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Ford Foundation Gallery presents **Cantando Bajito**



Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice | 320 E 43rd Street, New York

On View March 5 - May 4, 2024

Opening Event March 5, 2024 | 5 – 7pm

Gallery Hours: Monday - Saturday | 11am – 6pm

New York, NY – The **Ford Foundation Gallery** is pleased to present ***Cantando Bajito***, a year-long series of three exhibitions featuring artists who explore forms of resistance in the wake of widespread violations of bodily autonomy and gender-based violence threatening to erode civic space and democratic values worldwide. *Cantando Bajito* is developed and brought together by curators Isis Awad, Roxana Fabius, Kobe Ko, Beya Othmani, Mindy Seu, and Susana Vargas Cervantes, with the advice of a larger curatorial group integrated by María Carri, Zasha Colah, Maria Catarina Duncan, and Marie Hélène Pereira.

The exhibitions address violence and incursions against bodily autonomy leveled toward feminized bodies, from the overturning of Roe and attacks on abortion rights, to violence against trans people through bans of gender affirming therapy and non-prosecution of homicides. Latin American feminist Verónica Gago has called these attacks on the progress made by feminist movements an aggressive counteroffensive that has an eroding effect on democratic values. The exhibitions attend to this violence from a place of resistance, support, and joy rather than a place of victimhood.

The first chapter in this sequence of exhibitions is dedicated to exploring the daily violence that feminized bodies experience and the strategies used to confront it, and to imagine new ways of existing and thriving beyond it. *Cantando Bajito: Testimonies* brings together the work of artists who consider methods used to navigate violence—from the value of the testimonial, the building of community, the moving together in space, and the inclusion of subversive signals that provide sustenance and pleasure. The first exhibition features artworks by Sheba Chhachhi, Gabrielle Goliath, Leonilda González, Lalitha Lajmi, Kent Monkman, Tuli Mekondjo, Sylvia Netzer, Abigail Reyes, Dima Srouji, and Keioui Keijaun Thomas and is curated by Isis Awad, Roxana Fabius, and Beya Othmani.

Drawing on social movements from around the globe, this diverse group of intergenerational artists works in an equally varied range of mediums, from video and sound, to etchings and watercolor and oil paintings, to photographs and multimedia, and glass, clay and stone. This show also represents many significant moments in these artworks' exhibition histories. Gabrielle Goliath's *This song is for...* (2019-) will be making its U.S. premiere of this powerful and celebrated sound installation. Leonilda González's *Novias revolucionarias (Revolutionary brides)* (1968) will be exhibited in New York City for the first time, alongside artists Lalitha Lajmi and Dima Srouji's exhibiting debuts in New York City.

Voice, as central to testimony and resistance, is a key theme explored across the featured artworks, including embodied forms of expression such as speaking, singing, protest, and other voiced acts, all acting as vehicles for individual and collective survival, mobilization, and resistance in the face of oppression and violence. The exhibition's title can be translated into English as "singing in a low tone," a phrase that the recently liberated Nicaraguan political prisoner Dora María Téllez Argüello used to describe the singing exercises she did while incarcerated in isolation to conserve her voice and defeat the system of political terror she was enduring.

The low tone of the singing in Téllez's experience is echoed by the versatile, powerfully flexible tactics for survival and resistance evoked across the artworks. They imagine beyond and through resistance toward creative new ways of existing. Keioui Keijaun Thomas' multimedia work, such as the featured video *BLACK BODIES* (2018) and selection of prints from 2015–2019, address Blackness outside of a codependent, binary structure of existence. Everyday materials, voice, text, and color become urgent tools for composing a visual language, as embodied expressions conjure new forms of existence. "The body is always adapting to what language needs to be read," the artist explained in a *New York Times* profile. "In many ways, the body is transcribing that for me." The watercolor paintings of Lalitha Lajmi's *Performer Series* (2013–2015) contemplate the performances and concealments involved in gender roles. The autobiographical, dream-like quality of her work opens up a shifting space of revelation and subversion. Exploring dream sequences, relationships, and performances, her works conjure a subtle and layered history of the modern Indian woman in the decades after the country's independence.

Color and hue, so potent in evoking visceral feeling and meaning beyond language, each with its own spectrum of associations, also form a motif running across the exhibition's artworks. Lavender and purple are the palette for the first exhibition. Historically associated with efforts to achieve gender equality, purple is widely associated with contemporary feminism and symbolizes achievements gained and those yet to come.

In creating the sound work *This song is for...* (2019–), Gabrielle Goliath asked each of the survivors of sexual violence who contributed a song to be performed for the installation to also select a color wash to go along with it. Color and voice, which both channel embodied experiences of emotion, are entwined in Goliath's platform for testimony that transcends words, accessing more layered forms of understanding. The artworks in this show themselves serve as testimonial objects. Some share the artist's story and some become a vehicle for others to tell their story.

This song is for... reimagines the popular convention of the dedication song into a reflection on sexual violence, through covers of songs selected by survivors. In moments of musical rupture, visitors witness a frozen present, sharing in testimonies of trauma entangled with personal and political claims to life, dignity, hope, faith and even joy.

The artists featured in *Cantando Bajito: Testimonies* explore ways of resisting claims over women's bodies, land, traditions, and narratives, countering the treatment of the feminized body as a territory that can be occupied, unlike the male body, which is deemed sovereign. Artworks in the exhibition challenge colonial displacement of women by surfacing and centering women's connections to land and its power through testimonial objects and artistic processes.

Dima Srouji's sculptural work *Maternal Exhumations II* (2023) contemplates colonial violence toward feminized bodies. Her work honors the Palestinian women who were part of the workforce that excavated the land during American and British archeological missions and centers the women's deep connection to their land. Replicas of glass vessels and toilet flasks, used by women in cleansing and healing rituals, are placed in soil as though just excavated, an experiment in imagining the vessels' return to the ground.

Tuli Mekondjo's fiber-based work *Omalutu etu, omeli medu eli/ Our bodies are within this soil* (2022) explores the search for restitution and repair in the shadow of Namibia's violent colonial past. Through burning, washing, embroidering, and mending techniques, the artist conjures the presence of Namibian women who labored as domestic workers during the colonial and apartheid eras. Mekondjo's canvas draws connections between land, ancestry, and history, channeling their renewing life force and honoring interrupted lineages.

Cantando Bajito: Testimonies also speaks to art's power to subvert and render spheres of violence into possible ground for resistance by activating the collective imagination through visual cultures. Kent Monkman's work intervenes in familiar images of Western art history to explore themes of colonization, sexuality, loss, and resilience from the complex perspectives of underrepresented Indigenous experiences. In Monkman's work, such as the painting *I am nipi* (2022), the artist's gender-fluid alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle often appears as a time-traveling, shape-shifting, supernatural being who reverses the colonial gaze to challenge received notions of history and Indigenous peoples.

In Abigail Reyes's *Plana* (2014), sheets of paper with repeated lines from a secretarial-training typing manual are suspended overhead, transforming tools associated with work categorized as women's professions. Reyes draws on studies of soap operas, significant in Latin American popular culture, often featuring a character

of “the secretary,” as well as interviews. The artist shows how skills required in these professions can also become tools for endurance.

Activist and photographer Sheba Chhachhi revisits her archive of images from the Indian feminist movement in *From the Barricades* (1980–1997). The images, both intimate and powerful, capture the essence of collective resistance and document women’s protest against forms of oppression including rape, dowry, religious fundamentalism, and domestic and state violence.

Artworks in the exhibition also imagine and represent the facing of vulnerability together to withstand oppressive systems. The engravings of *Novias revolucionarias* (*Revolutionary brides*) (1968) by Leonilda González created in a time of dictatorship depict images of women who were linked in local understanding to people who disappeared under the regime. The brides’ suffering is transmuted into agency as a kind of refusal, forged through their representation together in large numbers. Sylvia Netzer’s sculpture *Glen-Gery Olympia* (2004)—a monumental artwork in the form of a reclining woman—brings ideas like modularity and repetition from minimalist sculpture to create large-scale work that is deeply personal despite these systematic methods. Netzer’s work renders her personal experience as a woman, and as a large woman who has been excluded from value systems, material and immediate.

This exhibition’s artworks explore the transformative power of art to resist and counter violence. Together, the works will create an imaginative sphere for envisioning potential change: a space where testimonial value is conjured and restored; where layered stories are made material and recognized through color; where the right to joy and pleasure is asserted as resistance; and where spaces of violence are recast as openings for new solidarities and ways of life.

Image: Leonilda González, *Novias revolucionarias I* (*Revolutionary brides I*), 1968.
Courtesy of Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales (MNAV) Uruguay. Photo Sebastian Bach.



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About the Curators

Isis Awad

Isis Awad is a curator, writer, and poet from Cairo, Egypt. She is the Founding Director of Executive Care*, a self-as-organization curatorial practice at the service of trans and queer artists of color from performance and nightlife. She also organizes national conferences aiming to find solutions for youth homelessness as Events Manager with the nonprofit organization, Point Source Youth. She was Exhibitions and Development Manager at Participant Inc in New York from 2018-19, and the MFA Exhibition Coordinator at The Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College from 2021-2022. Her writing has been published by *The Brooklyn Rail*, *ArtAsiaPacific Magazine*, *Art Papers*, *BOMB Magazine*, *Topical Cream*, and *Movement Research Journal*.

Roxana Fabius

Roxana Fabius is a Uruguayan curator and art administrator based in New York City. Between 2016 and 2022 she was Executive Director at A.I.R. Gallery, the first artist-run feminist cooperative space in the U.S. During her tenure at A.I.R. she organized programs and exhibitions with artists and thinkers such as Gordon Hall, Elizabeth Povinelli, Jack Halberstam, Che Gosset, Regina José Galindo, Lex Brown, Kazuko, Zarina, Mindy Seu, Naama Tzabar, and Howardena Pindell among many others. These exhibitions, programs and special commissions were made in collaboration with international institutions such as the Whitney Museum, Google Arts and Culture, The Feminist Institute, and Frieze Art Fair in New York and London. Fabius has served as an adjunct professor for the Curatorial Practices seminar at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, and Tel Aviv University. She has also taught at Parsons at The New School, City University of New York, Syracuse University, and Rutgers University. She is currently curating the 2024 exhibition series “Cantando Bajito” at the Ford Foundation Gallery.

Beya Othmani

Beya Othmani is an art curator and researcher from Algeria and Tunisia, dividing her time between Tunis and New York. Currently, she is the C-MAP Africa Fellow at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. Her recent curatorial projects include the Ljubljana 35th Graphic Arts Biennial and Publishing Practices #2 at Archive Berlin. Previously, she took part in the curatorial teams of various projects with sonsbeek20→24 (2020), the Forum Expanded of the Berlinale (2019), and the Dak'Art 13

Biennial (2018), among others, and was a curatorial assistant at the Berlin-based art space, SAVVY Contemporary. Some of her latest curatorial projects explored radical feminist publishing practices, post-colonial histories of print-making, and the construction of racial identities in art in colonial and post-colonial Africa.

About the Ford Foundation Gallery

Opened in March 2019 at the Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice in New York City, [the Ford Foundation Gallery](#) spotlights artwork that wrestles with difficult questions, calls out injustice, and points the way toward a fair and just future. The gallery functions as a responsive and adaptive space and one that serves the public in its openness to experimentation, contemplation, and conversation. Located near the United Nations, it draws visitors from around the world, addresses questions that cross borders, and speaks to the universal struggle for human dignity.

The gallery is free and open to the public Monday through Saturday, 11a.m.-6p.m. It is accessible to the public through the Ford Foundation building entrance on 43rd Street, east of Second Avenue.

About the Ford Foundation

[The Ford Foundation](#) is an independent organization working to address inequality and build a future grounded in justice. For more than 85 years, it has supported visionaries on the frontlines of social change worldwide, guided by its mission to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement. Today, with an endowment of \$16 billion, the foundation has headquarters in New York and 10 regional offices across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Learn more at www.fordfoundation.org.

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