

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

Redefining Anthropology as a Site of Creativity

Artist Maya Stovall questions the altruistic intentions of anthropology while also attempting to redefine the discipline as a site of creativity and community empowerment.

Rosa Boshier March 10, 2022



Maya Stovall, *Theorem, no. 1* (2019). A public performance commission of Fort Mason Center, San Francisco (photo by Charlie Villyard, courtesy the artist; Reyes | Finn, Detroit; and Parrasch Heijnen, Los Angeles)

HOUSTON — “I have to prepare my children for the city that’s coming,” maintains one of the subjects of Maya Stovall’s video *Liquor Store Theatre* (2017). The powerful words resonate

in Stovall's exhibition *Razón/Reason* at the Blaffer Art Museum in the Houston, Texas, a city that is also rapidly changing, bringing with it as much loss as possibility. According to the *Houston Chronicle* the Third Ward, which was the center of the Civil Rights movement in Houston in the 1960s, has seen its Black population drop 15 percent while white residents in the area have risen 170 percent within the last decade. Predominantly Latinx neighborhood the Second Ward has seen its Latinx population drop by 25 percent.

The subjects of *Liquor Store Theatre*, who Stovall encounters in front of liquor stores in the McDougall-Hunt neighborhood of Detroit, all have various takes on their city. Shot between scenes of Stovall's signature sparse and sunglass-clad choreography in front of these community hubs, these Detroiters' opinions of their city range from the romantic to the rigorously intellectual, from the optimistic to the staunchly skeptical of the city's changes. While some willingly share their philosophies on life and the nature of creative kinship (one man wears a hat made of mirrors, which he uses as a conversation starter), others challenge Stovall on her practice. When one subject accuses Stovall of summing up the city in 20 minutes, she is quick to clarify her intentions around this documentation of her hometown. An assistant professor of Liberal Studies at Cal Poly Pomona, she recently released a book through Duke University Press called *Liquor Store Theatre*, which addresses sides of Detroit often overlooked by the outside world.



Installation view of *Maya Stovall: Razón/Reason* at Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston (courtesy Blaffer Art Museum, photo by Francisco Ramos)

The main room of Stovall's exhibition is a small space, yet it is filled with multiple cities — videos of Detroit, Michigan; Aarhus, Denmark; and San Francisco, California. These videos use dance as an anthropological intervention to collect or challenge data about a city while also resisting the field of anthropology's tropes. For Stovall dance is a means of disruption — taking place in unconventional spaces — as well as exchange, engaging onlookers who ask her questions. Behind the camera, she is curious. In front of it, dancing, she is stoic, isolated. She makes herself a commanding and fixed part of the environment.

Stovall approaches dance as a kind of mapping, rendering new perspectives of these cities, offering portals into their pasts and futures by gathering opinions and documenting local history

through verbal exchange. Her work also illuminates the contrast between what a place currently is and what it has been in the past. In her *Alta Park* video series (2019), set in the ever-gentrifying Bay Area, her subjectivity as a woman of color artist is accentuated as she dances alone on the top of Alta Plaza Park.

At first glance, Stovall's intention with these videos seems to be to create unbiased accounts through the direct documentation of anecdotes from the people she talks to. However, the artist also cultivates an awareness that the practice of anthropology is not neutral. Here, Stovall uses anthropology as a device to further her creative vision.



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Razón/Reason's curation reflects the dialogue Stovall establishes between art and academia, a sense of a bond that builds as the work develops. On the museum's upper level, a series of three videos focus on communities and conversation, the latter prompted by the artist's public dance performances. In an adjoining hallway, a recording of a Zoom conference between Stovall and University of Houston MFA students and faculty, which she organized while an artist-in-residence at the university, brings viewers back into the academic realm. The conference positions her practice as the subject of scholarly study, reversing the dynamic of the videos, in which the artist is the researcher.

Downstairs, Stovall's *Neon Theatre* series starkly contrasts the movement and dialogues that characterize her videos. Gold-tinted neon signs of specific dates memorialize historical events that highlight human achievements and atrocities. The minimalist signs direct attention to moments in history when humans have either reached toward or away from each other in remarkable ways — for instance, the year 1970 commemorates the founding of La Raza Unida party. For this iteration of the *Neon Theatre* series, Stovall worked with a group of interdisciplinary UH students and 375 Houston community members to select dates that reflect and shaped Houston and South Texas history.

Despite the creativity of the work, the dense and systematic curation — rooms separated by video, conference, and installation — makes for an exhibition that skews more academic than exploratory. Likewise, the exhibition pamphlet reads like a master's thesis, a justification for or defense of the work rather than a compliment to it.



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Much like its name, *Razón/Reason* creates an interplay between interpretation and translation, how a place is perceived from the outside as opposed to how it is felt and seen by those who live within it. The exhibition questions the altruistic intentions of anthropology while also attempting to redefine the discipline as a site of creativity and community empowerment. However, this noble and nuanced intention gets lost in the at-times pedantic presentation of the works, which has the potential to alienate viewers. Nonetheless, the exhibition posits potent questions about belonging, history, and study that will connect with many long-time Houstonians, who have seen a sweep of developers displacing communities of color in historically Black and Latinx areas such as the First, Second, and Fifth Wards in order to embrace “urban renewal.” *Razón/Reason* will undoubtedly

parrasch heijnen

resonate in a city that understands the implications of displacement and erasure all too well.

Maya Stovall: Razón/Reason continues at the Blaffer Art Museum (120 Fine Arts Building, University of Houston, Houston, Texas) through March 13. The exhibition was co-organized by Steven Matijcio, Jane Dale Owen Director and Chief Curator; and Melissa Noble, Mitchell Center Managing Director.