



**Claire Kim**

NXTHVN Fellows

*Un/Common Proximity*

In January 2020, the NXTHVN fellowship cohort wrapped up a week-long orientation with a celebratory dinner party at poet Claudia Rankine’s home. I remember standing in line for my second helping of mac and cheese, elbow to elbow with my fellow fellows, chatting excitedly about the first few days of our program. Once the guests sat down to dig into their plates, each fellow was asked to introduce themselves and answer an off-the-cuff question about their artistic or curatorial practice—no time to rehearse or refuse—just a prompt and suddenly you were staring back at a room filled with people to impress. I remember being blown away by the artists’ responses—each of them seamlessly creating entryways into their studio practices by diving into the heart of their work and offering details of their histories, influences, and drives. I was asked, “What does curatorial practice mean to you?” I don’t remember everything I said, but I do remember I began my response by stating, “My curatorial practice is rooted in loving artists.” I left that dinner party thinking that falling in love with this cohort of artists would be the easiest part of my job at NXTHVN. With the fellowship coming to a close and our final exhibition on the horizon, I can confirm that my instinct was correct.

That dinner party remains a bookmark in my mind as I organize the various themes that emerged and coalesced in the studio practices of artists: Allana Clarke, Alisa Sikelianos-Carter, Daniel T. Gaitor-Lomack, Esteban Ramón Pérez, Jeffrey Meris, Ilana Savdie, and Vincent Valdez. It serves as a grounding memory of where we began—physically and emotionally close—and a clear reminder of how much was forced to change over the course of our extended fellowship of seventeen months. *Un/Common Proximity* presents works that were created throughout these shifts, highlighting the ways each artist purposefully and/or inadvertently responded to a tumultuous year marked by a landmark U.S. election, a global pandemic, and a national reckoning with systemic racial injustice. As Rankine writes,

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“The body has a memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight.”<sup>1</sup> With themes of protection, healing, redemption, and intuitive processing, these artists present a restorative method of unearthing and confronting the various traumas and oppressive histories that are held in their bodies and those of their community members.



Installation view, NXTHVN 2020-2021 Fellows, *Un/Common Proximity*, James Cohan, 48 Walker Street, June 10–August 13, 2021

Alisa Sikelianos-Carter’s mixed media paintings and collages offer protective healing by inviting viewers into a hushed other-worldly realm that features environments reminiscent of the ocean floor, outer space, and swamplands. In her large-scale paintings, these imagined spaces are inhabited by powerful and divine beings donning Black hairstyles. Sikelianos-Carter refers to these figures as “galactic portraits of Black ancestors.”<sup>2</sup> Looming over viewers, the beings measure at six to eight feet tall and are shown standing, sitting, and leaning on one another. Each is meticulously glittered from head to toe; the luminescent speckles become a sort-of armor. Instead of facial features or heads, the figures don afros or collages of Black hairstyles—hand-cut images of braids, cornrows, and twists are layered to create suggestive new shapes—which the artist refers to as “crowns.”<sup>3</sup> Matching the undeniable regality showcased by each figure, the scale and sense of omniscience in each work projects an aura of empowerment that uplifts viewers. The glitter, shimmering and refracting on the surface, provides a layer of unpredictability and movement to the works. The materials mimic the autonomous and uncontrollable nature of the figures. For Sikelianos-Carter, these works not only honor her Black ancestors, but also represent the importance of yielding to their powers and the irrefutable magic that connects her to them.

Magic, often entwined with alchemy, is also an integral theme in Jeffrey Meris’s artistic practice. Meris arrived at NXTHVN with kinetic sculptures from a previous series, titled *Now You See Me, Now You Don’t*. Due to their time in

<sup>1</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Alisa Sikelianos-Carter in conversation with the author, March 15, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

storage and their iron and steel parts, they arrived on site covered in rust. During the first two months of his residency, he tended to each sculpture, cleaning them with terry cloth rags and acetic acid. In doing so, his studio slowly filled with reddish rust-stained cloth materials. At the same time, Meris began his personal rituals of self-care, lovingly referred to as “Self-Care Saturday™,” (also known as “SCS”), a dedication of time and energy to his mental and physical health where, among other actions, he began to grow and nurture plants. With these rituals, Meris found solace and rejuvenated purpose while contemplating Ocean Vuong’s question, “why can’t the language for creativity be the language of regeneration?”<sup>4</sup> Meris adopts this notion of regeneration, coupled with the ancient concept of alchemy—the transmutation of matter—in creating both of his new bodies of works: his large scale “paintings,” as well as his hanging sculptures. Meris’s paintings are made by stretching and joining the rust-stained rags that were strewn about his studio—each cloth dyed in a unique pattern finds new life as a larger ‘skin,’ resembling animal hides, all the while holding a history and memory of his past works and traumas. The artist’s hanging sculptures, reminiscent of chandeliers, are made of aluminum piping, ceramic vessels, and spider plants. The pipes for the chandelier-like works “explode” outwards, mimicking the shape of his spider plants, which sit in bullet-shaped ceramic vessels attached to each pipe. These materials, along with Meris’s shift from working with steel and iron to aluminum, a lighter, and, as Meris says, a more “intimate” metal—often found in domestic spaces for plumbing—can be seen as a metaphor for the shift in the artist’s practice, once centered around conversations of racialized trauma, to one focused on a steadfast devotion to healing, cleansing, and rituals of care.



Jeffrey Meris, *Fairy Godmother*, 2021

Allana Clarke’s practice also exposes the power of materiality, as she brings new life to materials that have held personal and/or historical ties to anti-Black sentiment, often related to society’s violent adherence to Western standards of beauty. In *This Will Be My Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America*, Morgan Jerkins writes, “the question that white people are asking is not ‘Why can’t we all be human?’, but ‘Why can’t you be like us?’”<sup>5</sup> By repurposing materials such as hair bonding glue and cocoa butter, Clarke rejects such pressures, subverting the narratives of these products to create works that offer a path to transcendence and healing. To create her hair bonding glue sculptures, Clarke pours the material—hundreds of bottles of it—onto large mesh beds before allowing it to cure. The glue slowly dries from the top layer down, creating a sticky and unpredictable leathery surface at which point she springs to action, performing her gestures of pushing, pulling, pinching, ripping, and twisting. This performance results in large, three-dimensional wall-based sculptures with folds, ripples, and tears of various textures,

<sup>4</sup> Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, (New York: Penguin, 2019), 178.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan Jerkins, *This Will Be My Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2018), 198

each inextricably linked to the artist's energy and physicality. Clarke's cocoa butter works elicit a similar bond to her physical self. Individual letters are cast in rubber molds filled with cocoa butter, which are then assembled on the wall to share lines of the artist's poetry. The text stems from her relationship to the material of cocoa butter itself, reflecting on Clarke's experience of "rituals of alteration, indoctrinating [her] into a world that is anti-black."<sup>6</sup> In both processes, the artist relies on time—waiting for the materials to coagulate before next steps are taken—a condition that coincidentally, or tellingly, embodies the wait and patience needed to attain transcendence.



Allana Clarke, *Relentless*, 2021

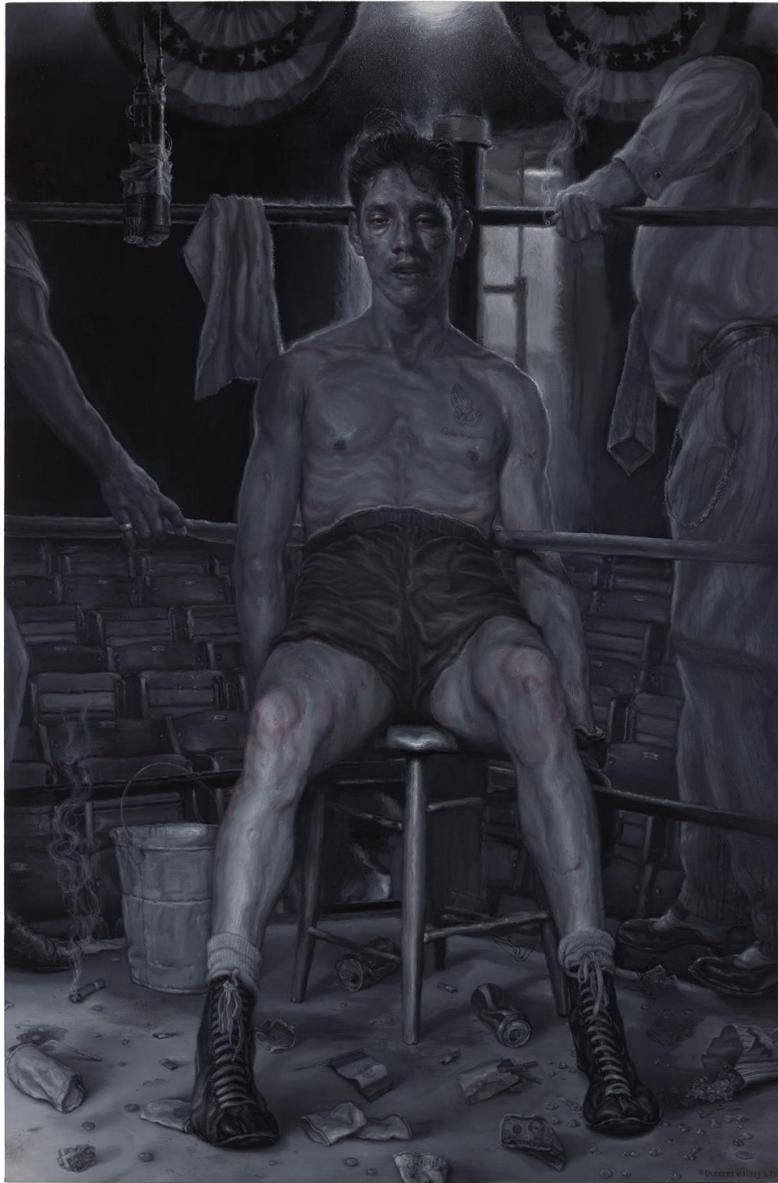
Like Clarke, painter Vincent Valdez uses his artistic practice to critique and combat white supremacist norms in American society. His drawings and monumental paintings act as haunting mirrors that reflect on 21<sup>st</sup> century America's cursed compulsion to repeat and propagate violent patterns of racism, classism, and xenophobia—prodding viewers to question the various distorted myths and realities of capitalism and the American dream. Valdez works incessantly, so much so that the NXTHVN fellows would joke about him living in his studio—a rarity to see his lights turned off no matter the time of day or night. In this setting, he works on multiple pieces simultaneously, navigating between series. Standing at the center of his studio, one can see large portraits depicting “real life heroes”<sup>7</sup> who work in the shadows to protect marginalized communities next to a diptych of two American spectacles—the iconic image of Michael Jordan from the 1988 NBA Slam Dunk Contest and a scene from the Iran–Contra Affair trial of Oliver North. Across the room is a grisaille painting, nearly eight feet tall, of an exhausted Chicano boxer sitting in the corner of a ring flanked by a coach and sponsor, both just out of view—a metaphor exposing the hierarchies of American society. Immaculately painted with flurries of active brushstrokes full of dimension—details of a pinky ring catching the light, a lit cigarette's smoke dissipating into the air, a fading scar denting the left shin bone—Valdez creates a character who sits between various cruxes of identity: American and Mexican; the poor challenger and the wealthy elite. The work, titled *Just a Dream (In America)*, is named after a 1958 song by Jimmy

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<sup>6</sup> Allana Clarke in conversation with the author, January 28, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Valdez in conversation with the author, January 27, 2021.

Clanton. The lyrics, “I know that we could never last / We just can't seem to in the past / Just a dream I dream in vain / With you I'd only live in pain,”<sup>8</sup> lament a lost lover, but Valdez reinterprets the song as an ode to America. Valdez’s criticisms, often resolute and heartbreaking, carry a sense of redemption and highlight the struggle of societal underdogs through a lens of autonomy and resilience.



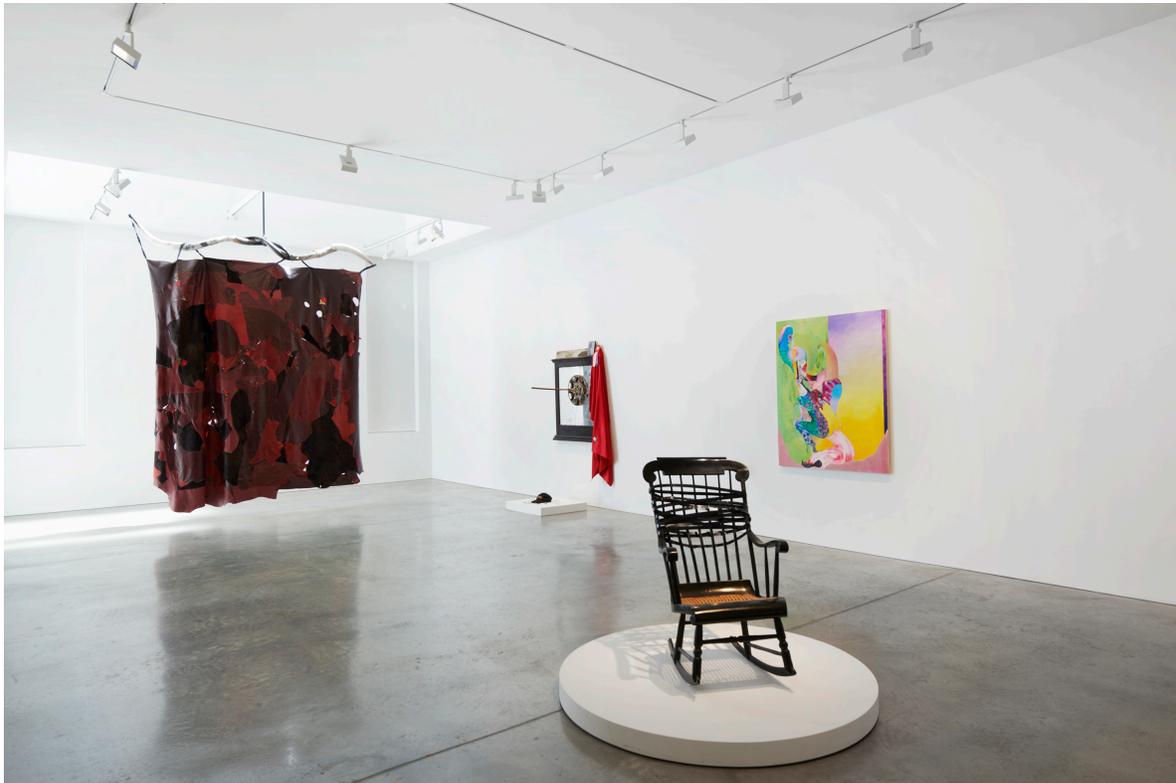
Vincent Valdez, *Just A Dream (In America)*, 2021

Challenging power structures and hierarchies is a clear through-line in Ilana Savdie’s practice as well. Her large-scale paintings, using electrifying color palettes and thick layers of textured beeswax, seesaw between representation and abstraction. From this intermediate space, Savdie zooms in and out of the human body and psyche—layered and leaking figures become real estate for other organisms all the way down to microscopic life forms. In an early studio visit, Savdie flipped through her archive of images of these organisms: parasites, viruses, bodies that have become hosts and vice versa. A chill ran down my spine as I looked at these images and imagined which of them, and how

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<sup>8</sup> Jimmy Clanton, “Just a Dream,” 1958, Lyricfind, Accessed May 15, 2021.

many, existed in my own body—and yet it was hard for me to look away. Savdie hones in on this tension between fascination and disgust, seduction and fear. These details coupled with the almost skin-like texture of the wax prompts viewers to negotiate their own relationship to their bodies and to imagine hierarchies of power and control between and amongst the various bodies that live on and with us. In addition to these bodies, elements of the Colombian Marimonda appear in various scale and colors throughout her practice. The image, now a staple figure representing Carnaval de Barranquilla, has historic and folkloric roots as a costume used to ridicule the oppressive elite. Savdie uses this history and the Carnavalesque theme of exaggerating the body as a means of mocking power structures and hierarchies—a historically queer form of resistance and protest. Savdie’s works pose larger questions about the boundaries between foreign and familiar; how to trace home, history, and heritage as an “inconvenient body”; and how to assert and find redemptive outlets against oppressive structures, authorities, and regimes.



Installation view, NXTHVN 2020-2021 Fellows, *Un/Common Proximity*, James Cohan, 48 Walker Street, June 10-August 13, 2021

Notions of protest and opposition are shared in a more indirect manner in Daniel T. Gaitor-Lomack’s artistic practice. His performance and assemblage works hone in on the historical and metaphysical energies related to space, some existing on Earth and others accessed spiritually and/or subconsciously. During his time at NXTHVN, Gaitor-Lomack used materials found in the surrounding Dixwell neighborhood, combining and layering discarded materials to create new forms. Made from a series of intuitive gestures and connections, his sculptural works become windows, transporting viewers into and through the many lives that each object has lived and met. Specifically, Gaitor-Lomack examines themes of childhood and investigations of innocence in his new series of work that include ice pops—transparent tubes of sugary liquid that have come to symbolize summertime and adolescence. By gluing these treats to found objects, often mirrors or frames, the artist warps and entangles motifs of young and old, naive and wise, exposing new relationships to the flow of time and history. With symbols from his lived experiences as well as from dreams, mythologies, and current events, his works become portals to manifest and predict futures. In his performance work, Gaitor-Lomack enters, relates to, and even rejects these portals. As he takes on different personas—becoming a medium of sorts—he moves through different realities and dimensions leading viewers

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through a journey across time and spiritual realms. On the left wall of his NXTHVN studio is a quote that Gaitor-Lomack wrote at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic: “As soon as the God gets a little light the wicked wants to dim it.” Gaitor-Lomack fuels his practice through an uncompromising mission to offer clarity and protection to viewers. If Gaitor-Lomack’s current materials direct viewers toward New Haven, Esteban Ramón Pérez’s practice points to his SoCal Chicano roots through sculpture and sculptural paintings.

Ramón Pérez’s cardinal works are his large-scale leather paintings—a series that began with repurposing leather scraps found in his father’s upholstery shop in the Los Angeles area. After stitching together the scraps, the artist treats both suede and leather, or as he calls it, the “factory finish” side of the surfaces. On the suede, Ramón Pérez tapes down designs using a pinstriping method, an homage to his introduction to painting, which he attributes to lowrider culture. On the factory finish side, he sketches a design, often recalling his Chicano heritage, integrated with threads of postcolonial histories. The artist alters and blurs images using Photoshop to hint at the realities, or “distorted myths,” as Ramón Pérez would say, that are promised by American society. For example, his most recent work, *Como la Flor*, depicts a distorted image of the Mexican coat of arms. Ramón Pérez uses a tattoo gun, sans ink, to etch the image onto the surface; this method of scratching and puncturing the first layer of leather necessitates two to three rounds of mark making to depict the chosen image. The combination of the detailed and delicate treatment of the leather with the undeniably tough and punk method of painting manifests into awe-striking works of powerfully honest representations of identity and dissent.

The artists’ sculptural works, smaller in scale, offer viewers a similar sense of redemption. These works, boasting Ramón Pérez’s signature combination of brute technical skill with hyper-specific translations and reimaginations of Mexican folklore and familial history, speak to the subjectivities of the Mexican American community. These “objects of power”<sup>9</sup> each made with various found and sourced materials including boxing gloves, pheasant and rooster feathers, metal studs, and ancho chiles, among others, radiate a resolute sense of dignity emblematic of the artists’ dedication to his practice and his heritage.

One year and five months ago the 2020–2021 NXTHVN artist fellows embarked on a collective journey that would present various unforeseen challenges. And yet, through all of the uncertainty, each fellow continued to show up to their studios and make their art. Some used the act of creating to quiet their anxieties, while others made work to heal, protect, and cope with grief and confusion. As Toni Morrison writes, “This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.”<sup>10</sup> With grace, humor, and a little help from the camaraderie of our makeshift quarantine pod, these artists’ works share personal and communal experiences that offer a roadmap to finding healing and protective guidance to navigate a rapidly changed and changing world.

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<sup>9</sup> Esteban Ramón Pérez in conversation with the author, May 10, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison, “No place for self-pity, no room for fear,” *The Nation* 23 (2015).