

From an ecological perspective, we are never alone. How it is, exactly, that we fit into the larger systems of our lives is difficult to comprehend; even though we feel the impact of each other's actions every day. Understanding our place in the world takes a little bit of imagination and finding purpose takes a lot of introspection. This elastic process of looking outwards and searching inwards inevitably leads towards existential contradictions. Isn't it wonderful to know people who can embrace them?

The four artists featured in *Ecology and Collage*, Noel Puello, Vessna Scheff, Jordan Deal, and Chloe Luisa Piñero, are dissimilar in materials, process, and concepts. However when placed together, their work speaks to the vibrant world that we inhabit and our potential to access it.

The artists are playful and purposeful. They highlight the incongruencies of life; the rift between pleasure and ethics, being hurt and being heard, the ecstasy of grieving and the seduction of familiar haunts.

Noel Puello is part of a movement referred to as “slow fashion,” which is a process of clothing creation with a conscious concern towards ethical material sourcing and equitable labor practices. Her designs are fabricated with a range of upcycled materials: deadstock fabric, curtains, bedsheets, duvets, and thrifted clothing. The multi-faceted histories of the source materials are highlighted in the designs, where textures and colors clash with lavish drama.

The clothing constructed by Noel Puello does not have “hanger appeal,” a term used within the fashion industry to describe the

appeal of a garment when on display. Puello's creations are typically asymmetrical, feature ornamental flourishes and are designed to drape over the body. The garments composed by Puello are best seen on people — especially if those people are a part of Puello's community and family. Fashion photography is an important element of Puello's work; the images indicate how the clothing can be worn and they emphasize that a variety of genders and body types can wear her pieces. The photo series featured in *Ecology and Collage* is shot by photographer Becky Mcneel and feature Bianca as the model, who poses with poise and exuberance.

One of Puello's favorite materials to work with is men's dress shirts. Sourcing abandoned dress shirts is easy and Puello can tie-dye and deconstruct the material

with relative ease. The social and physical rigidity of men's button ups come apart under Puello's hands. There is a love for queerness here. As we approach the future of ethical and inclusive fashion, we should be sure to recall that creators like Puello are laying the groundwork for whatever should come next.

Why is there a connection between queerness and collage? If the work of Chloe Luisa Piñero is any indication, assembling materials together is an act of desire. Aesthetic beauty can be achieved by combining content that's considered to be pretty but, what Piñero does especially well is contextualize standardizations of beauty within an perennially decaying consumer culture. Daily encounters with models, advertisements, food packaging and detritus are documented into

shimmering artworks that reflect her ruminations on place and desire.

At times, Piñero will compose her collages around a deconstructed figure (a model, a social media influencer) and will then surround the subject with a series of rectangular borders and frames. This multiplicitous framing is its own liminal space, one where material choices and treatments vary greatly from piece to piece. The borders of “Back Seat” include: a white sheet of paper, the exposed back of a canvas, and various found materials which have been rolled into clear plastic tubes. Squiggles of oil paint, glitter, a beaded necklace, and small gems form the border of “Star.” Our desires are contextual, especially when that desire is for women, who exist within layers of exposure,

self-possession, exploitation, and reclamation.

There is only one non-figurative piece by Piñero in *Ecology and Collage*. “Untitled (Finca 2)” features a scattered selection of appropriated imagery and found objects gathered in Philadelphia. For Piñero, these materials are reminiscent of her father’s home in Puerto Rico. The piece has a more vertically-oriented composition than the other works that Piñero presents; strips of printed material lay over each other and reach over the top of the canvas. They are visually held together by two bands of ribbon that stretch parallel at the bottom of the canvas. Primarily, the piece is green and brown, the only exception being two clumps of hot pink streamers. Piñero compliments the earthy tones of her father’s farmland with a pop of enthusiastic color.

“Untitled (Finca 2)” is an imitation of a place, an abstraction and a wish.

Of all of the participating artists, Vessna Scheff uses the most traditional materials: watercolors, ink and graphite on paper. Through this media, Scheff investigates mark making and color. After these investigations are committed to paper, Scheff cuts up her compositions and recomposes them into elegant collages. From here, she may continue to add color and line work, creating pieces that are dense with methodical gestures. Scheff largely works on a small scale, preferring to emphasize a single brush stroke or a dancing line of graphite.

Scheff’s meditative practice expands beyond formal considerations. The artist is conscious of the multi-dualism of being a mixed-race Black woman who is working in

a medium that is both considered to be traditional and yet is unseen in many contemporary art spaces. Scheff's considerations of how identity and content can merge are apparent in "Dear Apology." The work consists of a collage that has a short letter written on the back. The letter is addressed to "Apology" and in it the speaker lists what "sorry means" in a series of axioms. "Sorry means - I believe what I did was wrong. Sorry means - I regret doing it." The last statement reads, "Sorry means - Reparations" and is signed, "Love, Equity."

"What is Equality Gonna Look Like?" and "How Do We Heal The Haters?" are two works created by Scheff that were produced while she listened to a conversation between Angela Davis and adrienne maree brown. Each piece features the image of a Black woman, who has been

assembled out of print cut-outs. Their far off gazes and soft smiles imply a moment of contemplation. The title of each piece is collaged into the composition. The speculative questions that are presented, of course, do not have direct answers. An artist, Scheff is uniquely interested in the spaces between questions and answers.

In addition to being a visual artist, Scheff is also a musician and performer. For *Ecology and Collage*, Scheff has experimented with matching her own music with close-up footage of her watercolor piece, "When You Feel Safe To Be You." This is not the first time Scheff has combined painting and performing. For Scheff, watercolors have a temporal experience similar to music. Relatively, watercolors on paper are extremely ephemeral compared to arts painted in oil

or sculpted from clay. Merging watercolor and performance emphasizes the fleeting nature of both, resulting in the creation moments, not monuments.

In the work of Jordan Deal, moments of transformation are retold through poems, stories, and rituals. In their poem, “I was kissed by the moon,” Deal recounts how they fell in love with the moon during a night of close watchfulness. They describe returning to the “inner altar” that they had built inside of themselves and the hope to see new growth from this place of sacredness. “Winged pilgrimages to paradise” is a video performance in which Deal, with great fervor, recites their poem that details a journey to the foreign present. Deal begins lying face up on a mattress before descending off of the bed and crumpling onto the floor. Their shrieks of

narration are punctuated by laughter, by coughs, and gasps for air. It is a channeling of ancestral energies.

“Primordial Supper” features a recorded conversation between Deal and their grandmother. The audio is played over footage of Deal washing family photographs under water before covering them with boiled honey and salt. The two talk about family histories and the sensory experiences that remind them of home. The cleansing rituals that Deal enacts both reveal and conceal the content of the imagery. How could one truly expose the full weight of family history? The camera recording the action is very close to the water and to the photographs, as if we are holding them ourselves.