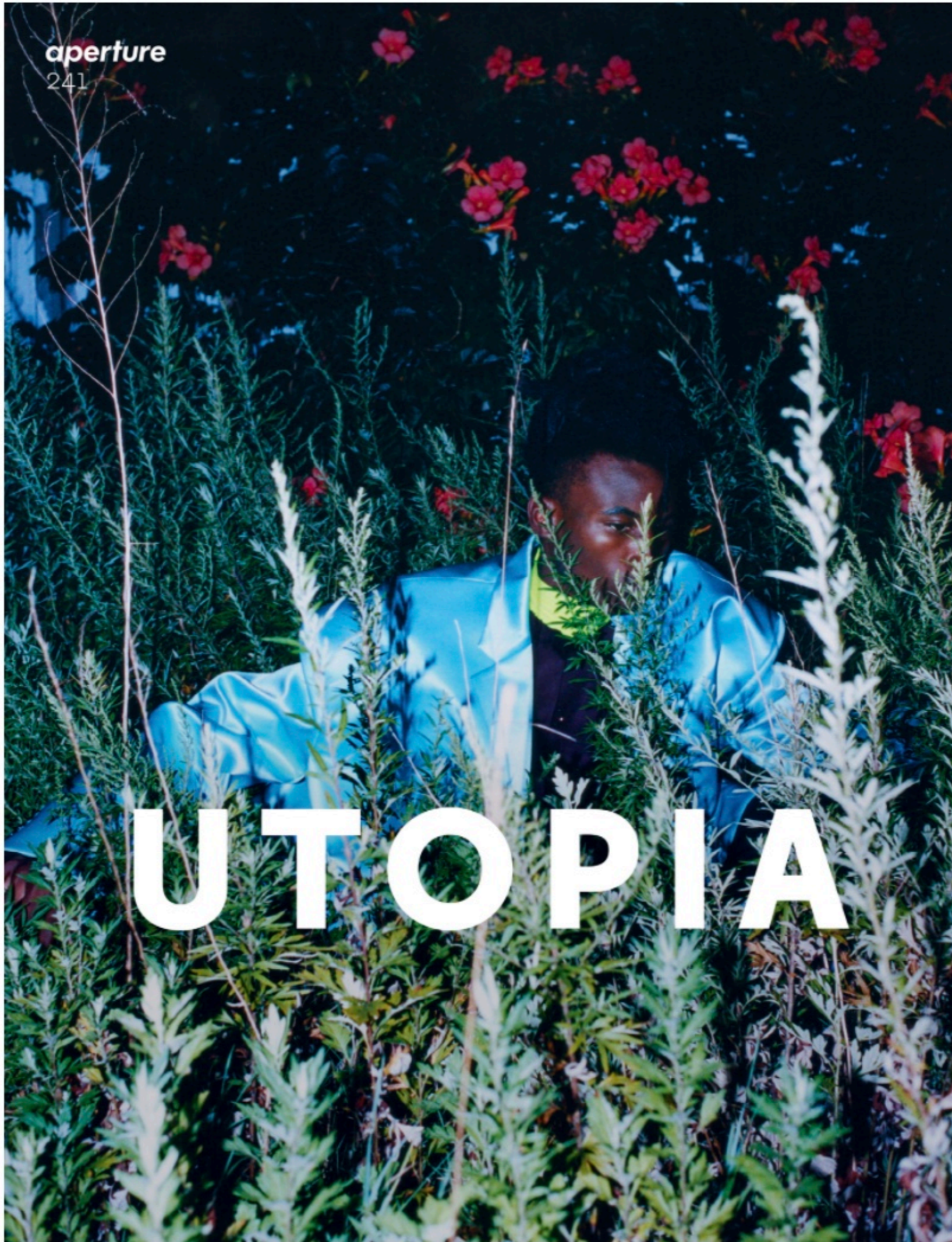


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UTOPIA



Young Latinx image makers look to cultural traditions and reimagine liberty.

Calling in the Spirit

Kiara Cristina Ventura

Where can people of the Latinx community feel safe? After the history of colonialization and the experience of migration, how can we express a complex sense of spirituality in the United States? How can image making become ritual and serve our spirits? How can we create visual representations of a place of our own—a utopia?

For people of marginalized communities, engaging in spirituality and imagining utopias for ourselves are not only instinctual processes but ways of survival. Learning from their grandmothers, who were guided by their grandmothers, many Latinx artists have used passed-down spiritual practices, often an amalgamation of Indigenous, African, and European beliefs and customs, to make striking and powerful portraits in recent years. Their work is all the more urgent after a year in which the U.S. was struck by a pandemic, racial unrest, a divisive election, and existential uncertainty around immigration and citizenship.

“The Afro-Syncretic religion is the best way of describing the New World and the Caribbean,” says the Bronx-born, Afro-Dominican artist Yelaine Rodriguez. “It’s a history of resistance where African traditions have been passed down through the generations.” Challenging Eurocentrism, Rodriguez responds to the contemporary world with photographs referencing orishas, deities known to be intermediaries between humankind and the supernatural, from the Yoruba religion, which was brought to the Caribbean by enslaved Yoruba people from West Africa. With *Oshun Orisha of Fertility: Help Us Birth Generations of Revolutionary*



Page 120:
Jheyda McGarrell, *Let You
in Last Night*, 2018
Courtesy the artist

This page:
Yelaine Rodriguez,
*Afro-Sagrada Familia
(Mawon Zahir Ajam)*,
Bronx, 2019
Courtesy the artist

Opposite:
Amarise Carreras, *el
jibare reza por amor
(El jibare prays for love)*,
Queens, 2019
Courtesy the artist



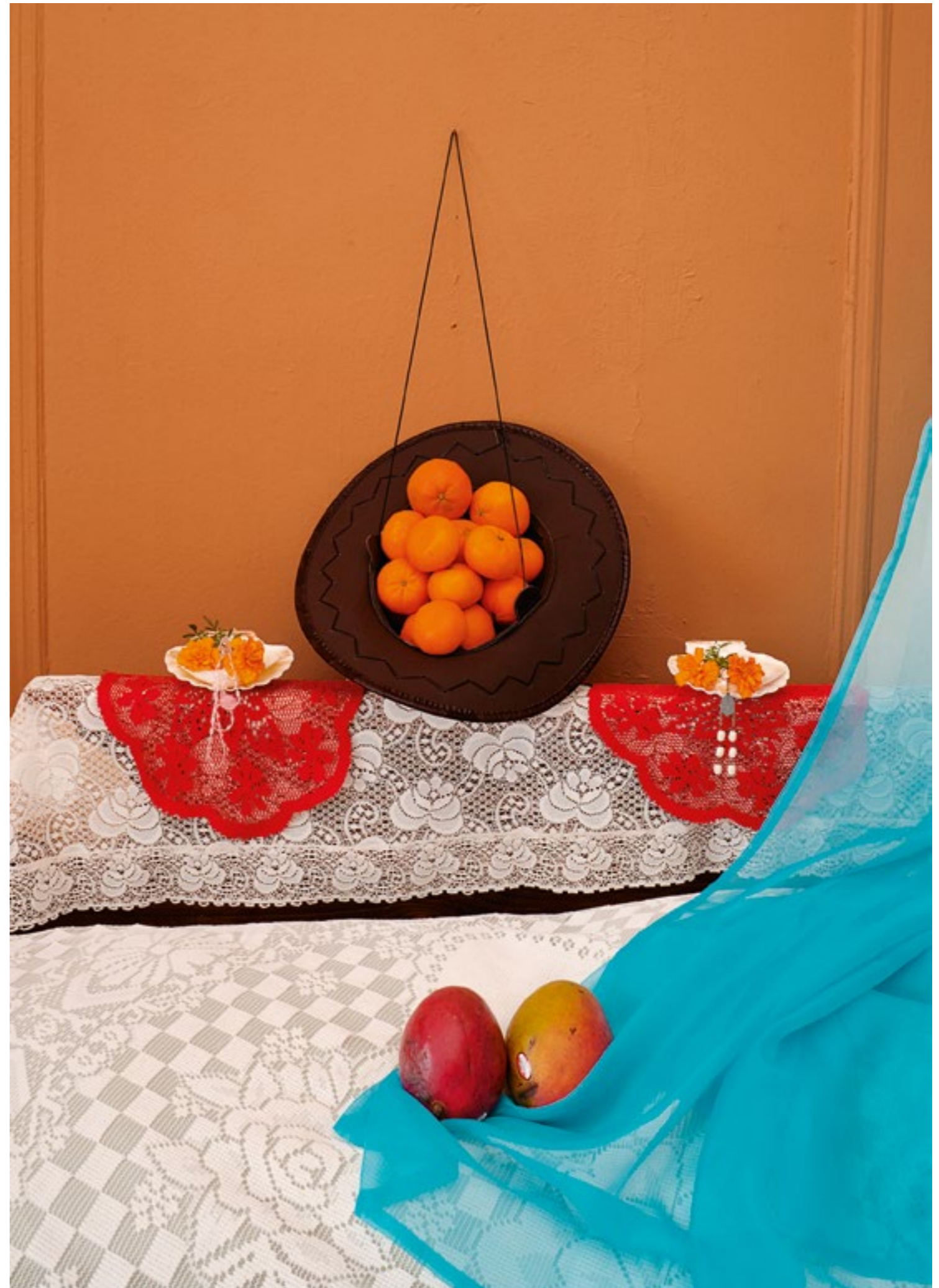
Womxn (2020), Rodriguez represents the orisha Oshun, the goddess of rivers, beauty, and love. In the image, the woman dressed as Oshun wears a handmade headdress and a beige and yellow cowrie-shell gown created by the artist. Rodriguez also probes colonial history in her series *Afro-Sagrada Familia* (2018). This title alludes to how Spain extracted wealth from the Americas to build its grand monuments, such as La Sagrada Familia, a large unfinished Roman Catholic basilica in Barcelona designed by Antoni Gaudí. “These images ask the questions of why some communities are viewed as sacred while other cultures get erased from history,” Rodriguez says.

For many Latinx artists, the languages of religion and visual art have provided opportunities to seek control and imagine liberty. The Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta, for example, enacted performances that resulted in elegiac images such as *Imagen de Yagul* (1973), for which she covered her nude body with white flowers and appears to sink into the earth. Here she alludes to the grief caused by her separation from her family and culture, after she fled to the United States when Fidel Castro came to power. In such self-portraits, Mendieta reveals ritualistic moments of being held by nature.

Today, drawing upon the legacies of Mendieta and others, several young Latinx artists are attempting to capture expressions

of the soul and spirit through photography. They are imagining places of comfort and care as a means to process trauma, identity, and complex beliefs. The queer Puerto Rican artist Amarise Carreras pays homage to their grandmothers and ancestors with their performance-based photographs featuring spiritual objects, tropical food such as papayas, Caribbean beauty products including Tropical Roots hair-growth oil, cleaning tools and domestic items such as Fabuloso mopping solution, and the white lace mats usually found under *abuela’s* glass candy dish. Carreras plays with the objects in their still lifes to create conversations. “I activate one object, then another till you can tell that each object has been touched,” Carreras notes about their *Still Life/Altars* series (2017–19). “Then I share photos of the aftermath so people have access to the healing, but it’s also still personal and private for me.” The intentionally ritualistic preparation is deeply influenced by the practices of Carreras’s maternal lineage and is informed by Santeria, a pantheistic religion, mainly practiced in the Caribbean, that is based on the beliefs and traditions of the Yoruba people, the Taínos, and the Roman Catholic faith.

When looking at photographs of process and ritual, it’s natural to question whom and what the ritual is for, but a photograph can reflect a spiritual practice that defies categorization. In the



Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski,
*Who Broke the Sky, Who
Fell Through, Fire Island,*
2019
Courtesy the artist

**For these artists, creating
one's own place of comfort and
acceptance is about preserving
sacred traditions.**

self-portrait and digital triptych *firm footing* (2020) by the Dominican Ecuadorian artist Albany Andaluz, the artist, dressed in a long red gown, steps through canvas stretcher bars. Her facial expression is one of uncertainty, alluding to the feelings of ambivalence that come with a change of environment. The stretcher serves as a boundary, and Andaluz is on the edge of leaving the floating blue sky behind and entering the green woods to find a sense of grounding. "Everything that I have made has come from things I have owned or someone that is close to me has owned, or from someone I have recently met. It's a lot about confronting the process of letting go and wanting to see the material resurrected in different ways. The processing of letting go is an affirmation of abundance and that I will have more," she says.

Andaluz is not only making a symbolic statement about reaching toward the notion of abundance, she is also highlighting her deep relationship with the materials in her photographs, especially the textiles she often repurposes. Coming from an immigrant background, she challenges her family's mindset about the scarcity of resources and confronts coping behaviors involving acquiring materials to survive and to signal comfort. She cuddles her inner child in the self-portrait *deliver us from the self-righteousness-ly* (2018), which plays upon Madonna and Child iconography distributed across religious sites in Europe and throughout art history. In her imaginative realm, Andaluz is able to safely process, unlearn, and let go.

When your identity is constantly being politicized, safe spaces are essential, even if those spaces are only imagined and staged. The Afro-Chicanx artist and photographer Jheyda McGarrell's *Let You in Last Night* (2018) makes a statement about queerness by giving the public a glimpse into a hidden intimate moment, allowing the viewer to look through a window and into a bright orange bedroom where McGarrell and their partner lie half nude.



A rare moment in which a door isn't closed and locked, a window isn't shut, and the blinds aren't down. In this sensual scene, McGarrell turns their head and looks straight into the camera lens, a welcoming act that also questions who has access to witness. Here McGarrell establishes agency over the scene and the photograph itself, creating a queer utopian space.

With images of fantastical tableaux inspired by ancient stories, the Afro-Borinquen interdisciplinary artist Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski asks, What if the world inherited a queer, thick, Black and Brown, earthbound, femme, loud, flamboyant genesis? In the photograph *Who Broke the Sky, Who Fell Through* (2019), the artist alludes to death as she appears as an iridescent pink-sequined ghost standing on a Fire Island beach. Mirrored tombstones emerge from the sand among a ground full of tall grass. The artist plays with light and texture, as sculptural elements in the piece reflect glistening pinks and blues, honoring the dead during a mystical sunset and heralding a new future on the horizon.

For these artists, creating one's own place of comfort and acceptance is about preserving sacred traditions while contending with family histories of migration, poverty, discrimination, and displacement. Their visions normalize and honor our diverse Latinx community, which is crucial to the larger identity of the United States and beyond. They call on the parts of society that need to be healed and call out those who don't welcome their cultures. These spiritual performances are slowly fashioning new realities that these artists will one day touch.

Albany Andaluz,
*deliver us from the
self-righteousness-ly,*
2018
Courtesy the artist

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