

Summertime

*Summertime, and the livin' is easy
Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high*

(‘Summertime’, 1934)

For many of us in the temperate zones, summertime marks a period of abundance, of fecundity, of release from the cold grip of winter and the anticipation of Spring. It is a time that creates spaces that lure us outdoors; spaces ambient with the heat of the seasonal sun, fragrant with flowers in bloom, spaces that offer us some freedom from the structure that interior life imposes. Fresh fruits and vegetables pepper our downtowns and kitchen tables, long and bright days keep the dark of night at bay, and exuberance, joy and lightness of being would seem the dominant structure of public feeling. As DuBose Heyward’s lyric to George and Ira Gershwin’s most famous aria attests, it’s *Summertime, and the livin’ is easy...*

But for whom? Indeed, the second line of DuBose and Gershwin’s *Summertime* – a lullaby sung by a slave woman to the white child she cradles – would seem to pose that very question. For when *the cotton is high* it is the labor, bondage and suffering of the slave that ensures everything’s gonna be alright for that swaddled baby to whom this hymn to summertime is sung. Summertime’s very abundance has its unseen cost, but *hush, little baby, don't you cry...*

Summertime is an exhibition that departs from this provocation. The works by Julio Valdez, Lina Puerta, Leeza Meksin, Adrian Kondratowicz and Alexis Duque assembled in this show all respond in different ways to the task of thinking carefully and critically about this most abundant and ebullient of seasons. Together they help us to scratch beneath the surface of the taken-as-given idea of summertime. They encourage us to critically explore the aesthetic domains that summertime precipitates, and in the ways the pieces gathered here talk to one another, the show prompts us to register the costs of summertime’s structures of feeling. To whom and what do we owe the joy that summer brings? And what environmental costs lie at the cusp of summertime’s grip on our imaginations?



Figure 1. *Dreaming Boy III*, Julio Valdez (2012-13)

Painter Julio Valdez's work has for some time been driven by a fascination with the natural elements. In the collection of his paintings on display here, there is a nod to the elemental joys of summertime, particularly in relation to water, to the sea. Sandaled feet cooling in the water; figures swimming carefree (one of them Valdez's son [Figure 1]) in the most inviting, shimmering and iridescent of waters; and fish, butterfly, droplets of color and floating silhouettes that blend surface and depth, sea and sky. Water is, for Valdez, something like a metaphor for the human spirit, and his paintings evoke something of the familiar sensual pleasures of summertime's association with the sea.

But they do so in ways that also leave the trace of something slightly more troubling. As Federica Palamero has written, for Valdez, a New Yorker who hails from Dominican Republic, "The sea is now depth, density, a stage for both pleasure and drama; it is that which makes the island what it is, and makes exile what it is... [t]he sea is a mirror of history, of time, it is geography in and of itself."¹ In Valdez's work then, the sea offers what the Caribbean writer Edouard Glissant has referred to as a 'poetics of relation'.² Through Black Atlantic slave histories and geographies, through contemporary routes of migration and experiences of exile, the sea is both history and geography of connection and relation even as we might think the shores it washes up against to be tightly and politically bordered. Everything flows. Spatially and historically.

How then to interpret the floating Black silhouettes of Valdez's 2004 work *Noon At the Island of the Turtle* (a study for *Mar Abierto*, Figure 2)? Bathers floating and frolicking in the summer sea, or the deathly historical echo of so many slaves thrown overboard from ships like the *Zong* in 1781?³ In our contemporary conjuncture, Valdez's floating silhouettes continue to haunt the imagination. Think, for example, of the recent photograph of the bodies of Salvadorian Oscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month old daughter Valeria, both of whom lost their lives crossing the Rio Grande in Matamoros, Mexico, or the just as haunting 2015 image of lifeless 3-year old Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian boy whose body tragically washed up on a beach in western Turkey. Since that photograph of Aylan Kurdi was circulated 4 years ago, over 8,000 more migrants have died making that perilous Mediterranean crossing from northern Africa to southern Europe, the majority in Europe's summer months.⁴ The disjuncture and

¹ Federica Palamero, *Julio Valdez* (FTC Group: New York, 2009), p.67

² See Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (trans. by Betsy Wing, University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 2010 [1997])

³ The *Zong* was a British slave ship operated by the Liverpool based Gregson slave-trading syndicate. As was common business practice, the syndicate had taken out insurance on the lives of their slave cargo. In late November 1781, when the ship ran low on drinking water, the crew threw 132 slaves overboard in order both to ensure the survival of the rest of the ship's passengers, but also to cash in on the insurance on its slave cargo. For more on the *Zong*, see Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and being* (Duke University Press: Durham & London, 2016), pp.34-41.

⁴ See *Missing Migrants*, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean> (last accessed 9 July, 2019)

dissonance that Valdez's work precipitates has everything to do with summertime's dis/connections. The very subtlety of his work at once celebrates and interrogates our sensual pleasure in and with the ocean, pushing its symbolisms, material histories and human narratives.

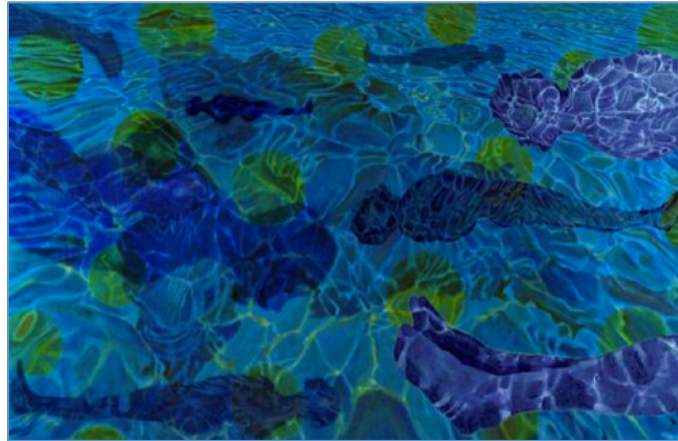


Figure 2.
Mar Abierto, by Julio Valdez (2006),
housed in El Museo del Barrio, New York City

If Valdez's work invites us to contemplate the sea's relationalities, what it both brings to us and hides, then Lina Puerta's tapestries also evoke the hidden connections that enable summertime's very fecundity. Her figurative piece *Tomato Crop Picker*, from Puerta's 2017 Farmworker Tapestries Series, brings into representation the often occluded backbreaking labor of Latinx workers who harvest the crops of tomatoes, strawberries, cantaloupes and countless other delicious morsels that make their way so seamlessly to our summertime tables. In this tapestry, the laborer is swaddled in scarf and cap to protect herself from fierce sunshine; that very same elemental accompaniment to the perfect summer dish. Puerta's work brings the labor of summertime into visibility, demanding us to confront the persistence of the plantation geographies as well as inequity and residual violence that are inseparable from the palate of summertime. In text incorporated into *Tomato Crop Picker*, Puerta announces: "In a 2012 report, Human Rights Watch surveyed female farmworkers. Nearly all of them had experienced sexual violence or knew others who had."

But what of Puerta's own palette? In both color and materials, her tapestries are abundant, just like summertime. She combines lace, linen pulp and cotton, beads, ribbons, chains, but also butterfly wings, feathers, fur and other organic material. And her colors evoke the exuberance of summertime. These pieces are riotous assemblies of visual stimuli that dance summertime for us. And there is something very poetic in this deliberate excess.

Interrogating abundance and excess is precisely what Leeza Meksin's mixed media collages and Adrian Kondratowicz's piece do; if not so explicitly in the context of summertime's seasonality, certainly in the context of the threat of a persistent and unrelenting summertime. That is to say, their work speaks to the human induced climate change that profligate consumption precipitates. Meksin uses the medium of collage to render landscapes, icebergs, and figures, all of which are vacuum formed in that most perilous of materials, single use plastic. In so doing, her work forces capital and nature together, thus asking that we interrogate how we consume, what we consume, and at what environmental cost we consume. Meksin's work is imbued with diverse materiality and the most intricate of process. It is experimentation with things, forms and subjects, incorporating oil painting, fabric and fiber materials, as well as plastic, neoprene, spandex and burlap. She cuts, peels, folds, stretches materials, creating both tensions and harmonies, juxtaposing the 'natural' with the 'cultural', organic and inorganic. Like our environmental present, her works are always a complex socio-political assemblage of sorts; something to unravel intellectually and aesthetically.

Process is also central to Kondratowicz's untitled piece in this exhibition. If its riotous palette visually evokes summertime, the piece's form probes the relationship between presence and absence. Kondratowicz describes this piece as a 'Painting in the 5th Dimension'. He has developed a process he calls the Benglis medium, after the artist Lynda Benglis who created works by pouring paint and leaving it to set. Kondratowicz works with the undersurface of acrylic, latex and enamel poured onto a dried glaze of acrylic watercolor on a glass surface. Kondratowicz calls the membrane that is revealed when the pour is peeled away the soul of his paintings, their essence. If Lynda Benglis' poured paint works of the 60s and 70s blurred the boundaries between painting and sculpture, then Kondratowicz's work blurs the boundaries between surface and depth. This is an image that at first appears all surface, like a map, perhaps even an impressionist painting. But Kondratowicz's painting in the 5th dimension invites us into the artifact's far more layered historical provenance, for this joyous surface is a trace of a process much more capacious and complicated. This is a work that poses questions about the relationships between what we do and what we leave behind; questions about the sustainability of social, spatial and economic processes as we know them.

What we leave behind, however, might ultimately be irrelevant. This would seem to be something of Alexis Duque's message in his two pieces in this show. For if an unbearably hot summertime becomes the norm, if human induced climate change renders the temperate world tropical, then it is humanity that is imperiled. Climate scientists predict that continuing with our current emissions, we could warm the planet by between 2.8°C and 5.6°C in the next 85 years.⁵ Reforesting an area roughly the size of the US presents our best chance of keeping temperature rises to a safe 1.5°C.⁶ What

⁵ Mark Maslin, *Climate Change: a very short introduction* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014), p.12

⁶ Mark Maslin & Simon Lewis, 'Reforesting an area the size of the US needed to help avert climate breakdown, are they right?', *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/reforesting-an-area-the-size-of-the-us-needed-to-help-avert-climate-breakdown-say-researchers-are-they-right-119842> (last accessed 9th July, 2019)

these alarming statistics hint at are the perils of business-as-usual. Duque's paintings are both apocalyptic yet playful. They seem to warn of the absence of humanity in futures overrun by a planetary overgrowth caused by human induced climate change. Tropical vegetation overruns an escarped cityscape in one of his intricate paintings, and in another it is the very figure of the human that is imperiled as a skull is consumed by verdant nature run wild. There is though a haunting beauty to these unpeopled images. A beauty that pleads with us that our summertimes must end. Autumn and winter must come and lead us to another Spring. For in the face of a great climate derangement, Duque reminds that there might be no *us* to enjoy an everlasting summer.

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The intention of this show is not at all to rain on summertime. It is not to dampen our enthusiasm for what is for so many of us the most joyous and rewarding time of the year. In different ways, the pieces in this show celebrate the unique structure of feeling that summertime brings with it; its palette of colors, tastes, sensations, heat and light, growth, and not least the freedom from structure the summertime brings. Instead, part of the aim of the show is to push at something like a *politics of summertime*. As this essay has suggested, it is to urge us to just scratch at the surface of the taken-as-given idea and experience of summertime. The curatorial work of this show thus invites us into a contemplative space where our unthinking and intuitive knowledges about the summertime – the structures of feeling it precipitates – can be understood as more differentiated, more uneven, and ultimately more human processes. Summertime, this show suggests, is a living space of encounter and exchange. Reorienting ourselves in the light of the knowledge of these encounters and exchanges may just open the door to more equitable relations with distant others and with our collective environmental futures.

So hush, little baby, don't you cry

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