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FOR CURATORS OF COLOR, JOURNEY TO UTOPIA BEGINS WITH 'PERILOUS BODIES'

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A three-part exhibition masterminded by a trio of women and a forward-thinking institution, under the theme of *Utopian Imagination*, is about to drop in New York City. The exhibit's first act, which opens on March 5th, inaugurating the new gallery space run by the Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice, is called *Perilous Bodies* and it unfurls like an epic masterpiece, with raw, honest investigations into violence across the globe.

Grounded in the wisdom that there is no learning without reflection, the exhibition's curators [Jaishri Abichandani](#) and [Natasha Becker](#), in collaboration with the leadership of Lisa Kim, director of the Ford Foundation Gallery, felt it was crucial to first look at the pathology of human violence. The selections on view deconstruct injustice through visceral and emotive works of art. Brought together, they reveal the shared and interconnected fragility of a world infused with violence, displacement and individual suffering. Conceptually, bodies of knowledge, of land, and physical bodies are used as sites of both inquiry and testimony by the 19 featured artists.

The exhibition's participants come from 11 nations, the majority are women and all are artists of color. In this way, the *Utopian Imagination* offers a significant paradigm shift, challenging cultural institutions to take a leadership role in structural change, social justice and political evolution through an increased inclusion of social practice art in their programming. This is where the Ford Foundation's 80 years of commitment to supporting social movements with innovative, often high-risk ideas, is necessary armature. Art as a form of soft power that engages truth and influences social opinion through metaphoric, literal and poetic strategies is expertly amplified through their institutional endorsement of social-practice art. And *Perilous Bodies* is filled with exceptional examples.

An installation of small photographic light boxes, warmly lit and made with mahogany wood frames, sits on a slightly raised platform directly across from the gallery's entryway. The work, *finding one's shadow in ruins and rubble* by Tiffany Chung, features found photographs of the destruction of the built environment in Syria. The absence of people and the documentation of displacement, both physically and psychologically, is palpable in the work. However, as with many pieces in the exhibition, the warmth of the materials, the meticulous evidence of the heart and hand of the artist, and the curatorial placement of the object (one that feels like a candlelit altar in this case) seem to converge to create a healing embrace. (Perhaps it is foreshadowing a tenet of *Radical Love*, the upcoming second part of *Utopian Imagination*.)

Otabong Nkanga's *The Weight of Scars* invokes a sense of touch through a large scale woven textile and photographic piece that anchors the main gallery space. The Nigerian artist uses tapestry and its association to craft as a template to address the extraction of natural resources and the subsequent desecration of the earth, Focused on the landscape of

Namibia, the work conveys the psychological damage of those at the center of plundering. Implied within the piece is the scarring of the earth, and the inextricable link between the mind/body/spirit of human beings and the commodification, geographic lines, power and greed rooted in colonialism.

The exhibition's most quietly poignant piece is, perhaps, a new work by Nona Faustine. *Demeter's Morning* continues the American photographer's practice of engaging the visibility of the Black female body through performative images. Cloaked in a tablecloth and seated on a bench with personal belongings strewn around her, she embodies the archetype of the Greek Goddess Demeter. The work is inspired by the homeless Black women Faustine encounters around her native Brooklyn, gracefully paying homage to both their vulnerability and dignity. Seated amidst classical style columns and seating areas that can be found scattered throughout the architecture of New York City's parks, the work encourages a deep empathy for both the suffering of individual human beings close to home and the reality of displacement worldwide.

As befits the exhibit's title, many of the works deal with difficult themes: decades of unsolved murders of women in Juarez, Mexico (Teresa Serrano), and the more recent killings of Black trans women in Florida (David Antonio Cruz); the caste system and plight of India's Dalit women (Thenmozhi Soundararajan); American imperialism (Mahwish Chishty, Sarah Rahbar); sexual violence (Jasmine Patheja); refugees and exiles (Barthélémy Togo).

Other works inhabit a more ambiguous space, where multiple readings may abound. The multimedia artist Wendy Red Star employs the symbolism of the Coyote as a trickster in relation to the appropriation and reclamation of Native American cultural artifacts. Guillermo Gallindo's, *Sirveintes y Escaleras / Servants and Ladders*, combines an aluminum ladder with found object-artifacts from the U.S.-Mexico border, to create a sculpture left open to interpretation.

Similar to the entrenched longevity of many of the social issues addressed in the exhibition, the art ranges from pieces made in 2019 to older, rarely seen items. Made in 1999, *The Blue Wall of Violence* by Dread Scott is a controversial work that addresses police brutality against Black men, and was last seen 10 years ago at Brooklyn's MoCADA (Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts). The age range of artists within the exhibition also echoes ideas of time, longevity and relevance, with the oldest artist, Teresa Serrano, clocking in at a spry 82 years old.

In fact, a video by the youngest artist in the exhibition, may give us a clue to the philosophical underpinnings of *Utopian Imagination. Umma's Tongue—molten at 6000°* by 28-year-old Hannah Brontë features indigenous women reclaiming the power of the earth through the aesthetic sensibilities of youth culture. It uses potent rap lyrics in a music video style form of agit-prop to make its statement.

Another hint at what the future might look like may be the opening night "spoken word opera" performance by artist Vanessa German. It will culminate in the opportunity for visitors to engage in one-on-one healing sessions with German in the subtropical garden of the Ford Foundation's Atrium lobby.