

Retracing the Past Back to the Now

At *Women & Their Work*, an exhibition by Betelhem Makonnen and Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez is a firsthand account of emotions more than events, feelings more than facts



Detail of 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 "molasses", 2019. Image courtesy Women & Their Work Photo: Ariel René Jackson

By **Barbara Purcell** - December 7, 2019

In “the meaning wavers,” on view now at *Women & Their Work*, artists Betelhem Makonnen and Stephanie Concepcion Ramirez piece together their pasts in order to form new perspectives in the present.

Makonnen, [a native of Ethiopia based in Austin](#), and Ramirez, [a Salvadorian-American in Texas](#) originally from Maryland, dive deep into their cognitive scrapbooks with these 10 installations, creating an immersive memoir which blends transparency with opacity (starting with the show’s title).

With its lowercase wording and double entendre, “the meaning wavers” immediately subverts the notion that there’s a single, dominant truth to a story — especially one’s own story.

“If you put an ‘i’ in the word waver, you’ve waived your right to that authority,” says Makonnen, who, along with Ramirez, seems more interested in reexamining historical records than simply archiving them.

[Women & Their Work's](#) Rachel Stuckey was keen on connecting Makonnen and Ramirez; though they had taken part in an exhibition together at Austin's MASS Gallery last year, the two artists weren't well acquainted.

"Rachel believed there was a very strong conversation between our practices," Makonnen tells me. "It was amazing once we started talking: the efficiency of communication, the parallel experiences, the ability to see each other in the dark."

Through a series of phone calls which were "very vulnerable and very personal," the two women deepened that conversation — one, an immigrant, the other, a child of an immigrant, discussing experiences of displacement, disconnect, existing between two points. Near-identical revelations emerged despite their differences in age, culture, and background, which only reinforced the surprising ways in which they discovered they were already connected.



Still from Betelhem Makonnen's "change means revolution in Amharic (person, place and thing)," 2019. Two channel video with stereo sound, 5 minutes 36 seconds. Photo: Ariel René Jackson

Nothing is perfectly pronounced or clear in these portraits. Foreign voices and faceless family members from another time and place remain protected and preserved in the past. Recent recorded conversations in the artists' mother tongue (or mother's mother tongue) establish distance and closeness all at once. Even a mournful rendition of John Denver's "Country Roads, Take Me Home" whistles across a desolate wind which sounds as if it's blowing in from another dimension way beyond the gallery walls.

If this all sounds elusive, that's because it is; "the meaning wavers" is a firsthand account of emotions more than events, feelings more than facts. Faded photographs and silhouettes of sound inhabit the dimly lit space, shedding light (and dark) on what is both personal and universal, abstract and figural, real and intangible, when it comes to memory, family, and identity.

The exhibition begins with an imposing image of Makonnen's old Ethiopian passport practically bulging from the wall, a black-and-white photograph of her as a young student affixed to its sepia page. A magnifying glass is held in place on the document by Makonnen's now-grown fingers. The glass fails to hone in on any of its details and stops just short of her adolescent face, sparing the government-issued version of herself from further scrutiny. Though the 2019 work is untitled, in parentheses it reads: *on closer inspection nothing lines up*.

Ramirez's video "por amor" (2019) shows the artist crouching in a field of exceptionally green grass, vigorously scrubbing her hands—washing her hands of soil, with soil. A conversation in Spanish pipes through the attached headphones, with a single question in English lighting up the audio: *She is a neighbor?* An older female voice enthusiastically responds: *Si, si!* All the while, Ramirez continues to clean her hands in the video, seemingly detached from her dialogue in the audio.



Installation view of "the meaning waivers" at Women & Their Work. Photo: Ariel René Jackson

Though film and photography make up most of these installations, there is something abstract and mysterious about the work as a whole. Why would film footage of Makonnen wearing a mask of her own face as a child, for instance, seem more elusive than a blown-up photograph of her mother from many years ago, with her face completely cut out? Or Ramirez's text about tragedy and estrangement, written as a single strand on the floor, semi-concealed by her own installation, feel like a family secret no one should be allowed to know?

"Family, loss, and love are universal burdens that we all carry," says Makonnen. "It's not about knowing the Salvadoran experience or Ethiopian experience; our hope is that everyone connects to it."

Rather than work on every piece together for the exhibition, both artists decided early on that an overall collaboration would be most powerful for telling each of their stories. Instead of it being a

single experience, two people can be experiencing the work differently, explains Makonnen, pointing out once again that this approach denies the notion of an official story.

“That’s why the meaning wavers; it’s not a fixed thing,” she says. “We wanted the gallery space itself to convey the incommunicable.”

“the meaning wavers” continues through Jan. 9 at Women & Their Work. womenandtheirwork.org

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Barbara Purcell

Barbara Purcell is an Austin-based writer. She has been featured on the Tyra Banks Show, Playboy Radio, and Martha Stewart Radio. Her work has appeared in the Austin Chronicle and Tribes, an online arts and culture magazine. She is a graduate of Skidmore College.

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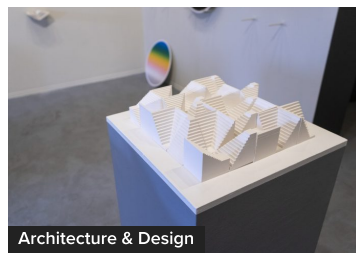
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