

BETELHEM MAKONNEN & STEPHANIE CONCEPCION RAMIREZ

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*THE MEANING WEVERS*



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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## THE MEANING WAVERS

“History is prayer,” writes Betelhem Makonnen in her book, *conjugating History* (2019), she continues, “History is stories with fixed points of view, repeated and practiced till rote.” In the two-person exhibition, *the meaning wavers*, lens-based artists Makonnen and Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez weigh the legibility of documents and institutional frameworks in the histories of displaced people.

In the entryway of the gallery, *untitled (on closer inspection, nothing lines up)* (2019) features Makonnen’s first Ethiopian passport, issued to her in 1982 by the Marxist-Leninist government established by the Derg, a communist regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1987, after overthrowing Emperor Haile Selassie and starting a civil war. Passports as early biometrics are a part of “epidermal thinking” in summarizing the self. It “reduce[s] flesh to pure information” where parts of the human body are digitized for automation, identification, and verification purposes.[1][2][3] As a marker of certification, the passport photo begets a type of authenticity that is constructed by larger national bodies. Instead of playing into

technological methodologies of reduction, Makonnen cleverly moves to take the passport photograph, as a constructed image of “accuracy,” and demonstrate its fallacy. She enlarges the passport photo into a vinyl print as an advertisement of the self and makes use of the material’s banality tied to commercial production. She also considers the technological gaze; from far away the image retains its clarity and upon closer inspection, it is quite pixelated. This facet of imperceptibility is an apt metaphor for immigrant histories’ where the meaning *always* wavers – depending where we are and how our stories are told.

The photograph does not encapsulate the changes that occur with time; when people leave so do the memories of the places they felt attached to. The immensurability of photography is attested by Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez through the color #A07958 *molasses* (2019), that covers the gallery walls. Ramirez came to this color by averaging the skin-tones of thirty-six figures from photographs in her family archive, printing the color and attaining a color-matched paint. It is due to the oral culture of storytelling between families that generational stories are passed down, however, with displaced people, a continuous void exists. Ramirez honors the bonds that tied her El Salvadoran kin and distant community together by visualizing their presence through a shared color – a sustained presence.

The individuals represented by the color #A07958 *molasses* (2019) are all found in Ramirez’s *vibraciones de temblores* (2019) installation. Through hand-stitching emergency blankets, known as “refugee blankets,” Ramirez created a type of enclosure in the center of the gallery. Using a photo transfer process, Ramirez painstakingly rubbed various photographs that were sent to

her mother from her great-aunt during the civil war in the 1980s into the metallic panels. Below, on the gallery floor, Ramirez has inscribed a story that concerns the fissures of severed familial relationships and addresses her mother’s role in amending those connections in the afterlife. Working through intergenerational trauma and understanding familial stories are central aspects to Ramirez’s photo transfer process. As images crackle, fracture, and take shape through the installation, Ramirez states, “in order to heal from these things we have to first acknowledge there is something to heal from.”[4] The title, *vibraciones de temblores* meaning “vibration of tremors” conjoins the landscape of El Salvador, a country that has over twenty volcanoes, with the undercurrent of trauma incurred by immigrant families. Ramirez explains that navigating familial research is akin to being on the “verge of eruption” as it involves discussing triggering subject matter. Ramirez strikes at a commonality of familial strife that is as much a part of migration as are stories of love, and ones that honor our lineage. The edges of the emergency blankets were hand-sewed by Ramirez to pay homage to her mother’s life-long seamstress practice, a skill her mother learned and taught in El Salvador and that provides her financial sustenance in Maryland. Her mother’s grit and tenacity is passed down from one generation to the next. In Ramirez’s video, *Preludes* (2019), Ramirez collapses time by cross-referencing her mother’s sewing practice and bringing the wooden logs found in her mother’s backyard in Maryland into the gallery. Her installation, *Untitled I-III* features stacks of firewood, embedded with illuminated resin-covered photo transfers of Ramirez’s transnational family as well as “memories (review, revisits, reexamination, second guesses, edited histories).” Ramirez calls attention to the



Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez, *Untitled III*, (detail), 2019, resin, LED lights, photo transfers, emergency blankets elevated by memories and firewood (review, revisits, reexamination, second guesses, edited histories), 32” x 24” x 28”

vulnerability required to produce the work and boldly highlights the familial toll of immigration.

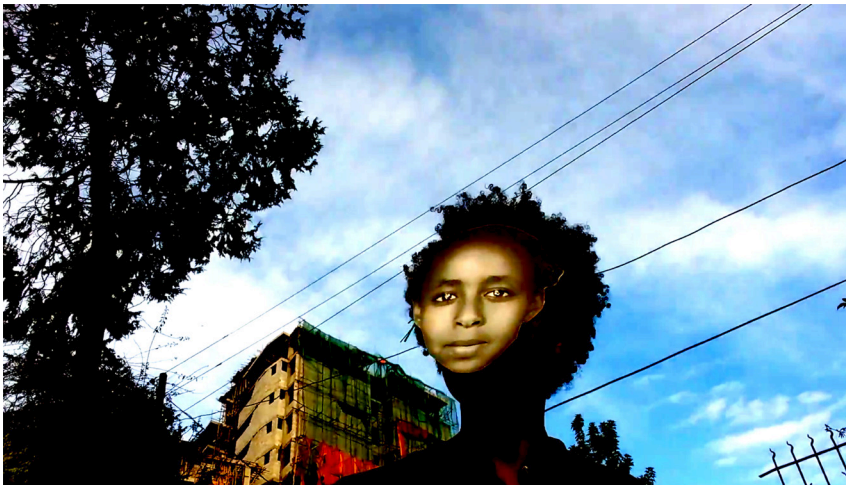
The process of transferring a photograph to a new surface creates a rippling, weathered effect and serves as a metaphor of incommunicability; that often immigrant stories cannot be transmitted from one generation to another due to erasure and intergenerational trauma. Ramirez and Makonnen's experience share the devastation experienced by immigrants due to Marxist revolutions. Ramirez's mother left El Salvador in 1976 leading up to the impending civil war by the Revolutionary Government Junta (RPJ) headed by José Napoleón Duarte Fuentes. Duarte was propped up by the U.S. as a symbol for "anti-communist" resistance in Central America.[5] The war consisted of many human rights violations and caused families, like Ramirez's mother, to flee. Due to continued practices of U.S. intervention and low refugee acceptance rates, as of April

22, 2019, more than fifty percent of migrants are Central American refugees.[6] Ramirez was drawn to the urgency of using emergency blankets in her work, as she associates them with the thousands of people who are wrongfully incarcerated and sentenced to die by ICE.[1]

Makonnen and Ramirez, as women of color, are in control of which parts of their histories they allow the public to view. Often women of color's narratives undergo a type of compartmentalization that flatten complex narratives. Makonnen and Ramirez resist reductionism of immigrant histories and instead pivot to consider the incommensurability of knowledge referring to gaps and distances between memories and official records. Makonnen's photo-based installation, *Studio portraits of mother and daughter (February 1974 / የካቲት ፲፱፻፺፯, Yekatit 1966, E.C. and June 1982 / ሰኔ ፲፱፻፺፬, Sene 1974, E.C.), eve of revolution / eve of separation*, features the studio portrait of Makonnen's mother while pregnant with Makonnen's little

brother, taken during the beginning of the Derg's communist revolution, with gunfire, explosion and masses in the street. In the installation, Makonnen obscured her mother's face in a gesture of protection like the one conducted on her as a child, where her mother or grandmother would adorn her with something reflective or distracting such as a red pin, bracelet or scarf to ward off the evil eye. Makonnen mirrors this protective gesture for her mother's portrait, in a gesture of protection and activating a "right to opacity," echoing a demand by Martinique Caribbean-Francophone theorist, Édouard Glissant, who stated that "[those] which have historically been constructed as the Other — can and should be allowed to be opaque, to not be completely understood, and to simply exist as different." [7] Across from Makonnen's mother is a portrait of Makonnen as a child, taken in 1982 where she wears a traditional dress with design specific to her mother's Welo region in northeast Ethiopia. In the gallery, the image of Makonnen's younger self is projected on multiple stacked pieces of drywall, descending in size toward the viewer. The architectural layering of the drywall combined with the projection accentuates the displacement of both time and space, as the image of Makonnen was captured moments before she left Ethiopia. These two portraits gaze at one another, visualizing the distance between a mother and her daughter and conceptualizing the cost of forced diaspora. The loss is incommensurable. Makonnen lists "Time and distance" as part of her materials list and Ramirez lists "(guilt, constant negotiation, doubt, fear, audacity, versions of history)" in her *vibraciones de temblores* installation.

Migration histories cannot be measured by only time or memory; relationships and places warp beyond the frame of a photo. Ramirez and Makonnen refer to the inadequacy of



Betlehem Makonnen, *change means revolution in Amharic (person, place and thing)*, 2019, two channel video with stereo sound, 5 minutes and 36 seconds





Betelhem Makonnen, *Studio Portraits of mother and daughter (February 1974 / የካቲት ፲፱፻፷፮, Yekatit 1966, E.C. and June 1982 / ሰኔ ፲፱፻፸፬, Sene 1974, E.C.), eve of revolution / eve of separation*, 2019, installation with printed photo vinyl mounted to wall, original photograph scaled to dimensions of the site, reflective vinyl, drywall, projection, time and distance, dimensions variable

Cover Panel: (left) Betelhem Makonnen, *untitled (on closer inspection, nothing lines up)*, 2019, digital print on adhesive wall vinyl and (right) Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez, *Preludes*, (still image), 2019, single channel 1080p video with sound, 4 minutes and 44 seconds



Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez, *por amor*, 2019, single channel 1080p video with sound, 1 minute and 34 seconds

documents as their limits are assigned by external factors: approximations of biometrics denoted as “official” identity by the state, archived “official” histories in dialogue with familial histories. Makonnen enlarges personal photos such as the studio portraits of herself and her mother that document the very moment that their realities were “on the eve of planetary change.”[8] The “authoritative” passport photo is rendered as commercial vinyl to show the incongruity of pixels as illegible history. Ramirez, through the color “molasses,” materializes the absence of familial histories as they are remade and unmade by immigration. She uses the photo as a document that outlines the fissures in her familial history through the photo transfer process on emergency blankets and pays homage to her mother’s sewing prowess. Makonnen and Ramirez create relational frameworks for understanding their family’s pasts and in turn, themselves in the present. Immigration refashions families permanently; the lens reveals as much as it conceals.

Hiba Ali is a new media artist, educator, writer, scholar, DJ, experimental music producer and curator based across Chicago, IL, Austin, TX, and Toronto, ON.

[1] Browne, Simone. “Dark Matter: On the Surveillance of Blackness.” Duke University Press. 2015.

[2] Eds. Salter, Mark B., Bennett, Colin J. “Unsafe at Any Altitude: The Comparative Politics of No Fly Lists in the United States and Canada.” Politics at the Airport. University of Minnesota Press, 66. 2008.

[3] Gray, Herman. “Cultural Moves African Americans and the Politics of Representation.” University of California Press. 2005.

[4] Ramirez, Stephanie Concepcion. Email Interview by Hiba Ali. December 15, 2019.

[5] Chomsky, Noam (1985). “Turning the Tide.” Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press. 1985.

[6] Guttentag, Lucas. “Crisis at the Border? An Update on Immigration Policy with Stanford’s Lucas Guttentag.” Stanford Law School. April 22, 2019.

[7] Glissant, Édouard. “Poetics of Relation.” Trans. Wing, Betsy. University of Michigan. 1997.

[8] Makonnen, Betelhem. Email Interview by Hiba Ali. December 15, 2019.

## BETELHEM MAKONNEN

A native of Ethiopia, Betelhem Makonnen currently lives in Austin, Texas. She received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; completed graduate coursework at the School of Visual Arts of Parque Lage, Rio de Janeiro; and holds a BA in History and Literature of the African Diaspora from The University of Texas at Austin. Working with video, photography and installation, Makonnen questions perception, presence and place as they relate to her diasporic consciousness. Makonnen is also a curator at Fusebox Festival and co-founder of the Black Mountain Project art collaborative.

## STEPHANIE CONCEPCION RAMIREZ

Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez is a Salvadoran-American artist from Prince George’s County, Maryland. She received her MFA at The University of Texas at Austin and her BFA at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. Ramirez currently works and lives in League City, Texas. Ramirez’ practice combines the language of photography with site-specific installations and text. Her work is based on notions of memory and the personal and historical amnesia that trace the veins of the Central American diaspora.



Betelhem Makonnen, *untitled (on closer inspection, nothing lines up)*, 2019, digital print on adhesive wall vinyl





Foreground: Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez, *vibraciones de temblores*, 2019, installation with photo transfers, emergency blankets, thread, monofilament, upholstery fabric, (guilt, constant negotiation, doubt, fear, audacity, versions of history), LED lights, handwritten short story and the presence of the absence of thirty-six histories in #A07958 “molasses” flat latex paint, dimensions variable

Background: Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez, *Preludes*, 2019, single channel 1080p video with sound, 4 minutes and 44 seconds

## WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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Women & Their Work is a visual and performing arts organization located in Austin that serves as a catalyst for new ideas in contemporary art. For over 40 years, Women & Their Work has brought groundbreaking art created by women to Austin with exhibitions, performances and education workshops. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented over 1,900 artists in 325 visual art exhibitions, 155 music, dance and theater events, 16 film festivals, 30 literary readings and spoken word performances, and 707 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *ArtForum*, and on *National Public Radio* and was the first organization in

Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 850 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



1710 Lavaca St.  
 Austin, Texas 78701  
 (512) 477-1064  
[info@womenandtheirwork.org](mailto:info@womenandtheirwork.org)  
[www.womenandtheirwork.org](http://www.womenandtheirwork.org)



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