the Greek word vapor, and is generally defined as layers of gases surrounding a spherical celestial body. It denotes something soft pervading into its surrounding space. My work in this show embodies some of those subtle, ephemeral qualities that cause the works to radiate into space. The sculptures contain multiple layers of materials that absorb, reflect, and refract light outwards into the surrounding space, creating an extended atmospheric feel. Also through a unique pigmentation process I developed, they possess the ability to shift color depending on the external lighting conditions, the position of the viewer, the time of day, the orientation of the work, etcetera. They are active mutable objects in symbiotic relationship with their environments, which brings the concept of movement into play.

The concrete aspects of my work are actually not concrete at all. There is no place to rest the eye — the pieces continue in an unabated line of discovery — fluid movement, active change, variability of color, mutability of form, resulting in an experiential object — a present tense object that is always moving into the future. The sculptures are free-form, constantly moving yet still possess an outer vessel that is self-contained. There is a juxtaposition of push and pull, of dematerializing the object and re-materializing the color, light, and form into an autonomous activated object. There is a feeling that nothing is stable, there is no stasis, always in constant movement to the eye. They create a dialogue of permanence vs. impermanence. The work seeks resonance with the human condition, which is one of constant change and movement in different directions; always moving into the future into an ever-evolving self, into a changing identity, into something new; seeking authenticity throughout time.

FPH: Seeing that there is a heavy fabrication side to your pieces, how involved are you in the process and what is that process like for you as an artist?

Colon: My studio is a repurposed plastics factory where I have an inordinate amount of fun! I am personally very involved in the fabrication process, and really enjoy the technical and engineering aspects of the job. I work hand-in-hand with my studio assistants and other aerospace

industry fabricators, approving every minute detail every step of the way. When I'm working there, getting down and dirty, is when I feel most alive, vibrant and dynamic. It is extremely liberating, and I experience creative freedom at its best, when I am in the throes of the industrial aspects of making the works.



Courtesy of McClain Gallery

FPH: In our culture, the perception of beauty seems to constantly be in flux. How do you as an artist extract a concept of beautiful, especially in the use of color, and how do you hope this translates to a viewer?

Colon: I approach the concept of beauty from a visceral, almost biological, place. I think aesthetics and the appreciation of beauty is something inherent in our genetic make up. We have a capacity biologically to crave beauty, to appreciate beauty, to want to be surrounded by an environment that possesses beauty. But again what is aesthetic beauty? In my experience, there has to be some form of order, not necessarily a rational order, but a sequence, progression, formula of organizing the world around you, which yields balance, colors, forms, a conglomeration of aspects that come together to produce some form of harmony, something that the human eye can see and the entire body can sense and recognize as a sublime feeling. We find beauty in nature because of its inherent, sometimes invisible order, but it is always ordered. There is always some underlying predetermined order that formulates how things are created, grown, and made in nature.

There is always a code of life that rules everything organic on the planet. That underlying order possesses an inherent beauty, an aesthetic capability of pleasing the eye. Or maybe it is that we just recognize as humans something that is part and parcel of our own formulation, a genetic code that is inside each of our cells that forms our body that allows us to be able to appreciate and recognize the orderly formulation of life. And by orderly it does not necessarily mean symmetrical. You can have orderly asymmetries that also create meaningful aesthetic language. For example, when you look at all of the leaves on a tree changing color in the fall, the fantastic burst of colors blend together such as poppy orange, tomato red, sunset yellows mixed with lemon yellows, and they're all asymmetrically clustered in a cloud of texture, forming an amorphous form that flutters in the wind with such breathtaking aesthetic pleasure, that you find yourself being alive in the moment, and that's where the real game is.

Even non-organic life on the planet possesses some form of organized beauty. For example, when you're hiking in the stark desert of California, with its monumental jagged-edge

mountains and huge clustered boulders, you feel the power of the space you are in, recognizing you are in some gigantic cratered form created by the power of earth. That form has such beauty in its stream of creation, the force that was required to create it and the magnitude of the explosion that required its creation, makes it breathtakingly beautiful. Then you look at all of the scattered boulders, rocks, and pebbles, although they appear randomly placed, the laws of physics created them, and generated their placement.

The laws of physics positioned them in their spot and those laws of physics possess order and an underlying rationale for where every little piece of earth crust, rock, sand, ash and dust was laid. Inorganic nature operating at its best. Therein lies aesthetic pleasure, in the marvel of the energy that this planet possesses at its core. The planet has life inside it, whether organic or inorganic. We live on this floating, moving ball of earth that is traveling through the stars, and has a life force that rules everything on this planet. We are part of that greater life force that wants us to seek aesthetic pleasure, to pursue beauty, balance and order, and if we are lucky we can tap into that life force for a feeling of the sublime.

FPH: What upcoming projects do you have coming up?

Colon: Lots of things. In terms of exhibitions, there are solo presentations of my work coming up at the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, San Angelo, Texas (December 15, 2017 – February 4, 2018); South Dakota Art Museum, Brookings, South Dakota (March – July 2018); Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia, Missouri (September – December 2018); Hilliard Art Museum, Lafayette, Louisiana (January – August 2019); Foosner Art Museum, Melbourne, Florida (September 2019 – January 2020). My work is also featured in a thematic exhibition titled: *Plastic Entanglements: Ecology, Aesthetics, Materials*, opening at the Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania (February 2018 – June 2018), traveling to Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (September 22–December 30, 2018), Smith College Museum of Art (February 8–July 28, 2019), and Chazen Museum of Art (September 13, 2019–January 5, 2020).

Gisela Colon's exhibition "Atmospheres" runs through June 17, 2017 at McClain Gallery (2242 Richmond). Hours are Tuesday through Friday from 10 am to 5 pm and Saturday from 12 pm to 5 pm.

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