

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Two Transnational Artists Connect Through Shared Experiences of Displacement

Betelhem Makonnen and Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez trace the influence of neo-colonialism on immigrants from the Global South, merging their personal journeys into a collective experience.

Billy Anania December 20, 2019



Betelhem Makonnen, "untitled (on closer inspection, nothing lines up)" (2019), printed vinyl mounted to wall, original photograph scaled to dimensions of the site, overlaps and errors; dimensions variable (all images courtesy of Women & Their Work)

AUSTIN — [Betelhem Makonnen](#) and [Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez](#) access the far corners of the subconscious in their art, evoking the nostalgia of early youth and the anxiety of displacement. For their first joint exhibition, titled *the meaning wavers*, they trace the influence of neo-colonialism on immigrants from the Global South, merging their personal journeys into a collective experience. Luminous mixed-media installations and hypnotic videos create an environment conducive to sharing and feeling, underscoring the mutual resilience of marginalized communities.

Solitary lightbulbs illuminate the darkened gallery of *Women & Their Work*, spotlighting family photographs and heirlooms. With this show, the artists escort the viewer through immersive histories of diasporic perseverance. Printed pamphlets, inhabitable structures, and videos with headphones encourage physical engagement with the works on display, while projectors transmit images of portraits and mementos in glowing blue.

Makonnen's emigration from Ethiopia is central to her artworks, and she appears in them at various stages of her life. A vinyl print of her childhood passport wraps around a curved wall in one installation, with her personal information in scribbled English and official government text in printed Amharic. Her date of birth is incorrect while the other handwritten information is nearly illegible, suggesting that her identity was secondary to the process. The artist's hand is visible in the image, holding a magnifying glass over the document, refracting her photograph and bringing out the paper's curved, pastel textures.

Still from Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez, "por amor" (2019), single-channel HD video with sound, 1 min 34 sec.

As a second generation Salvadoran-American, Ramirez contextualizes her heritage from a distance. In a video titled "por amor" (2019), the artist considers her complicity in US interventionism while seated in a vast, overgrown field. She rubs dirt between her hands, as if washing them. Her somber expressions indicate the gravity of the act and impart a subtle sense of irony, as she dirties herself with soil from an imperialist superpower. In her quiet contemplation, the artist attempts to make sense of her transnational identity without any hint of resolution.

Two videos in Makonnen's "change means revolution in Amharic (person, place and thing)" (2019) face each other in a small theater separated from the main gallery by curtains. The first relays a conversation between Makonnen and her cousin as they

drive through the streets of Addis Ababa. Demolished buildings race by, occasionally blocked by red and blue billboards for LG and Samsung. The second video shows Makonnen wandering outside, surrounded by trees and wearing a mask of her childhood portrait. As she moves, daylight changes the color of her visage from blue to yellow. On her own now, the artist hides behind her former self, occasionally lifting the mask to face the world with caution.

Still from Betelhem Makonnen, "change means revolution in Amharic (person, place and thing)" (2019), two-channel HD video with sound, 5 mins 36 sec.

At the center of the gallery, Ramirez's installation *vibraciones de temblores* (2019) invites viewers into the border-crossing experience. LED lights shine between a makeshift shelter of space blankets — the same materials distributed to immigrants detained by US Customs and Border Protection. The vertical panels contain her mother's photographs from El Salvador, torn to show only certain parts. Ramirez leaves in the negative space, respecting her mother's composition. The fragile structure functions as both sanctuary and prison, translucent on the outside but opaque from within.

Ramirez painted the gallery walls with a color she created by averaging the skin tones of 36 Salvadorans and Salvadoran-Americans in her "vibraciones de temblores" installation. On a towering photo of Makonnen's mother, bronze stains match the nearby wall and fully illuminate the right side of her torso. It is hard to tell whether the color is actually all there or just an optical illusion. But that ambiguity is part of the point. *the meaning wavers* makes clear that nothing is resolved or guaranteed. Meaning fluctuates — either gradually or abruptly. The artists contribute to this by exploring the empathic bonds that arise from shared experience.

Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez,
vibraciones de temblores (2019),

installation with photo transfers, emergency blankets, thread, monofilament, upholstery fabric, LED lights, handwritten short story, 160 x 64 x 126 inches. In background is still from Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez, "Preludes" (2019) (photo by Ariel Rene Jackson)

[Betlehem Makonnen & Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez: the meaning wavers continues at Women & Their Work \(1710 Lavaca Street, Austin, Texas\) through January 9. The exhibition was curated by Rachel Stuckey.](#)

Still from Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez, "Preludes" (2019), single-channel HD video with sound, 4 min 44 sec.

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