

GISELA McDANIEL

Painting with the Subject-Collaborator

Abstract

This visual essay introduces the work of Gisela McDaniel, a diasporic, Indigenous CHamoru artist based in New York. Working primarily with women and femme people who identify as Indigenous, multiracial, immigrant, refugee/displaced, and/or of color, her work responds to historical/contemporary patterns of censorship as it relates to the exhibition of women's/femme bodies, voices, and narratives.

Keywords: *CHamoru, painting, portraiture, Pasifika, Guam, Guåhan, subject-collaborator*

I am a diasporic, Indigenous CHamoru artist based in New York. My practice lies in social research, portraiture, emotional aesthetics, and technology when fusing audio and visual representations of my subject-collaborators. I work primarily with women and femme people who identify as Indigenous, multiracial, immigrant, refugee/displaced, and/or of color, and my art responds to historical/contemporary patterns of censorship as it relates to the exhibition of women's/femme bodies, voices, and narratives.

By "censorship," I mean taken-for-granted and exploitative practices evident throughout art history, but especially in portraiture. As an Indigenous artist and a survivor of sexual violence, when viewing portraits of women/femmes I immediately note how their agency and identities (including, but not limited to, their names) have been customarily omitted. From my perspective, this essentially amounts to a form of censorship. As a student of art history, I have also noted that the nature of the relationship between the artist and the subject has also gone unremarked in the art historical canon, notably in ways that ignore differences in power between the artist and sitter. Given the frequent representation of sex workers in works of fine art, this tendency strikes me as problematic.

Finally, as an Indigenous Pasifika woman and fine artist, I am keenly aware of how my extended Pasifika Aunties (as young girls) and (is)lands were (and continue to be) indelibly distorted in fine art and popular culture by the reach of the colonial, white, Western, cisgender, heterosexual male gaze. My practices thus evolved as a means to intentionally disrupt the history and practice of these

conventions. My coining of the term “subject-collaborator” underscores this crucial paradigm shift.

I intentionally create environments for subjects to collaboratively share stories with varying levels of anonymity. Drawing upon my Indigenous Pasifika heritage and the cultural practice of talking story, I incorporate subject narratives into sculptural portraits that embed found and gifted objects, including jewels, flowers, and the sitter’s significant belongings. For example, in *Tiningo’ si Sirena* (2021, Fig. 2), which depicts my mother, shell necklaces and a beaded rosary hanging from a knitted cross near her feet refer to her maternal families’ CHamoru-imbued practice of Catholicism. The inclusion of a t-shirt fragment commemorating the “60th Anniversary” of Guam Liberation specifically pays homage to the subject-collaborator’s parents (my Nāna and Tāta) who were young children during the brutal Japanese occupation of Guåhan during World War II. It also conveys the enduring intergenerational trauma of war and displacement into the CHamoru diaspora, of which my family was a part.

I treat my subject-collaborators with respect, and ensure their ability to exercise control over how, where, and with what objects they choose to pose. When my works are exhibited, embedded audio is triggered via motion-sensor technology when a viewer is within a certain proximity. In *Put it down for her* (2023, Fig. 7), the audio plays a recording of the subject-collaborator, Cara Flores, speaking about healing for her grandmother, while in *Haga Haga’* (2020, Fig. 3) viewers also hear CHamoru Poet-Activist, Siobhon Rumurang speaking about life on Guåhan, militarization, and what spaces truly belong to her/our people.

By including voices and “consensual artifacts,” my sculptural portraits invite—even compel—viewers to engage with complex stories exploring contemporary intersections of gender, race, colonialism, militarism, displacement, and the indomitable agency of women/femmes of color.

Based in New York, Gisela McDaniel received her BFA from the University of Michigan in 2019. Her recent solo and group shows include: ININA, The Ogunquit Museum of Art, Maine, US (2025); Hawai’i Triennial 2025: Aloha Nō, O’ahu, Maui, and Hawai’i Island, US (2025); Some Dogs Go to Dallas, Green Family Art Foundation, Dallas (2024); (Re)Work It! Women Artists on Women’s Labor, Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury, CT, US (2024); The inescapable interweaving of all lives, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2023); Tender Loving Care, Museum of Fine Arts Boston (2023); Thinking of You, FLAG Art Foundation, New York (2023); Manhaga Fu’una, Pilar Corrias, London (2022); A Place for Me: Figurative Painting Now, ICA Boston (2022); The Regional, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City,

US (2022); *Sakkan Eku LA, The Mistake Room, Los Angeles* (2021); *How Do We Know the World?, Baltimore Museum of Art* (2021); *The Regional, Contemporary Art Centre Cincinnati, US* (2021); *Dual Vision, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit* (2021); *Making WAY/FARING Well, Pilar Corrias, London* (2020); *Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh* (2020); *On the Road II, Oolite Arts, Miami* (2019); *Save Art Space, Playground Detroit* (2019); *Lush P(r)ose, Playground Detroit* (2019); *Vi-rago, Detroit Art Babes Collective* (2019) and *Theotokos: New Visions of the Mother God, The Schvitz, Detroit* (2018).

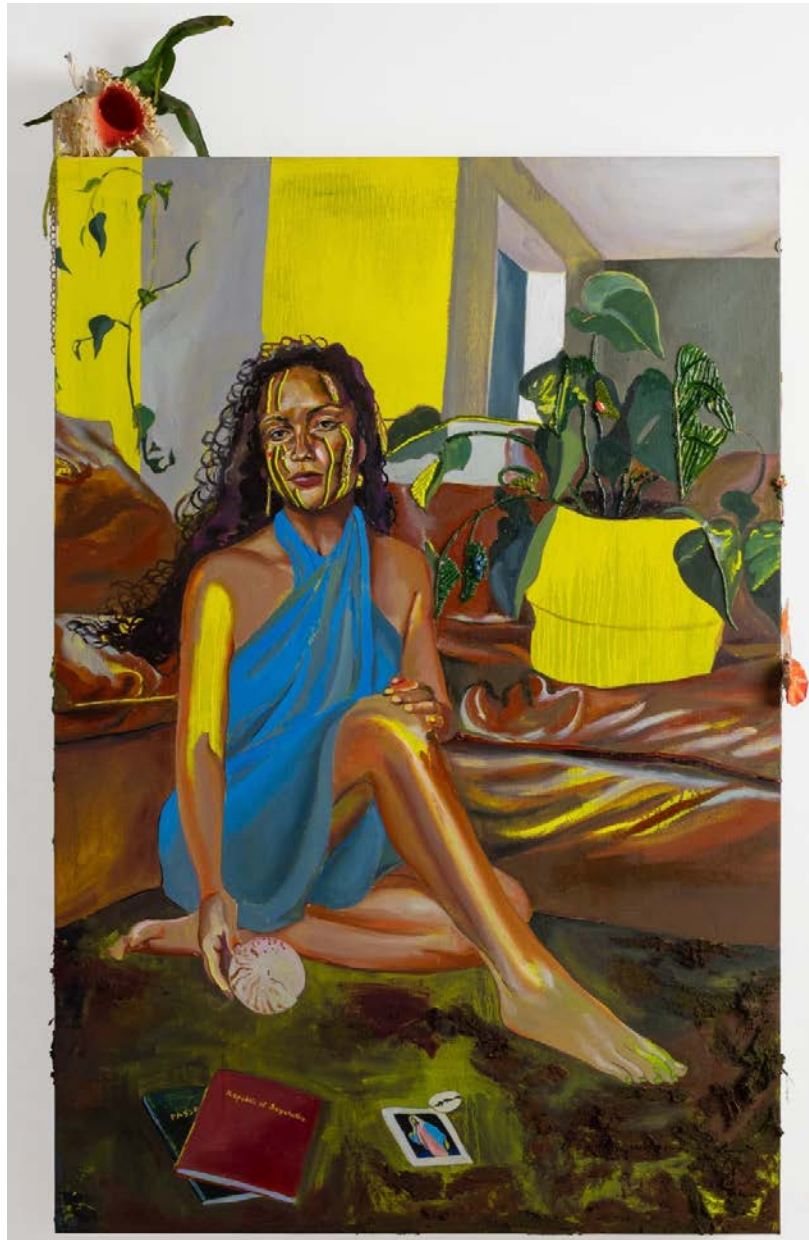


Figure 1. Gisela McDaniel, *Bali Mesgnon*, 2021. Oil on canvas, found object, shell, resin, and sound; 35 x 60 x 9 in. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corries, London



Figure 2. Gisela McDaniel, *Tiningo' si Sirena*, 2021. Oil on canvas, found object, jewelry from subject-collaborator, and sound; 45 x 60 x 5½ in. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London



Figure 3. Gisela McDaniel, *Haga Haga'*, 2020. Oil on canvas, found object, resin, and sound; 42 1/8 x 53 3/4 x 5 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London



Figure 4. Gisela McDaniel, *Lovely Sky 1*, 2022. Gouache and acrylic on paper, 15 x 22 in. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London



Figure 5. Gisela McDaniel, *Mâmes*, 2021. Oil on canvas, found object, shells from subject-collaborator, and sound; 45 x 51 x 5 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London



Figure 6. Gisela McDaniel, *Inefresi (Offering)*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 40 x 6 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London



Figure 7. Gisela McDaniel, *Put it down for her*, 2023. Oil on canvas, found objects, and sound; 65 x 54 x 5 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London