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## NOURISHMENT: CERAMICS AND THE DOMESTIC INSTITUTION IN PUERTO RICO

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**ABSTRACT** — As part of the curatorial process for the project *La materialización de lo doméstico-corporal* (The Materialization of the Bodily-Domestic), the author researched contemporary ceramics made by women in Puerto Rico, especially the ones that center around the subject of domestic labor, care, and nourishment. The product was an exhibition presented between November and December 2022 in the Art Gallery at the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez Campus. This article presents the findings of the investigation made as part of the curatorial steps. In Puerto Rico, domestic labor exists in a liminal space between modern and non-modern and women ceramists have developed a body of work that, when analyzed together, provokes conversations about the home as a feminist collectivist space, but also as a place where we must survive disaster. The artwork of female creators that deal with the subject of domestic space and is made with clay—a medium associated with care and reproduction—give a central role to the making process, merging form with content. With this paper, I propose a reading of the work of Puerto Rican contemporary artists Alice Chéveres, Zuania Minier, Andrea Pérez, Dhara Rivera, Elizabeth Robles, and Daniela Roselló to explore how, using clay, they address the act of “feeding” others, as mothers and women—as a metaphor for care work—and its relationship with the land. These artworks link body and domestic space by questioning the Colonial/Modern Gender System and the contradictions between non-modern feminized knowledge and the imposition of a colonial modernity. The habitable space—both body and home—is pondered as a feminist space that is the stage for oppression and violence, but also the setting for creation and conspiracy.

**NOURISHMENT: CERAMICS AND THE DOMESTIC INSTITUTION IN PUERTO RICO** — Ceramic relates to women’s bodies both metaphorically and physically. Its primary material, soil, is also a provider of food. This is why, in poetry, fiction, and the visual arts, the feminized being is often related to the earth (Quiñones Otaí 2022): both provide nutrition and life.<sup>1)</sup> As part of the curatorial process for the project *La materialización de lo doméstico-corporal* (The Materialization of the Bodily-Domestic), the author researched contemporary ceramics made by women in Puerto Rico, especially the ones that center around the subject of domestic labor,

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However, this link must also be questioned because it equates women with nature and men with culture and establishes a human-nature association that has been used to divide humanity into racial groups. The latter considers white bodies—especially male ones—as reasoning and civilized and, therefore, in control of nature and non-white bodies as part of nature.

care, and nourishment. The product was an exhibition presented between November and December 2022 in the Art Gallery at the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez Campus. This article presents the findings of the investigation made as part of the curatorial steps. The works that will be studied in this essay establish a link between the body and the domestic space based on a questioning of the modern/colonial gender system (Lugones 2007) and the dialectic relationship between non-modern feminized knowledge and the imposition of a colonial modernity. In that sense, both the domestic space, as the locus of care and feminized labor, and the body as the provider, are considered “infrastructures” that work within and against the patriarchal gendered colonial way of defining labor and its exploits. With this essay I intend to analyze how Puerto Rican female-identified ceramists approach the domestic with their creations, generating objects that explore how women connect our bodies with the spaces we inhabit, and the labor linked to it.

— The proposal of a modern/colonial gender system is made by María Lugones in articles published between 2007 and 2010. Her approach to the idea of gender in the colonial system is a response to Aníbal Quijano’s article “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America” where he establishes his views of gender in the colonial system as a dispute over “sex, its resources and products” (2001: 97) as related to racial relationships and a dispute that occurs only between men. Thus, Lugones argues,

Quijano appears to take for granted that the dispute over control of sex is a dispute among men, about men’s control of resources which are thought to be female. Men do not seem understood as the resources in sexual encounters. Women are not thought to be disputing for control over sexual access. The differences are thought of in terms of how a society reads reproductive biology (2007: 194).

— Using this debate as the basis, Lugones establishes that gender in societies that have been subjected to the coloniality of power is not a simple line of power from men to women, but a complex system in which racialized (non-white) females are categorized as human or not human depending on the needs of capitalism and enslavers. “[...] heterosexual rape of Indian [sic.] or African slave women coexisted with concubinage, as well as with the imposition of the heterosexual understanding of gender relations among the colonized—when and as it suited global, Eurocentered capitalism, and heterosexual domination of white women” (2007: 203). But, as

Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyewùmí has presented, gender is a colonial imposition and female subjects were not defined as inferior to males until the invasions of European civilizations in the Americas and Africa. So, the modern/colonial gender system is one where “Colonized females got the inferior status of gendering as women, without any of the privileges accompanying that status for white bourgeois women” (2007: 203). In an important quote, Lugones also lets us know the conditions of white women in comparison to those which native women enjoyed before colonization to further understand the implementation of the modern/colonial gender system as part of the colonality of power: “the stories Oyewùmí and [Paula Gunn] Allen have presented should make clear to white bourgeois women that their status is much inferior to that of Native American or Yoruba women before colonization” (2007: 203).

— By the 1970s, white Marxist feminists were already analyzing the role of domestic labor in the production of value and capital (Federici 2012: 16). They argued that women’s roles at home are essential to maintaining and reproducing the labor force and, therefore, the stability of the capitalist system (Safa 1975: 377). This premise is true, however, it is only true for societies in which a European modernity rose up, or where forms of production have been transferred from Western culture, as in the case of some communities in Latin America. The analysis of white feminists from the 1970s cannot be transferred to non-modern societies (Aparicio / Blaser 2015: 107). This would imply that domestic work in non-modern groups is established with a distinction between nature and culture (Latour 2007: 148), when it is not the case.

— The capitalist system in Puerto Rico has developed since the intrusion of Spain, with characteristics that have been mutating according to the needs of the European or North American empires that invaded the country. Puerto Rico was one of the territories where, since 1517, the first forms of enslavement related to racial policies were implemented (Baralt 1981: 13) and, where the raw materials that built European capitalism and industrialization were extracted. It has also been a territory for industrial production throughout the twentieth century.

— For these reasons, the work of Puerto Rican women cannot be excluded from capitalist development. Since the invasion, there has been capital production based on women’s labor. However, since the fifteenth century, throughout the Caribbean, there has been resistance to the exploitation and imposition of a modernity (Rodríguez López 2011) that did nothing but segregate and rape our peoples. Care work—which has been associated with what is

understood in the West as “women,” even before the imposition of the colonial project<sup>2)</sup> (Saidi 2020)—faced the assignment to gender with the European invasion (Oyéwù mí 1997) and a movement from the outside to the inside (Segato 2019: 30) and from the communal to the individual. This has been exacerbated by the subsequent liberal and neoliberal trends experienced in this archipelago, as well as in other territories of Abya Yala (Bonilla 2004).

— But, just as there was resistance to the invasion, colonial ways of doing—including the individualization of care—are still being challenged (Marisol Plard Narváez). In impoverished areas of Puerto Rico, especially urban ones, food continues to be collectivized in certain situations. And, when faced with moments of crisis, the most humane practices of cooperation resurface.<sup>3)</sup> This resistance has created pockets in which a non-modern domesticity has developed. Even so, colonial discourse racialized Puerto Ricans and placed us in non-modern categories, so the distinction only applies to some ways of doing, including the domestic. For these reasons, in Puerto Rico, family service labor must be analyzed as a generator of capitalist wealth, but also as a non-exploitative economy where the reproduction of humanity is a necessity.

— Humans must survive and to do so we need food. Women, in any type of society, have historically assumed the most important tasks required for the multiplication and physical maintenance of each individual. Although the domestic space has not existed throughout human history, it is largely the place where the labor of procreation and subsistence of humanity is carried out. Feminized artists from around the world are the ones who have made most of the utensils necessary for care and feeding, because they are the creators of the home and work in it. Just to present an example, Lawrence Waldron suggests that in both Taino and Salaloid societies, women formed an important part of the ceramic producers (2011: 6).<sup>4)</sup> Likewise, from a conceptual point of view, female artists are the ones who think about domestic spaces and construct narratives about their situation within them. Ceramics have been amongst the most used mediums in this context, due to the availability of materials and their importance in the production of kitchen tools.

— In Puerto Rico, the house is a refuge for women and, at the same time, a space of instability. This is due to tropical conditions, impoverishment, and gender-based violence.<sup>5)</sup> It is also the place where we must carry out tasks imposed by patriarchy and where we have our own space to think, create, conspire, and feel comfort. From these numerous points of view, artists Alice Chéveres, Zuania Minier, Andrea Pérez Caballero, Dhara Rivera, Elizabeth Robles,

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This does not mean that people who were designated as women after the development of the colonial project were subordinated, and their jobs conceived as inferior before the European invasions (Oyéwù mí 1997: 9–10).

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Examples of these are the Mutual Support Centers or the Solidarity Brigades that emerged after the passage of Hurricane María through Puerto Rico and continue to be active organizing soup kitchens around the archipelago, proving to be essential after the earthquakes of 2020 and the passage of Hurricane Fiona in 2022.

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Archeologist Miguel Rodríguez-López has also suggested it in comments during lectures attended by the author.

5)

One of the highest in Latin America (OIGALC 2021) (Instituto de Estadísticas de Puerto Rico 2022: 2).

and Daniela Roselló examine our relationships with the concept of home. Their artworks speak to us about sustenance, by linking the feminized body with domesticity and ceramics. They speak about the imaginary, especially the creation of myth around the relationship between women's anatomy as the first provider of food and the representation of nourishment.

— The six artists explore the connection between body and home—as inhabitable space—through the performativity of their works. In 2022 Elizabeth Robles created *Danzando con las Abejas* (*Dancing with the Bees*), a piece of performance art produced around the artwork *Panal de espirales* (*Honeycomb of Spirals*, 2020) [fig. 1], by the same artist. The second one is an assemblage that contains ceramic mounds surrounded by honey. For *Dancing with the Bees*, Robles served honey to the public in 3 x 2-inch, unpainted ceramic containers that look like a vulva or a flower [fig. 2]. The act of licking honey from them makes audience participation an important part of the work. In *Ocupar(se)*<sup>6</sup> (2022), Andrea Pérez Caballero works with the body as well, interchanging performance and clay, as she does in most of her artwork. *Ocupar(se)* is a video performance in which the body of the artist moves up and down, putting effort into her arms, shoulders, and back, imitating the movement made when kneading clay to create ceramics.

— *Honeycomb of Spirals* is made up of five ceramic mounds surrounded by honey that suggest the women's breasts from which food emanates and, also, a landscape essential for agriculture. The artist painted the protruding and rounded pieces with minerals and fired the pieces several times to achieve a shiny black surface. The mounds lay on a plastic tray—filled with honey—that rests on a table. Between the shine of the enamel and the honey, the artwork is reflective.

— When looking at *Honeycomb of Spirals* we can think of a landscape, suggested by the mounds of earth above a reflecting lake. This connects the piece with the Puerto Rican tradition of landscape painting and Indigenous inspired ceramic sculpture (Hermandad de Artistas Plásticos de Puerto Rico 1998: 78–89, 290–314). In that sense, Elizabeth Robles uses a language known in Puerto Rico, but delves into contemporary subjects, beyond the beauty of Puerto Rican land or an ode to the ancestral. The artist presents us with a landscape linked to food security and provokes conversations about the source of sustenance and the relationships between production and consumption. Honey is confused with the brightness of the mountains and seems to emanate from them, as the ceramic bowls we use to eat and the plants—that heal us and

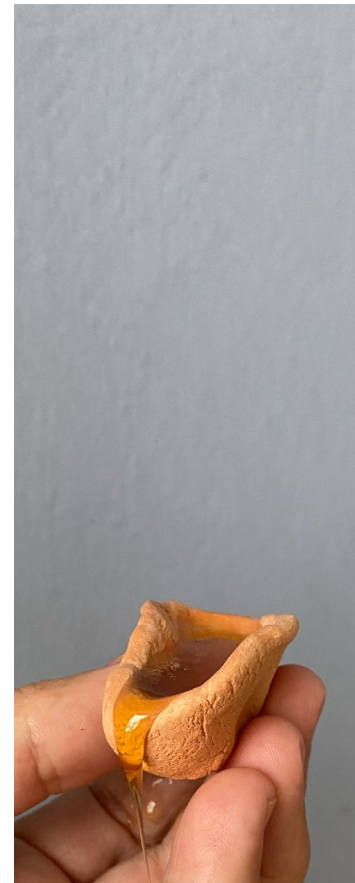
6)

The translation of this title is difficult as it is a play of words, but it can be understood as “Ocuppy (itself).”



// Figure 1

Elizabeth Robles, *Panal de espirales* (*Honeycomb of Spirals*) (detail), 2020, assemblage-sculpture, ceramic, honey, plastic tray, table, © Elizabeth Robles



// Figure 2

Elizabeth Robles, unpainted ceramic container where honey was served for *Dancing with the Bees*, 2022, table, © Elizabeth Robles

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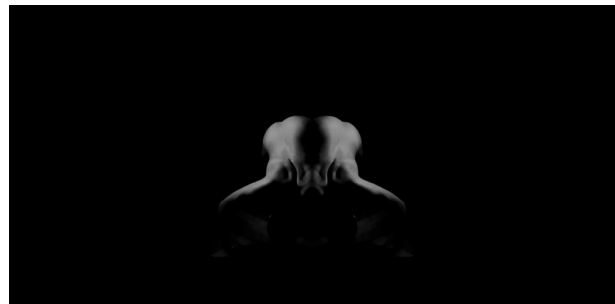
provide us with food, shade, and oxygen—emanate from the earth. This also suggests breasts from where milk flows, thus, equating a woman's body with the earth.

— The conceptual proposal of *Honeycomb of Spirals* is supported by the piece that accompanies it: *Dancing with the Bees*. It is through the latter that we can understand how Robles conceives the act of breastfeeding or nurturing as one of love and affection between humans. The action of serving honey to the public, directly from the tray, created a connection between the artist and her audience through their interaction, reminiscent of that of a mother and her child. It is the act most closely linked to the domestic space, that of feeding and being fed. For the action the artist carried out each homely task: She created the bowls to serve the honey, sewed a white apron, put it on, served the honey, and gave it to anyone willing to take it. The artwork not only reproduces a daily domestic exercise metaphorically, but also recreates the action of communal feeding, playing with the idea that, although neoliberal individualism prevails in the Puerto Rican way of doing things, we resist following non-modern trends.

— In *Ocupar(se)* [fig. 3], by Andrea Pérez Caballero, the modeling medium becomes an abstract and conceptual element. The action of kneading clay and creating ceramic objects with it is as domestic and feminized as the act of nurturing itself. Working the raw material is an invisible labor, since the person who uses the object only sees the finished piece. What more direct metaphor can exist for women's daily labor than that of a body performing an invisible task that serves as the basis for the reproduction of humanity?

— The way Andrea Pérez Caballero kneads recreates this invisibility. *Ocupar(se)* is a video performance in which the artist moves her torso and arms forward and backward, up and down, imitating the movement made when kneading. However, there is no visible clay. The body we observe is naked; we can barely decipher a space or backdrop because there is little light. The public can associate each of the symbols with the act of putting domestic labor aside, not taking it into account, pretending that it was not done. However, we cannot deny that physical pain and effort are present because it is the only matter we can see clearly in *Ocupar(se)*.

— According to Federici—and any woman could have said it before—the concealment of family service work is a strategy of capitalism for the reproduction of tasks that, even today, are not



// Figure 3  
Andrea Pérez Caballero, *Ocupar(se)*  
(detail), 2023, video, © Andrea Pérez  
Caballero)

paid (2012: 18). “To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking” (Federici 2012: 19). In *Ocupar(se)* Andrea’s body works and works. It cooks, smiles, and fucks. Creates. It produces ceramics, kneads clay, feeds, nourishes, since each bowl, each amphora, and each pot serve to feed, to sustain.

— In addition to the palpable and indispensable performativity of the pieces by Elizabeth Robles and Andrea Pérez Caballero, the Puerto Rican artists who explore the domestic space through ceramics make us question the security proceeding from the image of the home. They do so with works in which the creation process is important too. In *La purga: sin parangón* (*The Purge: Unparalleled*, 2013–2019), Zuania Minier presents an effigy of the Virgin Mary, a three-dimensional figure that is part of the daily scene of a Puerto Rican home. She does so in an irreverent way, playing with the concept of the religious surveillance of bodies. On the other hand, with *Fachadas* (*Facades*, 2017) Daniela Roselló Ledesma displays an uninhabited and destroyed landscape that provokes dialogues about the instability of the tropical territory and gender-based violence in Puerto Rican homes. In both cases, the artists make use of broken ceramics, a cathartic action that invites the public to think about oppression and resistance.

— Minier’s *The Purge: Unparalleled* [fig. 4] departs from the traditional statues of the Virgin Mary usually made in plaster and acquired in garden stores, or religious figurines that are placed on home altars. These sculptures have decorative or worship purposes, or even announce to visitors and neighbors that in said residence the virgin has spiritual preeminence. Traditionally, they come in one of two postures: those with their arms folded and hands joined together on the chest—in an attitude of prayer—and those with their arms lowered but slightly separated from the rest of the body at the bottom and with the palms of the hands in the direction of the person looking, welcoming the viewer. Minier imitates each of these poses, which create meaning around the different traditional views that Latin Americans make of the virgin as a Judeo-Christian society where Catholicism dominates.

— However, the figures in Zuania’s work do not reproduce our traditionalist gaze, but rather reverse it, tarnish it, punch it, and destroy it. Each of the figures of the Virgin Mary—or inspired by



// Figure 4  
Zuania Minier, *La purga: sin parangón* (*The Purge: Unparalleled*) (detail), 2013–2019, clay, ceramic pigments, wood, © Zuania Minier

her—in *The Purge: Unparalleled* lacks a head (or face), hands, and feet. In the traditional, homely statuettes these anatomical elements are the only ones visible; the rest of the body is *hidden* below a mantle. Then, in Minier's creation, the Virgin Mary is not there; her body does not exist under the mantle that is supposed to cover it. However, the clothing *covers* the silhouette of the body, in the same shape as it would have been if it was inside the mantle. In each of the sculptures there are notable characteristics that make us question the imposition of an ideology associated with the Virgin Mary in Latin America, especially on the anatomy of women. All are created with an immaculate white, except for one of the figures that has a gold detail. From left to right we see how the surfaces mutate to generate doubts. The first features traditional elements and a smooth surface. In the second one we already observe damage on the surface, like the plaster sculptures on the front lawns of Puerto Rican houses, affected by high temperatures and humidity. Further on, spectators can see very small figurines and images that allude to the Virgin of Guadalupe, with a mandorla, golden heart, and flowers under her feet. The last images in *The Purge: Unparalleled* present a figure that turns her back to the audience, a broken figurine inside a wooden niche—as if it had fallen to the ground and had been placed again in its original location—and a third sculpture that is gently bent, on top of the same niche. The latter seems to have melted while the ceramic was being fired.

— The irreverence with which Zuania Minier treats the virgin figurines arouses dialogues about the prominence of the Virgin Mary in the patriarchal manipulation of feminized bodies at home. By presenting the sculpture of *the virgin* from her back, bent or broken, Minier questions the ideas associated with the Virgin Mary that are the basis for the construction of the coloniality of gender (Lugones 2010) and that promote submission to men, and sexual control in Latin American women: virginity until marriage and sexual work on demand after it (Federici 2004: 230). Ortiz-Torres et al. explain how the figure of the Virgin Mary was used as a source of inspiration to impose submission on colonized women:

As part of Latin America's colonization process, the Catholic Monarchy that ruled Spain utilized Catholicism as an effective strategy to dominate and conquer the indigenous population in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico [...] both Catholicism and Protestantism played a major role in disseminating ideal female images such as the Virgin Mary and other Biblical women (e.g., Ruth, Elizabeth, Sarah) (2000: 863).



— The traditional figures that represent the Virgin Mary doubly act on our bodies from inside the domestic space because that surveillance over our anatomies is also related to the maintenance of the home and its members. In Latin America, the role of caregiver imposed on feminized humans has deeper consequences than in other cultures due to what has become known as “Marianismo” (Morales / Rojas Pérez 2020). Latin American women—or Latinas in the United States—see the act of caring for all members of their family as their duty and resort to paid assistance for this type of tasks less than white women. “[A study of] Mexican American women caregivers found that both highly acculturated and lower acculturated caregivers felt that caregiving was an integral part of being a good daughter [...]. Women are socialized into the marianismo role beginning in early childhood, which guides normative behaviors of femininity, submission, weakness, reservation, and virginity” (Mendez-Luck / Anthony 2016: 927).

— The fact that until recently both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic were agrarian societies also helped in the promotion and reinforcement of the values and beliefs discussed here. In the case of Puerto Rico, coffee production (under Spanish rule) and sugar plantations (under United States control) were labor-intensive activities. Therefore, large families were used to maximize work capacity. Values that promoted reproduction were well-suited for the economic survival of the family and society (Ortiz-Torres et al.: 864). “In agrarian societies, the transmission of wealth from one generation to the next depended on clear paternal linkages, which in turn relied on women’s virginity until marriage (legal or consensual) and on their fidelity during marriage” (ibid.: 864). The white figures of the Virgin Mary in *The Purge: Unparalleled* suggest the purity and absence of stain—sexual sin—expected of women. But the white color loses its force when the figure is broken or bent. Based on the religious imposition that was part of the colonial project, Mary, the mother of Jesus, becomes a central symbol for the subjugation of women, and the constructed significance results in denying reproductive rights. “Another important component of marianismo is to see the Virgin Mary as their role model. Hence, Latinas must stay pure and asexual until marriage” (Morales / Rojas Pérez: 247).

— Minier’s work is not just an object hanging in an art gallery, it is also a process because the viewer can imagine the artist throwing the statuette to break it and then placing it in one of the six niches that make up the work, in which the eight effigies are located. Likewise, it becomes a process when we think about the steps she had to follow to burn another of the figures in a non-traditional way or to

leave behind the classical teachings about the process of ceramics and the use of the kiln. In this way, she managed to make one of the images bent or become *melted*. The process could be imagined as part of a cleansing or a purge, as its title says. Minier is trying to get rid of the forces that monitor our bodies and seek to eliminate our reproductive rights. She also calls, with the irreverence with which she treats the divine figure, for the destruction of the idea of a specific behavior in women, from inside the very home.

— Marianismo is also an ideology that sustains gender violence and reproduces it, since Latin American women are expected to submit to their partners (Moreno 2007: 343–344), this is one of the palpable sub-

jects in *Facades* [fig. 5] by Daniela Roselló Ledesma. The artwork is an installation composed of six ceramic structures that resemble the front of a traditional urban Puerto Rican home. In all of them there is a balcony and a back skeleton that could be a complete home or just a part of it. The buildings that make up the piece are broken or cracked. In that sense, they also converse with Minier's work. The cracks are complemented by various elements that the artist includes in the piece. The walls and interiors of buildings have silt and lichen on both sides. It grew little by little because Roselló left the sculptures outside her workshop in San Juan and the humid climate of Puerto Rico was not forgiving. However, she decided to accept it as part of the installation (Roselló Ledesma 2022), since it contributes to the content of the work. Thus, the *Facades* are presented as broken or unsafe homes. In Puerto Rico, the precariousness of a dwelling can come from an abstract perspective, such as distrust in the house structure and its protective capacity or in the domestic institution that is exacerbated by the tropical/colonial situation: gender-based violence.<sup>7)</sup> For many women, home is where sexist attacks occur, so even without the physical conditions of a broken or unsafe house, it does not have the capacity to protect us. However, safety is understood as a home's most important objective. If, in addition, we create an analogy between the walls of a house and our skin, the cracks can symbolize punches or pain. The cracks can also be a form of catharsis against this concept of home instability, just as Minier did with the Virgin Marys in *The Purge*...

— The landscape that we observe in *Facades* is quotidian for those of us who live in Puerto Rico. The balconies are similar to those that are part of houses in historic centers of most of the

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Impoverishment due to Puerto Rico's colonial condition has exacerbated patriarchal violence against women because men feel inferior (Delgado 2023) and because women don't have the resources to move from violent homes. These conditions worsen when tropical events, such as hurricanes, occur because there is a lack of stable houses after the events (Tighe / Gurley 2018).



// Figure 5

Daniela Roselló Ledesma, *Facadas* (Facades), 2017, ceramic, © Daniela Roselló Ledesma

cities and towns in the archipelago. In recent decades these homes have become abandoned (Asiedu, et al.). On many occasions, the balcony is built of cement and the rest of the structure is made of wood, and with desertion comes the rotting of the organic construction typical of the tropics; however, the section made of concrete remains. Puerto Rican towns have become a collection of natural gardens behind balconies. With the growth of real estate speculation since 2017 (Bonilla 2018; Suárez et al. 2022), we have observed a lack of housing for the inhabitants of our archipelago (ibid.; Cañizares 2023); historic urban houses nonetheless remain abandoned (Asiedu, et al.). The image that Roselló Ledesma creates with her installation incites mixed aesthetic feelings because we can find them beautiful, and they even provoke nostalgia but make us recognize the insecurity of housing in Puerto Rico.

— Through *Facades*, Roselló explores subjects related to the Puerto Rican tropical/colonial context and how it reveals and is the catalyst for Puerto Rico's real estate instability. The unsafety of the home is related to violence against women but also, in the tropical scenario, is often destroyed by hurricanes. The passage of Hurricane María in 2017 showed evidence of the poverty and the housing and health crisis that has developed in Puerto Rico. Since the implementation of the Fiscal Control Board by U.S. President Barack Obama in June 2016, the habitants of the territory have experienced four catastrophic events that have worsened poverty, caused the death of thousands of people, and deepened the housing crisis: the passage of hurricanes Irma and María in 2017 that left the entire archipelago without electricity (Redacción 2017) and approximately 60,000 homes lost their roofs (McCormick / Schwartz 2018); an earthquake event between December 2019 and February 2020, with its highest point on January 7 (6.4 on the Richter scale) (USGS 2020); the pandemic caused by the global spread of the COVID-19. This led to an increase in digital nomadism (Gil / Baptista 2022) and the number of white people from the United States who moved permanently to Puerto Rico, causing housing prices to rise, and the crossing of Hurricane Fiona in September 2022, which brought more than thirty inches of rain (Tolentino Rosario 2022). The artwork by Daniela Roselló-Ledesma is better understood if it is compared with images of these events in the news and media.

— Even though the destruction is palpable in the work, viewers are also faced with an installation that inspires strength. On the one hand, the firing technique used by the artist creates a texture similar to cement. On the other hand, the houses in the piece evoke the balconies—made with concrete—of traditional urban homes in

Puerto Rico, where the rest of the house—made of wood—has been destroyed. Just as Minier and Roselló's actions of throwing or breaking the pieces of ceramic evoke resistance and questioning the domestic reality of women in Puerto Rico and Latin America, we can also think of a future in which our resistance bears fruit and we achieve a control of the home that responds to our own needs and not to those of capital and patriarchy.

— In the same way, Dhara Rivera reverses the idea of the home as an unstable one to one that becomes a refuge. Since the 1980s, the artist has focused her work on elements of nature, sometimes in relation to the spaces we inhabit by associating organic objects, water, and earth with *habitat*. Her ceramic productions titled *Bulb*, *Organic Garden 3*, and *Buds*, all from 2022, link image and material to create three-dimensional pieces that evoke the garden of a house, which is a space for retreat and pleasure, as well as food—edible or fruit-bearing plants—and care—herbs or other parts of the plant that are healing. Both *Bulb* [fig. 6] and *Organic Garden 3* [fig. 7] are rounded ceramic objects, with indentations and protrusions, similar to a growth or a flower's pistil. They are abstract shapes that may be associated with fantastic vegetation, due to their shape and size, similar to that of a potted plant. Both have perforations: *Organic Garden 3* has two and *Bulb* has more than twenty. From these holes emanates the light of a light bulb that the artist introduced inside each piece. Both rest on two round wooden plates. The ceramic objects are placed on the wood in an asymmetrical manner, imitating biological reality, where the perfection of compositional balance does not exist. *Buds* [fig. 8] has a less abstract form than the previous works and is similar to a succulent *kalanchoe laetivirens* in a pot. The lower part, almost spherical, has light tan tones and the upper part is black. The colors were acquired from the clay with which the piece was created. Likewise, it is supported by two oval wooden plates, without perfection in its circumference or exactness of shape. A series of chains hang from it, providing texture and dissociating the plant-like design from the naturalistic figuration. This detail turns the piece into a contemporary work of art that shows us how the artist uses her garden as a space for reflection. The artist has several specimens of the plant that inspired *Buds* in her garden. It is a species that reproduces easily because its *children* grow on its leaves and are emitted when they have already taken root, allowing them to reach



// Figure 6  
Dhara Rivera, *Bulb*, 2022, stoneware, mahogany, steel, lightbulb, © Dhara Rivera



// Figure 7  
Dhara Rivera, *Organic Garden 3*, 2022, stoneware, underglaze, lightbulb, and electric cable, © Dhara Rivera



// Figure 8  
Dhara Rivera, *Buds*, 2022, stoneware, mahogany, lightbulb, © Dhara Rivera

the ground as small plants. The chains can also be a metaphor for the row of children that the plant leaves, which reminds us of the tasks of domesticity and reproduction.

— Urban gardens have become a feminized place that exists in the liminal territory between: the domestic and the outdoors; personal pleasure and the tasks of reproduction; the coloniality of gender and the resistance associated with witchcraft and non-modern knowledge. Judy Skene analyzes the feminization of the garden and its relationship with women's creativity and resistance to the world that men were creating as modernity developed:

Reading Alice Walker's essay ["In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," 1984] made me question whether gardens, as transitional spaces between the natural world associated with women and domesticity and the cultural world dominated by men, provided for some women a space where they have been able to achieve a blurring of stereotypical gender roles (1996: 18–19).

— For Skene, as we already discussed in this essay, modern Western philosophical thought was structured around a series of binaries: man/woman, mind/body, reason/passion, and culture/nature that "have privileged the masculine and devalued the feminine" (ibid.: 21). For this same reason, anatomy is linked to the domestic space, because it is conceived as part of nature, especially feminine nature, and gender roles associated with care are conceived as a natural element with which women are born and not as matters of upbringing and culture (Federici 2012: 16). With this series of works Dhara Rivera listens to the relationship between the body she inhabits, her organic space, and the vegetative corporeities that live in her garden. She explores the link between accepted gender roles and external or botanical knowledge acquired through practice and transmission of knowledge from mothers to daughters and from grandmothers to granddaughters. However, with the inclusion of artificial elements that are part of technology, such as light bulbs and cables, it links the natural (ceramics and wood) with the artificial, dismantling gender theories that suggest that women are linked to nature, and not to reason. Likewise, the artist associates non-modern knowledge with that of modernity, which can coexist.

— As Dhara Rivera's work uses earth and its products, both as material and inspiration to speak about the domestic and sustenance, Alice Chéveres obtains the raw materials for her ceramic

creations from her home surroundings. The latter makes a historical recovery of the work of the people who populated the islands of Borikén and Ayití-Kiskeya before the European invasion, reclaiming, also, the history of the aesthetic productions of the women of these territories. Chéveres uses traditional techniques—clay taken from her backyard, shaped and fired in a campfire—to create objects that straddle the line



// Figure 9

Alice Chéveres, *The Artisan's Soul*, 2019, bonfire-fired ceramic, © Alice Chéveres

between the ceremonial and the useful. Although in our context most of the works created by Chéveres are used as decorative pieces, the utensils reflect an inspiration in the Taíno forms that arose from the extraction of the spirit (Oliver 2009: 53–54) that was contained in the object itself. Most of the works produced by the artist are kitchen utensils such as pots, bowls, or plates, but some look similar to a *cemi* or other sculptures used in different rituals, especially that of the cohoba.

— *The Artisan's Soul* (2019) [fig. 9] presents a fantastic scene inspired by Taíno stories. It is a type of glass or bowl surrounded by two anthropomorphic figures. They could also be interpreted as two figures surrounding an abyss, which forms the container. The artwork is not so directly related in form to the archaeological finds of Taíno ceramics in the archipelago of the Greater Antilles as other pieces by Chéveres, but it helps us understand how, from the languages of the original populations of the Caribbean, a contemporary work can be derived. The piece approaches the decolonial by proposing new ways of looking at and studying the non-modern culture of Taíno women and how their knowledge has not only survived to this day, but also inspires current proposals in the face of our realities as women who resist coloniality.

— The rest of Alice Chéveres' production should be analyzed in a contemporary, non-modern/modern context to promote the inclusion of everyday objects made to be used in the domestic sphere in the contemporary art discourse. Pots, cups, vases, and other useful pieces made by this, and other artists, link the feminized ceramic tradition with the anthropological performativity of service tasks in the home. The reason for this perfect coupling of Alice Chéveres' oeuvre with the theoretical precepts of this essay is that the first is always related to the need for survival, care, and feminized roles, whether at a time before or after the development of the modern/colonial gender system. Her works, *The Emergence of the Soul* and *The Rest of the Spirit*, both from 2022, reflect the artist's recent production which relates spiritual expression and domestic shores.

— The three works are bowls in which zoomorphic heads or bodies can be seen surrounding the hole that makes the object useful. *The Emergence of the Soul* [fig. 10] presents a prominent face that resembles an animal head associated with an amphibian or a reptile. However, on both sides of the head we see the skeleton of wings similar to those of a bat. Reptiles, amphibians, and bats were constantly represented in Taíno ceramics, usually fused together to build fantastic figures that reflected the supernatural or the invisible (García Arévalo 2019: 161). The figure is between life and death, since we can imagine it as a live bat whose bones are visible through the skin, or a dead fantastic animal. For Taíno mythology, the representation of the liminal space between life and death was important for communication with ancestors and “the afterlife” (ibid.: 143). Finally, in *The Rest of the Spirit* [fig. 11], two heads surround the vessel, each one on either side, looking upward. Like the head in *The Emergence of the Soul*, these are somewhere between a human head, an animal head, and a skeleton. On the upper edges of the plate, we can see geometric and linear designs created through incisions very similar to the Capá (García Goyco 2021: 360) Taíno style. By producing traditional ceramic objects, also manufactured by all settled cultures, but in this case with specific elements that refer viewers to the history of Borikén art, the artist retakes the history of women in Puerto Rico as creators and caregivers.

— We have seen how, for all the works analyzed in this essay, form is linked to the content by associating domestic shores with the task of creating the artwork. We saw that both the pieces by Elizabeth Robles and Andrea Pérez Caballero relate the staticity of ceramics with action to provoke dialogues about the daily work done with the body: sexual relations, cleaning, and feeding. By breaking and melting their ceramic creations, Daniela Roselló and Zuania Minier tell us about the domestic space as one in which the tasks of sustenance are reproduced, and as a place of instability and surveillance. The works of Dhara Rivera and Alice Chéveres rescue the non-modern knowledge of creation and botany of contemporary women in relation to our historical ancestors. In their pieces, the interest in the tasks essential for human survival is palpable, which, in the modern case, have been used for the reproduction of capital and, in the non-modern case, serve a purely human need.



// Figure 10  
Alice Chéveres, *The Emergence of the Soul*, 2022, bonfire-fired ceramic, © Alice Chéveres



// Figure 11  
Alice Chéveres, *The Rest of the Spirit*, 2022, bonfire-fired ceramic, © Alice Chéveres

— Also present in the set of works is the analysis of the habitable space—body/home—as a feminist place, which is the scene of oppression and violence (associated with gender), but also a framework of creation, dispersion, and conspiracy, where women can have our own place from which to speak, communicate and create community. All the works explore ideas associated with women as a home, as caregivers, but also as beings who need and desire, all linked to the concept of sustenance and the fulfillment of human demands. The art pieces analyzed in this essay make us wonder where we want to direct our—constant—work as women and how we can feel complete, finally breaking the neoliberal barriers of individualistic domestic work that locks us in and isolates us without a salary for our labor.

— Ceramics as a medium is essential in all the works discussed. In Zuania Minier's piece, for example, the melting of the final figure is caused by high temperatures in the kiln, just as the shattering of another of the figures was possible with this particular material. In the case of Andrea Pérez, kneading the clay is what makes her performance a domestic one, evoking the idea of production. We have seen how ceramics (clay) is also a medium that alludes to the subjects explored in the artworks discussed here, since this is where food comes from, just as milk for breastfeeding comes from our bodies. Likewise, it is a medium that has been associated with women and with the original creation of humanity in various mythologies around the world and throughout history.

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