

THE MFA SHOWCASE: YEAR 2

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By Jennifer Inacio

The MFA Showcase: Year 2 features nine emerging artists who explore the complexities of our bodies and identities through various media and perspectives. The artists' works delve into the physical, mental, and social connections between our bodies and environments. Contemplating on how external forces beyond our control shape our existence, many of these works highlight the fragile balance between autonomy and submission. The exhibition provides a unique opportunity for the artists to engage in a dialogue and discover common threads within their artistic practices, creating a thought-provoking and engaging experience for visitors.

Unmolding Our Bodies

Various works in the exhibition reference the social norms imposed on our bodies. In her stop motion video, "**Coffee and Cigarettes for Breakfast Because the Magazine Told Me To**" (2022), **Alyssa Wood** uses roadkill sewn into taxidermy to represent the human form. Originally from a rural area outside Nashville, Tennessee, her work is inspired by growing up as a young feminist woman in the Southern United States. Wood creates a parallel between the roadkill creatures she uses and how people are forced to mold themselves and adhere to set roles that society has carved out for them. By taking these creatures apart and sewing them back together, Wood challenges viewers to confront feminist politics and shows the resilience of the human spirit in the face of oppressive societal norms. **Bella Cardim** delves into a similar note but with a magnifying lens into her own personal experiences of emotional hunger and body image awareness. Her conceptual framework is rooted in her personal experiences with emotional eating disorders and her observations of excessive consumption in society. With over 16 years of experience in commercial food photography, Cardim has honed her skills in capturing the essence of food and its impact on the human psyche. Employing a range of media, including photography, sculpture, and installation, she explores the relationship we have with food and consumption. By combining evocative imagery and thought-provoking text, she creates participatory installations that engages the viewers and challenges them to examine their own relationships with food and body image. Lastly, **Chantae Wright's**

work confronts traditional notions of identity and representation. She began her practice with portraits and scenes from various photoshoots and has since expanded into an ardent exploration of polymorphism, portraying individuals with multiple identities. In "**La Beauté est au Pouvoir**" (**Beauty is in the Power**) [2022], Wright challenges the traditional portrayal of women under the male gaze by taking back the narrative of the female gaze. Wright's work explores themes of disidentification and polymorphism, and in this piece, the women are depicted in an upright position, proudly taking back their narrative and identity, reflecting Wright's own black, queer, female, Caribbean-American identity and struggles with questioning and pushback. Through her practice, Wright is committed to expanding the narrative of otherness to be more inclusive of everyday lived experiences, inviting viewers to engage with her work in a way that challenges their assumptions and biases.

Identity in Movement

Identity can be defined as a person's sense of self that is actively evolving and adapting over time in response to changing circumstances or influences. In ***Lamb in the Wilderness*** (2022), **Zuyi Jin** offers personal insight into his life journey, tracing his transition from a small town in China to a bustling megacity, and eventually a new country. Through his paintings and illustrations, he masterfully weaves together various turning points in his life, capturing the evolution of his imagination as his worldview expands. One can't help but be drawn into the movement of Jin's life forms as they traverse space and time on his canvases. Through his unique visual language, Jin invites viewers to reflect on their own journeys and the forces that shape them. On the other hand, **Melina Tsalikis** digs into her memory to investigate how childhood experiences are encoded within us and shape our sense of self. Often employing multisensory stimuli such as touch, smell, and sound to trigger memories and create immersive environments, her work invites viewers to engage with their memories and senses, encouraging them to reflect on how past experiences have shaped their identity and worldview. In ***Hey Dad (Tzatziki)*** [2023], Tsalikis explores her longing for cultural connection on her father's Greek side. Inspired by her father's practice of making tzatziki at home, the installation is composed of found bowls, plaster, kitchen cabinet handles, and dishcloths—creating a visual texture that replicates the dripping of tzatziki and symbol for cultural connection.

Similarly rooted in her cultural heritage and personal experiences, **Lucia Morales'** work draws inspiration from her childhood home in Lima, Peru. Her practice is a poignant exploration of her Andean heritage and personal identity. By using embroidered

textiles—traditionally associated with women's work and undervalued in the art world—Morales challenges gender roles and elevates the status of textiles as a valid form of artistic expression while reconciling her immigrant experience and her rediscovery of cultural roots and traditions. In *Mantas: Lo que ellas cargan, 3rd Iteration (2023)*, she pays tribute to the Peruvian Andean mantas that symbolize the connection and labor between mothers and children—representing the struggles of immigrant women in providing for their loved ones. Cuban artist **Alián Rives**, on the other hand, looks back to his homeland for inspiration. Through varying media, including photography, video, immersive experiences, installation art, and sculpture, he analyzes his experience living in the Cuban diaspora and explores the use of technology in a post-internet media environment. He often extracts data from everyday life to examine how information flows affect our reality—offering a thought-provoking look at the post-internet human condition and our hyper-tech visual culture. In *Negative Space [1] (2022)*, he uses minimalist aesthetics and negative space to challenge conventional documentary photography and the post-truth media environment. Depicting images of Cuban rafters who were killed by the government in 1994 while attempting to flee the country, this work offers a poignant reflection on human rights issues and political oppression—a reality so common in Cuban identity.

Complexities of the Body and Mind

Our physical and mental states are intimately intertwined, and they can affect each other in various ways. Physical sensations can trigger emotional responses, and our mental state can impact our physical health. Exploring the connections and complexities between the body and mind is often found in artworks, including works by **Pedro Sena** and **Lucas Varnum**.

Sena, a Cuban multi-disciplinary artist, explores his own human condition and desire for wholeness through various media. Drawing inspiration from surrealism, expressionism, realism, and ancient symbols, Sena's highly conceptual work reflects his attention to detail and explores complex ideas and emotions. The works in this exhibition explore the instability of the human condition through contorted human figures that convey movement in a static format. By merging symbolic poses, Sena investigates the multiple psychological dispositions that our physical bodies can express and how they often contradict or reaffirm each other. Through his work, he invites viewers to join him on his journey of self-discovery and encourages them to explore their own inner lives.

Varnum's sculptures reflect his innermost emotions and life experiences, serving as a tool for self-exploration. By combining organic forms inspired by nature with human elements, he investigates the complex relationship between humans and the natural world. The ceramic works in the exhibition explore the insecurities and discomforts Varnum experienced due to his childhood obesity. Using biomorphic forms, the artist creates objects that elicit a sense of discomfort in the viewer. Underglaze and traditional ceramic techniques are used to achieve skin tones, and a range of glazes are experimented with to enhance the sense of discomfort. In his work, Varnum explores personal journeys as a means to examine how insecurities continue to impact his life today while inviting viewers to ponder their own discomforts and insecurities.

In conclusion, *The MFA Showcase: Year 2* exhibition presents a unique opportunity for artists to engage in a dialogue and discover common threads within their artistic practices, creating a thought-provoking and engaging experience for visitors. The exhibition is a testament to the creativity with which these artists delve into the physical, mental, and social connections between our bodies and environments and contemplate how external forces beyond our control shape our existence. Overall, this exhibition highlights the importance of providing a platform for emerging artists to showcase their works and engage in a broader conversation.

Jennifer Inacio

Jennifer Inacio is Associate Curator at Pérez Art Museum Miami. She recently curated Marcela Cantuária's first US solo exhibition, *The South American Dream* (2023). Selected curated exhibitions include *Simone Leigh: Trophallaxis* (2022); *Felipe Mujica: The Swaying Motions on the Bank of the River Falls* (2021); *MY BODY, MY RULES* (2020); *Barbara Wagner & Benjamin de Burca: Estás vendo coisas* (2019); *Pedro Neves Marques: A Mordida* (2018); the museum's first Augmented Reality exhibition *Felice Grodin: Invasive Species* (2017–2022); among others. In addition, as an ambassador of The55Project—an organization with the mission to promote Brazilian visual artists and cultural projects in the United States—she has curated *Gustavo Prado: The Undercurrent* (2020); *Nádia Taquary—Oríki: Bowing to the Head* (2019); and *What I really want to tell you...* (2019). Inacio holds a Master's in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths, University of London (2014).