



Alicia McCarthy and Ruby Neri

MATRIX 270 MAY 23–AUGUST 26, 2018

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM • PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

When Alicia McCarthy and Ruby Neri were young undergraduate students attending the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) in the early 1990s, San Francisco was a different city than it is today. This was before the technology boom and bubble, the rise of Silicon Valley, and before so many of the city's artists were displaced by skyrocketing rents and gentrification. It was also a time when the community was reeling from the devastation of the AIDS epidemic. In those days, a subset of the San Francisco art scene radiated from the urban context of working in the streets, particularly in the Mission District, where artists such as Barry McGee and Margaret Kilgallen (along with McCarthy, Neri, and others) could be found spraying their graffiti tags on building exteriors. Neri has described this time as very social, but also very independent.¹ The period, the urban setting, and the group of artists who seemed to share a similar postpunk, low-fi aesthetic, has been referred to as the Mission School—although that is a moniker the artists themselves are reluctant to accept, and quick to refute.²

McCarthy and Neri recall that time as a vital period, when they were developing artistically within the community they were a part of and their strong collaborative relationship was forming. They met in 1990 through their mutual friend Virgil Shaw (a member of the band Dieselhed), and their bond grew as they realized their mutual interests in Riot Grrrl as well as artists such as Jay DeFeo, Joan Brown, and Richard Shaw. They characterize their time at SFAI as “free and wild”—no one was checking up on them, and they had the space and time to experiment. (That they were both nearly expelled for spray painting farm animals over the SFAI lockers underscores the freedom they felt.³) Another important mutual influence was Irène Pijoan, an artist known for her large-scale, intricate, lace cut-outs of paper, who taught at SFAI until her death in 2004. Similarly, they each consider Jay DeFeo's iconic painting *The Rose* (1958-66), which was then still embedded behind a false wall in the McMillan Conference Room at SFAI, to have been a powerful ghostly presence.⁴

Although they worked closely together early on, sometimes even painting on each other's work, their practices have diverged over the years. Neri moved in 1996 to attend graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles, and continues to live and work in this city. McCarthy is based in Oakland (where she was born), and teaches regularly at SFAI. Despite living in distant cities for many years, they have maintained a close friendship. They now favor different mediums—Neri focuses primarily on ceramic sculpture and McCarthy on painting and drawing—but they continue to share a range of aesthetic affinities. And although Neri remains largely rooted in the figure and McCarthy in abstraction, both artists share an intuitive and process-oriented approach, a saturated palette, and a strong physical relationship to their respective mediums. Moreover, they both relish immediate and spontaneous methods of working, which often translate to a rough-hewn, or loose, aesthetic style.

For **MATRIX 270**, McCarthy and Neri's first collaborative exhibition since 2004, each artist contributes new or recent bodies of work. For the last couple of years, Neri has been making a series of ceramic sculptures, many of them large scale, that upend traditional art historical representations of the female nude and the ceramic vessel alike. The poses her figures strike become oddly fused with the ceramic form; for instance, in *Untitled (Figures with Flowers)* (2018) the hands-on-the-hips gesture also doubles as the handles of an amphora. The female figures could be characterized as subversively erotic. Instead of inviting the gaze to permissively roll over recumbent, sensualized

bodies, the women that encircle Neri's vessels stand boldly upright and confront the viewer with their sexuality, their breasts sharply pointed and erect. Neri thinks of these women as self-portraits, but not in a literal way. Rather, she considers them “emotionally biographical,” developing from a more personal, libidinal place. She likens the act of making them to what she describes as a kind of “exorcism,” something she did for herself. One work, *Untitled (Woman and Horse Bowl)* (2016), however, could be considered a more direct self-portrait. Inside the shallow ceramic bowl, one finds an image of a woman riding a horse. It is less an image than it is a sculpture, as the starkly outlined form that emulates a thick, spray-painted line protrudes from the base of the bowl. The horse was Neri's eponymous graffiti tag, and relates to her history of riding, which she did regularly when she was young, even living on a horse ranch for a couple of years before moving to Los Angeles.

For her part, McCarthy includes a new group of square-format paintings set on white backgrounds. These new works explore her characteristic motifs—woven grids, double rainbows, negative space, stacked, colored bars—all of which privilege a sense of imperfect symmetry and interconnectedness. For McCarthy, color remains of utmost importance. Like Henri Matisse and Josef Albers, McCarthy sees color as contingent and relational. But perhaps more importantly, she believes it is nonhierarchical. She asserts that her intersecting and intertwined ribbons of color are “about nothing and everything” at the same time. The intersectional nature of the linear colors is key to understanding the centrality of community in McCarthy's artistic practice. If there are any metaphors to be read into these bright, abstract compositions, they are about how each individual line and color, carefully and patiently laid down by the artist, impacts the whole, and how they adapt to each other's placement and position within the painting's ground. In this sense each colored line adopts a humanistic quality—for, according to McCarthy, we are all overlapping and impacting one another on an equal, democratic plane.

That spirit of equanimity and the potential of the relational, in-between moments of life further unite McCarthy and Neri, who for nearly thirty years have continually sought inspiration and aesthetic experimentation from each other's work. This collaborative anchoring is further witnessed in the site-specific wall drawing they have executed together in the gallery. Additionally, the two artists have also produced a collaborative work on paper (available as a poster in BAMPFA's bookstore) which commemorates the fortieth anniversary of **MATRIX**—and this exhibition—at BAMPFA.

Apsara DiQuinzio

CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR

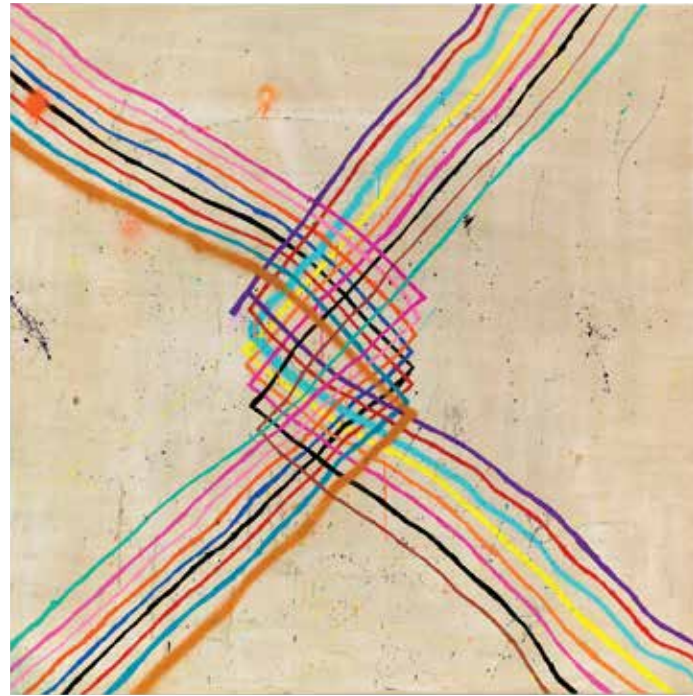
NOTES

¹ All quotations from conversations with the author, January–April, 2018.

² The term Mission School, coined by the critic Glen Helfand in 2002, provided an apt description for what these artists were doing. The artists point out, however, that it was not necessarily a cohesive movement, and there were many others working in a similar mode who are seldom acknowledged.

³ See Loney Abrams, “From Vandalism to Fine Art: Alicia McCarthy on Bay Area Graffiti Culture Since the '90s,” *Artspace Magazine*, January 8, 2018, accessed April 5, 2018, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/qa/alicia-mccarthy-interview-tk-55190

⁴ The work was deinstalled from SFAI when the Whitney Museum of American Art acquired the painting in 1995.



Biographies

Born in Oakland in 1969, **Alicia McCarthy** received her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1994 and her MFA from the University of California, Berkeley in 2007. McCarthy has shown her work in solo and two-person exhibitions at the Jack Hanley Gallery in New York, Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco, the V1 Gallery in Copenhagen, and Johansson Projects in Oakland, as well as in group exhibitions at The Lab, The Oakland Museum of California, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. The artist's work is also in the collections of the Millennium Iconoclast Museum of Art in Brussels, Facebook, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York. McCarthy received the Artadia Award in 2013, and the SECA Award from SFMOMA in 2017. McCarthy lives and works in Oakland and is represented by the Jack Hanley Gallery in New York and the Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco.

Ruby Neri was born in 1970 in Oakland, and received her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1994 and her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1998. Neri's work has been featured in solo and two-person exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, and the China Arts Objects Galleries, and in group exhibitions at The Underground Museum, the Oakland Museum of California, the Hammer Museum, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Gallery Paule Anglim, and the Stephen Wirtz Gallery. She has completed artist residencies at the College of the Arts at California State University, Long Beach, and the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana. Neri lives and works in Los Angeles, where she is represented by David Kordansky Gallery.

ALICIA MCCARTHY AND RUBY NERI / MATRIX 270 IS ORGANIZED BY APSARA DIQUINZIO, CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR, WITH VAL MOON, CURATORIAL ASSISTANT. THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE BAMPFA TRUSTEES.

Checklist

Ruby Neri

Unless otherwise noted, all works courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Untitled (Traditional Pot)
2017

Ceramic with glaze
35 × 26 × 24 in.

Untitled (Figures with Flowers)
2018

Ceramic with glaze
23 ¾ × 24 ½ × 14 in.
Collection of Stephanie
and Tim Ingrassia

Untitled (Woman and Horse Bowl)
2016

Ceramic with glaze
12 × 37 ½ × 33 in.

Large Seated Lady
2017

Ceramic with glaze
51 ½ × 37 ½ × 27 in.

Women
2018

Ceramic with glaze
35 × 27 × 28 in.
Courtesy of The Deighton Collection

12 untitled drawings
2018

Pencil on paper
Majority of the drawings are
12 × 7 ½ in., with slight variations
from drawing to drawing.

Alicia McCarthy

Unless otherwise noted, all works courtesy of the artist, Jack Hanley Gallery, New York, and Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco.

Untitled
2018

Gouache, spray paint, and
house paint on wood
60 × 60 in.

Untitled
2018

Gouache, spray paint, and
house paint on panel
60 × 60 in.

Untitled
2018

Color pencil, spray paint, and
house paint on wood
60 × 60 in.

Untitled
2018

Color pencil, spray paint, and
house paint on wood
60 × 60 in.

Untitled
2018

Color pencil, spray paint, and
house paint on wooden drawers
48 × 34 in.

Untitled
2017

Color pencil and
spray paint on paper
20 × 20 in.
UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific
Film Archive; gift of the artist

Artists' Lecture

Wednesday, May 23, 6 p.m.

FRONT

Alicia McCarthy and Ruby Neri, 1992

BACK, TOP TO BOTTOM

Alicia McCarthy: *Untitled*, 2017

Ruby Neri: *Untitled (Figures with
Flowers)*, 2018 Photo: Lee Thompson.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT

Alicia McCarthy: *Untitled*, 2017

Ruby Neri: *Untitled (Woman and
Horse Bowl)*, 2016 Photo: Lee Thompson.



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