

apexart



(Dialogues on)

**BUILD WHAT WE HATE.
DESTROY WHAT WE LOVE.**



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The object of things

Food, Health, Income, Safety. These are the main concerns Venezuelans name as reasons for leaving the country according to the Displacement Tracking Matrix of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). These four factors are symptomatic of a multilayered and highly complex humanitarian crisis that's still unfolding, that many of us, Venezuelans –both in and out of the country– are trying to make sense of.

Despite facing dangerous encounters and personal attacks for my work as a Human Rights activist and lawyer, I never contemplated ceasing to speak out against injustices or assisting others in doing the same. Initially neglecting my own safety in my youth, the tipping point occurred when the safety of my loved ones became directly threatened. In 2011, at the age of 21, I left Venezuela for the United States, working as an Au Pair, earning a meager \$2 an hour —a move I thought would provide some semblance of freedom and a temporary respite from political persecution. I never imagined not being able to return home. Things would only get better in time...right?

Reluctant to stay in the US, my decision changed when my mother, harassed and threatened by paramilitary forces, begged me not to return. A mother's desperate plea that's etched under my scalp and sometimes haunts me still. My younger brother, a doctor, faced similar harassment, and my former boss was shot shortly after being labeled a "CIA agent" (along with other Amnesty International staff) "employed to destabilize the revolution," by the then Vice-President of the Republic. Carlos survived, but witnessing these events from a distance and not as daily life, made me grasp what could happen to me if I went back home.

What a peculiar term, *home*.

I considered myself fortunate to have traveled to the US by plane, and I guess I still do, given the circumstances. My tourist visa eventually transformed into a legal limbo, while I gathered data, photos, news reports, records, letters and sworn statements for my application for political asylum. Details aside, by 2023 I had yet to be granted asylum or even be interviewed. My thick asylum file, heavy and poignant, stands as one of the few possessions that directly connects me to my homeland —a connection forged in violence, but one allowing me to process pain from afar, keeping me physically separated and unable to return.

While I was never sentimentally attached to material possessions, the passage of time prompted recollections of things I once had. I began looking for them, only to realize they were no longer with me. At a young age I had convinced myself that nothing truly mattered, and things held no intrinsic meaning unless we gave them one. Only recently, and gradually, I started attributing meaning to these seemingly little items lost during my migration: a children's poetry book my mom gave me (and her note inside,) pottery from my grandma, my graduation ring, souvenirs from a friend's travel, a bracelet from my great-aunt, family photo albums... These objects, once trivial, now carry profound significance. I remember them with grief for their absence, but what happens when memory inevitably fades? Without these tangible reminders, cherished moments run the risk of slipping away.

The scale of Venezuela's exodus is sometimes incomprehensible to me, but the collective loss —both material and emotional— is not solely mine. Each individual's losses, multiplied by millions, resonate within our shared migration stories. This communal wound transcends far beyond the borders of any single person and any single nation, dwarfing whatever discourse on a country in turmoil when confronted with millions of simultaneous pains.

The fear of forgetting drives me to hold onto whatever fragments I can, hoping that in the absence of things, we can remember together.

Breaking Down Memories:

A Dialogue on Contradiction and Reconstruction in Art

First, I'd like to clarify that Juan Diego is my older brother. And therefore, I believe that his journey in visual arts had a lot to do with my decision to study graphic design and currently continue practicing the profession along with other creative practices, like knitting. As a creative team, I believe we nourish ourselves from the margins.

MFV: For a long time, I've been able to see how you transitioned from a field or structure like architecture, through drawing and painting, to the digital medium. Do you remember how you got into photography?

JPC: Back in 2012, during an artist-in-residence program in Argentina, I started focusing on family albums and documentary photography. During the first month of exploring the city, what caught my attention the most was finding thousands of photographs, letters, school notebooks, and various items from families for sale in flea markets.

It wasn't just about saving family photos kept in drawers; it was about digging up memories, revisiting moments I thought were long gone. The repetitive nature of the photographic medium became a tool for me, a methodical way to tap into the persistence of memory.

Photography's inherent repetition, whether by capturing numerous images or revisiting the same subjects over time, give me a unique avenue for exploration and allow me to gradually peel back the layers of memory. By repeatedly engaging with certain themes or subjects, I found that the nuances and subtleties of those memories began to surface. This approach not only mirrored the persistence of memory but also became a way to immerse myself in the emotional landscape of the past.

Conversation between:

Juan Diego Pérez la Cruz and María Fernanda Vandersteen

MFV: Photos are some of the few things that can hold more value than other material possessions. As immigrants, we're compelled to discover their significance.

JPC: I think for our generation (a new wave of Venezuelan diaspora), family photos are incredibly significant. They're like gold! Especially when someone passes away. They capture the whole vibe of who we were at one point and the big moments in our family. My connection to all of this became even deeper when I had to depart from Venezuela in 2017, leaving much behind, except for some clothes and a bag full of photos from my albums.

MFV: Absolutely. I recall that you were in charge of our legacy in some way. When we had to leave the country, we never thought it would be so abrupt, and those albums were left stored at home until you were able to rescue them, and bring them with you. To close, what information would you like viewers to know about your work, or what do you want them to leave with?

JPC: I believe the beauty of art is that it can have hundreds of different perspectives and interpretations, which depend on the observer. However, there are two elements that I would like to share. The first one is working in contradiction. It's about making these pieces all about memories, but at the same time breaking down the very things (photographs) that were supposed to keep those memories intact. It's a constant battle between sharing and breaking them down. The second thing is that my work attempts to give a new lease of life to family archives, making them consequential. No more tucked away and forgotten. These archives connect people to their past, and their stories –even in fragments– will continue to get passed down.

Closing Gaps:

From Individuality to the Collective, Art as a Deconstructive Process of Popular Imagery

We are far away; a sea of distance separates us. Nevertheless, and as always, we are also very close. Ronald is the kind of person who has enough energy to be in many places at the same time.

Through his reflections, a deep understanding of the duality between the individual and the collective emerges, highlighting art as a bridge between these dimensions. Ronald invites us to contemplate his work not only as personal expression but also as an open dialogue with society. These questions are the result of a conversation via WhatsApp.

PP: Many times, art is interpreted from a collective perspective, and some believe that a work truly finishes when someone else sees it, when it reaches the viewer. What do you think about that? Do you do your work for others or for yourself? Do you believe that what you haven't finished or are still building or may not be seen, does it exist? Explain why.

RP: Damn! I've always believed that art has an end. Although I don't identify with the idea that art comes solely from introspection or creating art just for inspiration. Of course, things inspire me, but I think that art helps me understand what's happening around me, as well as people in my same situation, with doubts, curiosities, and intrigue about the "whys" of certain things. So, I think art doesn't end when a viewer sees it because it depends on the viewer; if it's in a gallery, it's not the same person who will see it on the street or on social media, you get me? I see my work as a hybrid. It is for me and for others, through others. Doing it is a kind of therapy to understand myself,

Conversation between:

Ronald Pizzoferrato and Pauline Pérez

to understand myself in front of others, and to understand others in front of me. It's like forming a society, and I want to believe that's what I'm building.

PP: I think your work is a deconstructive process of popular imagery. How do you approach this concept in your work?

RP: I think my work is appealing because it's participative and collaborative. Many people identify with that. I don't work from a centralized authorship, meaning that this work is not entirely my idea, my publication, or my distribution entirely. It's many pieces with many people fitting in. I also think the temporal situation has an influence (the moment we are living in now.) There was or is a lack of people who empathize with the different situations we –Venezuelans– have experienced. And this often directly relates to politics. But even though my work is quite political, it's neither partisan nor pamphleteering. I don't seek to satisfy a political discourse, and I believe that allows many to identify with what I do. It's like closing gaps that we don't see but often feel.

PP: If, for you, these gaps are built from social or political events, and your discourse is not partisan, what viable position can your discourse take if you think like this?

RP: I think we have been, and continue to be a very changing society. Because if you talk about Venezuela now, you have to talk about a Venezuela within its territory, and a Venezuela outside of it. Lately, I feel like I'm a hybrid between both. There's a time of the year where I experience migration, but then I return home, and that's where I see that in the end, that's what I'm building: a narrative that's understandable for Venezuelans both inside and out.

Woven Fragments:

The Transcendence of Ordinary Objects into Displacement Stories

I met Cass half a decade ago during a pivotal moment in her life. We walked atop a mountain range in Mexico and talked beneath a giant agave. We fully and rapidly embraced one another into our lives. Cass and I have a sibling-like connection that transcends borders –something I've learned from Venezuelans. Distance doesn't matter that much as long as you have WhatsApp and a killer set of stickers.

SA: How do you think your work transforms as it moves from your studio to your home and now to this exhibition? Are there connections between the movement of these pieces through different spaces/contexts and a bigger conversation?

CM: The idea of movement is definitely a theme I address in my work. The right to move freely, its restrictions, movement in relation to places... I think this can be seen in the work when you start to dissect it and think about the materials as what they are –garments that belong to people who, by one reason or another, have moved and relocated. Using donated clothing from Venezuelan immigrants symbolizes a thread between global conflict, sustainability and criticism of consumerism. There's a connection between experiencing an exodus and letting go of belongings that made the journey. The selected materials help locate a place, a culture which creates a platform for the mental and physical structure within my pieces. They're only profound because of their context, because these materials already exist and they're easy to identify.

SA: How do the materials you use transform from being or belonging with people to becoming art in your hands?

Conversation between:

Cassandra Mayela and Sam Arnow

CM: My artistic process really starts the moment I encounter people from whom I receive the materials. Meeting these people is a meaningful exchange that marks the beginning of a transformative journey for the materials and for me. Each item carries its own symbolic significance. It's not just a contribution; it's a voluntary release from material memories and that's something I deeply respect and strive to honor in my creative process. I think they change once interwoven with other pieces of clothing, turning them into a medium that speaks to the complexities of displacement, creating its own visual narrative that captures the essence of their experiences and broader themes of capitalism and its relationship to the migratory crisis. The specialness of this series, though, is the power to take ordinary things and to produce a transcendence of their ordinariness by reinterpreting them in a particular way, in this case by cutting and weaving them. This doesn't mean their transcendence is absolute, I believe in the possibility of things questioning and contradicting themselves.

SA: I love that. Life is so good when the ordinary becomes extra-ordinary (extraordinary). What about contradiction? Do you deliberately or accidentally weave contradiction into these works?

CM: I see contradiction as conflict or tension and I don't mean that as a negative connotation. I think there's violence and tension in transformation and chance and this can be seen in the work the minute I cut these valuable garments into shreds to then be woven with others, stripping them in a way from their individuality to form a oneness. When we think about communism, or to be rather specific to us [Venezuelans], when we think of socialism of the 21st century, this is the premise right? We're all one. Am I purposely intending to have this socialist characteristic in the work? Not really... I am trying to put together a society that's been fragmented for decades, even before I was born... I am trying to heal from this concept of otherness in our people to understand that we're a reflection from one another.

Objects of Transgression

A note from

Francisco Llinás Casas and Erick Moreno Superlano

More often than not, the Venezuelan migration crisis is adjusted to fit particular narratives. This adjustment gives the crisis a specific meaning. In the case of Venezuela, the meaning often comes in the form of a lesson, just as fables have a moral. For some, this crisis reveals what happens if the state veers too much to the Left. For others, the lesson is about neo-colonial oppression. These explanations reproduce perceptions of Venezuelan migrants as agentless victims at the mercy of the state and international humanitarian organisations. However, we find it unhelpful to approach this exhibition through reductive frameworks pivoting around causes and consequences. Instead, we see the potential for the objects exhibited here to be a point of entry into complex dynamics of socio-political positioning and space reclamation among Venezuelans. After all, the reality of several million bodies transiting, transgressing, crossing, re-settling—moving—cannot be analysed in static terms. Accordingly, we approach the objects in this exhibition as an archive that facilitates access to Venezuelans' socio-political and economic practices. We will look at how Venezuelan migrants' objects and actions can destabilise static understandings of space, history, and culture, revealing the socio-political complexity of migration—as the double oxymoron in the exhibition's title suggests.

The exhibiting artists capture the life and trajectory of objects that make possible the movement of Venezuelans: from homes and appliances that Venezuelans sell off to pay for their journeys, to clothes, IDs, family photos, and other objects of personal value that Venezuelans take with them in their journeys. We pose that, beyond their apparent function, these objects also play a role within processes of political agenciation. For example, more than just a piece of fabric used for warmth, a blanket with a tiger—like the one in Pizzoferrato's video—can represent Aragua State's baseball team and therefore belonging, or stand for the mythical characteristics of the animal—like power and courage. Similarly, a tricolour backpack, like the one reinterpreted by Mayela in *La Carga*, transcends its pragmatic function and subverts the meaning that the Venezuelan state has given to it. The artist makes evident how migrants turn the backpack and the flag on it into a mobile emblem that embodies the Venezuelan migrant experience instead of the Bolivarian educational project. Simple objects like these can thus facilitate political agency by signifying belonging and subverting the narrative of the state. However, as Venezuelans move through various geographical and socio-political landscapes, these objects may be left behind.

Objects may be discarded for practical reasons, such as losing their function, value or meaning, or because they are too heavy to carry. But it can also be because the object may otherwise prevent Venezuelans from inserting themselves into relations that make possible their mobility—i.e., carrying Haitians' belongings and children as a strategy to make money. Though painful, migrants' discarding of objects—or even memories, as Perez la Cruz's work explores—can thus be understood as a strategic act that safeguards their ability to advance in the journey to the US, their destination of choice. We could say that this process of discarding and acquisition results in a dynamic archive that captures Venezuelans' strategies for moving, adapting, and reclaiming control over their destinies. We see these objects not for their pragmatic function or economic value—and whatever this may tell us about migrants' trajectories and hardships. Instead, we foreground the political significance of the actions behind them.

Studying the objects in this exhibition could also help analyse issues relating to Venezuelans' practices in their new settlement societies. After all, as Venezuelans continue their journeys and re-settle in their destinations, they develop new strategies and acquire new objects to adapt, construct identity, make space, and reclaim political agency. Here, it is essential to remember the significant socio-economic disparities within the Venezuelan diaspora and, therefore, differences in objects and strategies that Venezuelans may acquire. For example, middle-class Venezuelan migrants, many of whom have been settled in the US for many years, are able to accumulate objects that allow for particular socio-political agenciation: a car, a house in Florida, etc. An accumulation, let's not forget, that has a lot to do with Venezuela's extraction economy during the oil boom and what Santiago Acosta refers to as *derroche mayamero* (Miami splurge). But the objects portrayed in this exhibition trace the journey of a new type of Venezuelan migration, that of working-class Venezuelans who, for the first time in history, have access to the US through the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) granted in 2021. Accordingly, we want to draw attention to the objects acquired by Venezuelans that, often having travelled through the Darien Gap, are now settling in the US, particularly in cities like New York—where, fittingly, this exhibition is taking place. Moreover, we want to highlight the antagonistic attitudes increasingly found on social media around the practices of newly-arrived Venezuelans in New York, particularly about their acquisition of expensive clothing articles, and what this can tell us about discrimination among Venezuelan migrants.

Striving to position themselves in the new space of the capitalist metropolis, Venezuelan migrants arriving in cities like New York develop, strategies to insert themselves into relations that facilitate their integration/ social participation, and the realisation of their goals and dreams. The acquisition of new objects such as a motorcycle or shoes is of special importance.

After all, following Lefebvre, space is produced through the relationship between people, objects, and labour. Indeed, in a Univision interview of 2023—now made viral on social media—we can see a young Venezuelan migrant outside a shelter in NYC telling a journalist that he wants a safer place to stay as he fears someone will steal his 200 USD shoes and his 150 USD hat.

Objects like these reveal migrants' actions to insert themselves into the system of capital accumulation, the "American dream." However, for middle-class Venezuelans, this act is condemnable. For them, working-class Venezuelans' purchase of expensive objects is immoral, irresponsible and arrogant, proof of newly-arrived migrants' corrupted priorities. Indeed, in the last year, middle-class Venezuelans in the US have used social media to express their discontent toward newly arrived working-class Venezuelan migrants. They fear these migrants are harming the reputation of the Venezuelan community with their behaviour. Well-known figures on social media have commented on different situations involving their newly arrived co-nationals. These discourses usually contain a moral judgement and a civilising lesson. This act of digital indignation seeks to separate newly-arrived Venezuelans from those of the middle class. According to their moral discourse, middle-class Venezuelan migrants conform to US social norms of good behaviour, and their counterparts do not. In other words, such discourse aims to define who is the "good" Venezuelan migrant and who is not. A dichotomy with connections and parallels with notions of "good" citizenship back home in Venezuela: *el marginal/malandro* vs. *el chamo bien*.

In the past, the disproportionate acquisition of objects—*derroche*—by the Venezuelan middle class in the US was a strategy to destabilise global hierarchies between the First and Third World. Similarly, the acquisition of 200 USD shoes by newly-arrived Venezuelans in New York should be interpreted as something more complex than just an irresponsible act of *derroche*. We ask, then, who is allowed to use *derroche* as a strategy to destabilise global stratification? Who is to say? Questions like these move the discussion away from the mentioned antagonism on social media, revealing instead how some Venezuelan migrants reproduce social injustices in the US. So, how can current narratives and attitudes about migrants, their objects, and their practices be changed to avoid disempowerment and stratification? Can we, as migrants, academics and artists, help to construct what we love instead of what we hate?

Zine created in conjunction with apexart Open Call Exhibition
Build What We Hate. Destroy What We Love.

Curated by Fabiola R. Delgado.
January 12 - March 9, 2024

apexart.org/delgado.php

Front cover: Juan Diego Pérez la Cruz, *Lagunas Mentales*, 2023

Back cover: Cassandra Mayela, *Balanced Contrast*, 2023

Inner cover: Ronald Pizzoferrato, *El Colchón*, 2019

Designer: Ana Isabel Orozco

Fabiola R. Delgado is an independent curator and creative producer. A former Human Rights lawyer and political asylum seeker from Venezuela, she strives for justice through projects that challenge narratives and recenter neglected perspectives. She's a USRAO National Leaders of Color Fellow and has worked with the likes of the Hirshhorn Museum, National Museum of American History, Washington Project for the Arts, Times Square Arts, and The Fundred Project with artist Mel Chin.

apexart's program supporters past and present include the Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation, the Kettering Family Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Buhl Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Spencer Brownstone, the Kenneth A. Cowin Foundation, Epstein Teicher Philanthropies, The Greenwich Collection Ltd., William Talbott Hillman Foundation/Affirmation Arts Fund, the Fifth Floor Foundation, The Puffin Foundation, the Trust for Mutual Understanding, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, public funds from Creative Engagement, supported by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and administered by LMCC, funds from NYSCA Electronic Media/Film in Partnership with Wave Farm: Media Arts Assistance Fund, with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, as well as the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the New York State Legislature.

