

Gestures of Care: Reviewing Irma Yuliana Barbosa's Pulling Tongues



Photo Credit: Samantha Hiura

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The smell of the earth, the sounds of water softly splashing, and the echo of the performers' building laughter floods the industrial interior of the gallery; a sensory invitation from multimedia artist Irma Yuliana Barbosa (they/them) to join in their performance, entitled Pulling Tongues. Upon entering the space, we are encouraged to remain acutely aware of our own physical presence, as all the senses are awakened by the artist's enactment of sound, smell, touch, and sight. In the shadow of the pandemic from which we are all slowly and continually emerging, the performance's central motifs of physical presence and touch are made all the more resonant.

Barbosa performed Pulling Tongues on October 14, 2022, the close of their installation Counting Sheep, curated by Zoe Latzer and Meghan Smith at CCA's Nave exhibition space. The installation itself consisted of retrofitted antique wooden furniture pieces resting on a bed of hay, reinvented through the use of perceptively visceral materials embedded into the pieces; including strings, stretched hide, hair, snail shells, and, most importantly, hand-formed clay tongues injected into the furniture pieces. The installation, while striking and intellectually provocative on its own, was given a second life through the element of performance.

For Pulling Tongues, Barbosa added a projection to the space – fluidly moving animals, including jellyfish and schools of fish, engulfed the installation and the wall behind it. Barbosa began the performance with a series of repeated, cyclical gestures and interactions with the objects in the installation. Over time, other performers joined Barbosa, doubling, tripling, quadrupling, and quintupling the artist's repeated actions. The performance was punctuated by the slow accumulation of the performer's bodies around a central tin bucket of water, from which the group used the water to shape clay into the forms of tongues. The group then dissolved into a puddle of sleeping bodies. From here, the other performers slowly got up, walked into the crowd, and took a seat, leaving Barbosa alone in the installation. In addition, the sound of a cowbell, rung by a performer moving behind the audience, rang out occasionally throughout the space from different locations.

The intimate interactions between performers and the repetition of familiar gestures—the cracking of walnuts, gently kissing and tucking a photograph into bed, the brushing of hair, and weaving—created an immersive sensorial experience for the audience. Barbosa's physical interactions with their chosen materials, perhaps picked for their sonic potential, married the impacts of touch and sound. Each point of contact, for example the resounding splash of water produced when Barbosa wet their hands in the water bucket, enunciated a movement in

space. Tender touch, embodied by the forming of clay tongues, symbolically functioned as a life-giving force throughout the performance. The clay then became a material archive of the artist's gesture, of the gentle touch enacted to build and pull the clay into the form of a tongue.

What I found most successful was Barbosa's subtle and profound articulation of the distinct pleasure of physical touch, sensory experience, and gestures of care. In speaking with one of the curators after the performance, I learned that the artist's gestures were significant in the context of the intergenerational relationships among the women in their family. The brushing of hair is one gesture that especially resonates with me, as an act that embodies the relationship I shared with my own mother, fraught with both care and frustration. The intervention of the performance into the installation worked as a materialization of intergenerational memory, dreams, and ephemeral sensation. With this context in mind, the tenderness and tangible sense of care in the performer's gestures is made all the more cogent.

While I found a number of the themes and symbols in Barbosa's work to be nuanced and both aesthetically and conceptually valuable, the performance overall felt lost in its nebula of unrealized ideas. Many themes were alluded to, but the recurring threads lacked cohesion. The use of multiplicity and repetition in the choreography was strong symbolically and well-constructed, but its various executions felt somewhat fragmented. While its open-endedness makes space for subjective interpretation, the performance nevertheless left me with more questions than it did provocations. With too much suggested and nothing revealed, I was left feeling deserted in a field of symbols. What may have been lacking was an anticipated moment of transformation in the performance's narrative.

Because this art experience unfolded in two parts – first, the installation *Counting Sheep* displayed at SOMArts and then at CCA, and second, the performance *Pulling Tongues* – I can't help but compare the two elements and note the efficacy of their integration. After experiencing the installation in two contexts, the material object began to accrue meanings and associations for me, divorced from the performance. I found that the psychic imprint of the installation took precedence over the performance, complicating my ability to integrate the two. This dissonance, in conjunction with the unanswered questions I was left with after watching *Pulling Tongues*, produced an intersection I could not fully navigate.

In spite of these challenges, Irma Yuliana Barbosa's *Pulling Tongues* created an aesthetically cohesive materialization of some of the most delicate and transitory elements of human interconnectedness. A pinnacle moment of the performance that remains on my mind was the slow drip of what became a puddle of gentle bodies. Their tender sleep combined with the dreaminess of repeated action and a hazy projection on the wall composed a moment that we all dream of—intimate touch and shared presence with those we hold close.

Samantha Hiura (she/her) is a first year graduate student in CCA's dual degree program for Visual and Critical Studies and Curatorial Practice. Her academic and professional focuses are centered on contemporary art as resistance, with particular interest in the intersections of queer and BIPOC experiences.