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Public Displays of Affection

Karen Miranda Augustine



Figure 1 Karen Miranda Augustine, Street Post: Church & Isabella, 2020, mixed media, acetate, beadwork, ink, sequins, and collage on wood, 25 × 17 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Public Displays of Affection (PDA) is a multimedia project on makeshift, spontaneous, and unconventional memorials randomly encountered throughout Toronto, Ontario (Canada). Small-scale, personal, and ad hoc in nature, each documents the passing of marginalized and lesser-known individuals.

Found in random spaces of civic sprawl, these sites were documented between 2019 and 2022 in public housing, alleyways, sidewalks, storefronts, parking lots, bridges, parks, street poles, and apartment lobbies.

If we are all interconnected, death, loss, and grief are obvious equalizers. These ad hoc memorials, disengaged from commerce or the need for social likes, often yield beautiful, community-minded, radical expressions of love.

The Inspiration

Several years ago, I saw a modest memorial taped to the wall of the southbound platform of Dupont subway station. It was a single rose with a short, handwritten statement on loose-leaf affixed above about the person who presumably took their life.

I was moved by its humble simplicity: isolated and alone, unexpected and out of place.

I wondered then how many passersby took notice of it, learned that someone special had experienced their last moments at that very spot, or related to the deep mourning of the person left behind who loved and missed someone so much that they marked the sacredness of that space.

The Process

My creative projects ride on the confluence of pop culture, spirituality, and the underground.

I create two-dimensional, mixed-media art out of found materials, beadwork, embroidery, and paint in a way that could be loosely described as low-relief assemblage. All are centered on a degraded photograph—usually stencil, photocopy, image transfer, or découpage—as it is in the raw, primitive imprint of my subject where I find the most interest.



Figure 2 Karen Miranda Augustine, Alleyway: College & Huron, 2020, mixed media, acetate, beadwork, and ink on wood, 26 × 17 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Memorialization is a repetitive theme in my art projects, which often include some aspect of participation from strangers and friends, as are the broader (and often misunderstood) life experiences of women and girls.

I am interested in the ways that shared experiences bind us.

I am inspired by the philosophy and visual vocabulary of traditional sacred arts of the African diaspora, especially in Haiti and in West and South Africa.

Often, I use beadwork, as well as elements of Haitian *drapo*—the sequins that many *vodouisants*¹ believe to represent “*pwens*, divine sparks where the human and divine intersect”²—a belief that succinctly explained the transcendent experiences I would have at night. Because of this, sequins hold deep, personal relevance and remain a constant within my practice.

Whether filtered through media stories, my personal life, mythology, or casual observation, I like to dig into the backstories of my subjects and connect



Figure 3 Karen Miranda Augustine, Streetlight Pole: Dufferin & Sylvan, 2021, mixed media, acetate, ink, oil stick, and rhinestones on wood, 24 × 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

that to the Spirit realm—to that in-between place where our earthly conditions converge with that of the Unseen.

For these reasons, I classify my work as ritualistic pop art.

The Project

Currently in progress, *PDA* has two streams. The first is a set of bead- and sequin-embellished mixed-media paintings composed of photo transfers, ink, and paint, mounted on construction hoarding and wood panels.

The second is a video projection with an improvised score. Created in collaboration with the composer Stefan Hegerat, the five-minute short is a meditative collection of source photos that fade in and out of each site to a rhythmic soundtrack that is equal parts grief and joy, presented against a groovy, lush, synth-pop backdrop.

Public Displays of Affection is a meditation on what we can discover about these personal acts of sacred-space marking, grief, ancestralization, legacies, and the dignity of strangers.



Figure 4 Karen Miranda Augustine, Security Grille: Dundas & Ossington, 2021, mixed media, acetate, ink, and sequins on wood, 19.75 × 29 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5 Karen Miranda Augustine, Storefront: Dundas & Sherbourne, 2020, mixed media, acetate, beadwork, ink, oil sticks, sequins, collage, and marker on wood, 17 × 25 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6 Karen Miranda Augustine, Streetlight Pole: Dundas West & Bloor, 2020, mixed media, acetate, beadwork, ink, sequins, wax, and collage on wood, 26 × 17 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7 Karen Miranda Augustine, Construction Hoarding: Kensington Market, 2021, mixed media, acetate, sequins, beads, oil sticks, wax, and ink on wood, 29 × 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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Karen Miranda Augustine is a Canadian mixed-media artist whose works have been exhibited in Canada, the US, Scotland, and Haiti. She has been published and cited in various books and publications, including *Caribbean InTransit Arts Journal*, *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts* (Cleis Press), *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (Columbia University Press), and *Ghetto Biennale / Geto Byenal: 2009–2015* (Central Books). She holds an MA in interdisciplinary studies from York University and is an emerging death and grief worker.

Notes

¹ Vodouisants: practitioners of Vodou.

² Kenaz Filan, *The Haitian Vodou Handbook: Protocols for Riding with the Lwa* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).