

I Feel, Therefore I Can Be Free: Musing on the Art as a Tool
for Change Project, by Curator Bushra Junaid

Through my work as an artist-curator I'm interested in ideas of visibility and invisibility/erasure, longing, and belonging, being betwixt and between, claiming and creating a home or place for oneself.

I see in the work of the three women artists from diverse backgrounds, cultures, traditions, and geographies involved in the Art as a Tool for Change Project (Violet Drake, Ethel Brown, and Nasim Makaremi Nia) the ways in which our preoccupations are aligned.

Violet

I imagine Violet as a young teenager in her small, rural community of Lawn on the tip of the Burin Peninsula on the south coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, a hardworking fishing outpost centred around traditions of music, folklore, food, kinship, and mutual support. I imagine her listening to pop divas like Madonna, Christina Aguilera and Lady Gaga and looking to them or for other role models with whom to identify. I see her exploring questions of identity and burgeoning feelings about the non-binary, queer, trans person she was becoming.

Through her poetry, writing, reading of science fiction and horror cinema, experimentation with digital painting, manipulation, and distortion of stock and self-generated images she is dreaming of a world in which non-binary

queer, trans and disabled people are whole, powerful and celebrated.

Violet reminds me of:

The necessity to find one's voice, determine what one wants to say, and to unapologetically, as Audre Lorde said, "speak the truth as [we] see it..."

The importance of building and maintaining a supportive and nurturing community of care and mutual respect around oneself as, to quote Lorde once again, "without community, there is no liberation."

The value in enriching one's practice by finding critical or theoretical underpinnings or frameworks for one's ideas and experiences through reading and scholarship and by

being in conversation through one's work with artists and thinkers with similar perspectives.

The importance of building as she says, "alternative maps of meaning" for one's experiences to counter "scripts of injustice, extraction and anthropocentrism."

Ethel

Ethel is photographed at five or six years old in her small, rural, inland community of Dumalag in the Philippine province of Capiz. Dumalag has hot, overcast summers and warm, windy, cloudy winters. It is unpleasantly hot, humid and wet year-round. Ethel grew up near a mountain and a river. Her family didn't own a camera so there are only a handful of images from her childhood of weddings, funerals and end-of-the-school-year photos of a job well

done. She moved to St. John's with her family at the age of 15 to live with her sister and family.

I imagine her becoming familiar with a new climate, geography, culture, and language at an impressionable age, and entering the wolves' den of high school. A sensitive individual, her visual acuity was heightened by the stark difference in environments. The gravitational pull toward photography was influenced by her newfound position as an "alien" observer and the paucity of images in her family archive.

A camera eventually landed in her hands allowing her to document skaters, bands, and other subjects of interest to her as an adolescent. She also got involved in a youth-led network that raised her consciousness around social

justice issues such as sexism, ageism, racism, homophobia, cultural diversity, the environment, and community development.

Experimentation with film and digital photography, different types of cameras and an interest in documenting landscapes, people and the everyday, light, reflections, details, and focus have characterized her practice.

She has become the documentarian of a personal archive of family life and the environment that reveals her visual sensibility and authenticity, allows her to tell her own story and will leave her daughters a rich legacy.

Screen printed diptych photographs combining image and text, striving for a balance between the two and to honour

both mediums and processes, explore ideas of identity, belonging, home and liminality.

Ethel reminds me that:

Memory, longing, and feelings of not belonging are universal.

One has a right to reject others' labels, define oneself and assert where one calls home. As Lorde wrote, "If I [don't] define myself, I [will] be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."

Documenting one's everyday experiences and developing a personal archive helps one make meaning and is an act of resistance.

Nasim

As a solid-state physicist, Nasim is interested in the way matter and the universe is constructed. Developing a drawing and painting practice and incorporating embroidery and techniques largely reserved for women allows her to explore their humanity, lives, and emotions visually.

She draws inspiration from the famous and storied carpet weaving traditions of her ancient hometown Ardabil, in northwestern Iran, which date back to the sixteenth century, and the role of women in crafting them.

The significance of the dome in Persian architecture as a representation of perfection and the heavens is another source of inspiration. The abstract, geometric sculptures, paintings and drawings of the late Iranian artist Monir

Shahroudy Farmanfarmanian have influenced her interest in and experimentation with cut mirrors.

She elevates and highlights feminine hygiene products, hand stitching them with colourful embroidery threads, referencing traditional carpet designs and commenting on how a normal bodily function like menstruation is perceived in some cultures and societies.

Nasim reminds me of:

The degree to which women's lives are circumscribed by gender discrimination, censorship, and taboos depends on where they find themselves.

The breath of fresh air that newcomers bring and the contributions they make to the places they choose or are forced to make home.

I am grateful to Violet, Ethel and Nasim for their willingness to be vulnerable, curious and bring their authentic selves to the project.

Together they remind us to:

Honour diverse perspectives, knowledge, and ways of being,

Build relationships based on mutual respect, genuine interest, and curiosity,

Learn through and from mentorship, artists, writers and cultural workers from one's own or other equity-deserving communities,

Share our stories through continued experimentation, development, and refinement of our skills, use of materials, methods and techniques.

Lorde, Audre. 1984. "Poetry is Not a Luxury," "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", "Learning from the 60s." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press.