

LANDSCAPES OF ORNAMENTATION

Isabela Arboleda-Ocoro
Georgia Collyer
Oscar Garay
Sarah Gelleny
Nick Horcher
Kat Nestser
Rebecca Panos
Tasneem Sarkez
Alaya Shah

Broadway Windows
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Landscapes of Ornamentation brings together nine works of art spanning painting, photography, sculpture and handcraft traditions that propose non-figurative and non-human ways of representing selfhood. Drawing on personal archives and material culture, the artists in this exhibition grapple with what it means to be seen on one's own terms. Collectively, they engage with a wide variety of cultural artifacts and subject matter to expand on signifiers of identity, challenge legibility, and contend with misrecognition.

The title *Landscapes of Ornamentation* comes from theorist José Esteban Muñoz who used the phrase to discuss camouflage motifs in the work of queer artists as a way to rearrange recognizable, normative systems of order. According to Muñoz, these hopeful reinterpretations of the world involve the important process of self reflection to gain new perspectives, a mode of contemplation that “speaks of a critical imagination that begins with self-analysis and a vaster social critique of how the world could and indeed should be.”¹ Here, the artists closely examine the visual evidence from their everyday lives and use a variety of methods to negotiate its legibility reflective of Muñoz's ornamented landscapes: they reconfigure, layer, embellish, and encode elements culled from the existing world, hiding meaning in plain sight. In doing so, they reimagine prescribed subjectivities to exceed categorization.

The exhibition begins with a series of hybrids: compressed geographies in Arboleda-Ocoro's double-exposed contact sheet, cultural signifiers in Sarkez's painting, and the conflation of personal and national histories in Nestser's miniature book. It includes visual reconfigurations of the preexisting environment, like the patterned surroundings of Garay's church and the altered Levi's tag in Collyer's work. The exhibition also draws on personal and inherited objects like Shah's chai table embellished with photographs and Horcher's symbolically encrypted necklace. Finally, it concludes with folklore and traditional handcraft as vehicles for transformation, as evidenced in Gelleny's band of anthropomorphized critters suggestive of other worlds and Panos's crocheted declaration of reconstruction. Across these varied subjects and forms, the artists carve out space for multiplicity, fluidity, and expanded notions of self — aspects of a future world that might reflect their own images back to them.

¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 143.

Isabela Arboleda-Ocoro's *Double Exposure: Egypt 2022/Coney Island 2018* (2022) presents an enlarged contact sheet of double exposed film from the artist's personal archive. Arboleda-Ocoro first shot the roll on a family visit to New York City's Coney Island, and reused the film years later when traveling in Luxor, Egypt, with her mother. The resulting scroll of images merges the two trips into a hybrid playscape/ landscape, bringing together two distant geographies and cultures onto the same plane. In this new locale, the Cyclone hangs over an Egyptian mountainscape, the Coney Island boardwalk provides respite for a camel in Kurna, and a woman approaching beach cabanas in Queens is transposed before the Temple of Karnak. Arboleda-Ocoro embraced this accidental superimposition as a modality through which to consider the leveling of cultural hierarchies and the fluidity of geographic identity. Melding experiences across time and space, *Double Exposure* offers the possibility of belonging to two places at once.

Tasneem Sarkez gathers images, motifs and text from personal and collective archives, reproducing them in her paintings to weave her own narratives from familial, political, historical and cultural signifiers. *Optimist Sees a Rose* (2023) depicts a cropped photograph the artist took of a beat-up vehicle wrapped in a faded image of pink roses, with sections of the smoothly painted surface sanded down to replicate the car's scuffing. Roses factor prominently in Sarkez's archive as signifiers of her Arab identity. Reproduced across commercial signage and packaging in Arab cultures, they are often superimposed on objects to signal elegance and care. Cars, on the other hand, carry connotations of mechanical power and industry. The contradictory resonances embedded within this everyday object also speak to personal constructions of hybrid cultural identity. In Sarkez's work, cars serve as ideal backdrops on which to engage with issues of legibility and self representation: they become roving signboards for projecting individual identity when owners mark them with decals and modifications.

Kat Nestser's *I Am the Son of Laboring People / Я Сын Рацоўнага Народа* (2023) takes the form of a miniature book bound in embroidered fabric. The interior pages reproduce a detail from a family photograph: the handwritten cursive of the artist's grandfather taking the Soviet oath as a school child in Belarus during the initial stages of its Russification. The pages function like a flip book, bringing this historical document to life in the present moment. Before presenting the book's contents to her classmates, Nestser asked them to add their signatures to the first page, appending her grandfather's personal archive with her own. By collapsing doctrines of national allegiance with the physical traces of her peers and family, the artist presents her personal history as inextricably entwined with its sociopolitical context. Here, the book's interior is inaccessible to viewers and protected beneath its patterned cover.

Pattern features prominently in **Oscar Garay's** *Vista de la Antigua Iglesia* (2023), a bricked church in his grandmother's hometown of Tlachichiquillo, Veracruz. Growing up in LA, Garay chose to build a strong connection to his Mexican roots and cultivate his own personal sense of Latinx identity. In this painting, warm interior light floods the community building set back from a chain link fence, creating a sense of both access and denial. As viewers, our access is doubly mitigated by Garay's process of abstracting the image into various registers of layered patterns. Those demarcating the built environment follow the gridded logic of indigenous textiles of Southern Mexico, while those of the natural landscape evidence the artist's own hand and meandering gesture.

Georgia Collyer's *Industrial Strength* (2023) presents an enlarged version of the readily identifiable Levi's brand patch, bordered by a thin frame of denim. Though the patch conveys specific information, including measurements, text, and iconography, it is so familiar we might not be compelled to look closer. The emblem has particular significance for Collyer, whose parents were both employed by Levi's in Indonesia, and for whom the brand represents an aspirational American identity. Interested in the concept of blind spots and how signifiers can be culturally specific, Collyer has counterfeited the familiar Two Horse logo by replacing a central icon of jeans with what appears to be a figure. Whether representative of manual labor or a crucifixion subtly invoking the Christian values of corporeal sacrifice that govern Western systems of power, Collyer's altered tag reminds us that our biases might prevent us from recognizing that which is hidden right in front of our eyes.

Nick Horcher's paintings depict friends and lovers in quiet moments of interior reflection, giving precise clarity to their jewelry, piercings, and tattoos. Foregrounding these moments of adornment and bodily modification, Horcher calls attention to the way in which the sitters have chosen to self represent and exercise agency over the body in all of its sociocultural weight. In *Lebanese Gold*; الجمهورية اللبنانية (2023), Horcher casts a glinting family heirloom against a satiny backdrop— a necklace passed down to him from his grandmother. Since wearing gold is taboo for men in Arab cultures, the gift becomes a familial affirmation of queer identity. Through the act of exchange, the traditional object is transformed to bear new meaning.

Alaya Shah's *What am I But a Collection of my Objects; Gathering* (2023) was handbuilt by the artist for a social purpose: as a table for sharing chai among friends. With this platform, Shah is able to hold queer space around Indian cultural traditions as an act that affirms the multiplicity of her own identity. The table itself is practically built and heavily embellished in a loose grid with images from the artist's personal archive: family photographs, including positive memories from weddings, trips abroad, and Indian dance class with friends, mixed with covers of Desi rap and early 90s hip hop albums. This act of self definition also imagines the space in which it is communicated to others, thus assuming agency over her identity as well as how and with whom it might be shared.

In **Sarah Gelleny's** *Proper Gentlemen* (2023) our gaze is met by three dapper woodland critters engaged in conversation. Folklore and mythology, which Gelleny explores in her work, often personify and animate the natural world, creating a sense of identification between us and nature. What would it mean for our sense of perspective if we could recognize ourselves in other forms of life? Here, momentarily, our world intersects with the world of creatures, challenging our human-centered point of view and testing preconceived notions of a hierarchical relationship between living beings. Gelleny's sculptures invite us to perceive ourselves and others from broader perspectives outside of our own.

Rebecca Panos weaves together past and present in her textiles and craft-based work, honoring family traditions while using them to construct her own autonomous narrative. Panos's crocheted banner unabashedly announces *I AM CHANGING* (2023), a declarative, disembodied statement that challenges the notion of fixed identity and proposes a queer potentiality. To further emphasize this, the artist has left the loose ends of yarn hanging rather than darning them back in. Notably, the "I" undergoing metamorphosis referenced here is absent. Becoming is a vulnerable process, and extricating oneself from the expectations of others can be a precarious endeavor. Panos's banner signals but does not reveal. Rather, we are left to grapple with the concept of transformation itself.

Marie Catalano - Curator, 2024

Arts education can seem miraculous. The ideas and values it produces are perpetually in question, and the truths it creates emerge from a complex interaction between the old and the new, the known and the unknown. But unquestionably, the value of these truths is tested, honed and established in the context of community.

The Barney Building and the community it engenders are *special*.

The exhibition, *Landscapes of Ornamentation*, curated by esteemed curator and program alumni Marie Catalano, brings everything arts education can engender into a place, a very public place, in the form of 80WSE's window space at Broadway and 10th Street. The nine artists, selected from the class of 2024, showcase the clarity, focus and dedication of our students as they prepare for career paths and lives in the arts. A variety of media and styles present the diverse strengths of the department and its interdisciplinary core, but more importantly, the works demonstrate the focus and vision students are able to discover and render with the facilitation of the Barney community.

The BFA Studio Art Class of 2024 has endured what is perhaps some of the strangest circumstances I have experienced in my 22 years of teaching. The COVID-19 pandemic looms large in the time of this extraordinary group's tenure at NYU, and yet, from my vantage, that trauma seems as though it was a mere inconvenience for them. This resilience is, among other factors, a resilience built from community. But more importantly, I have seen nuance in how this community has been formed. Mutual respect and an acknowledgement of difference take precedence in their interactions in ways that historically have been the exception. It has allowed this group to see wider horizons and to bring these vistas into clear and direct communication with their own thoughts and work.

The works together show that community and belonging are much more complex notions in this moment, that appearance, what is seen and shown, do not mandate what a community is or should be. The heterogeneity of style and approach on public view display an acknowledgement of shared experience, rendered through the myriad difference of perspective and form. My faith in the world and the future is established, re-established, in the community and identities these artists have built. And the work is outstanding.

Jesse Bransford - Director of Undergraduate Studies, 2024