Anthony D. Stepter shares the work of Damali Abrams and Jacquelyn Carmen Guerrero, whose practices revolve around creating spaces of celebration and healing through the influence of Afro-Caribbean culture.


Some very common words have relatively fluid definitions despite their popularity.

If joy were a thing we could buy, or catch on our smartphones, you can bet it would be ubiquitous. If it were easy to identify by its component parts or even its standard characteristics, we would pursue it and probably over-consume it. But, for better or for worse, joy is more like a process than a product.

At least two of the artists in ¿Qué Pasa, USA? embrace the slippery and shifting nature of concepts like energy and joy that may be easier to feel than to philosophize. Damali Abrams the Glitter Priestess and Jacquelyn Carmen Guerrero, also known as CQQCHIFRUÍT, challenge common notions of artmaking and singular identity by working in a wide range of modes, locations, and articulations. These two artists also leave a lot of room, very intentionally, to honor the subjective experience of those who come in contact with objects and performances they create. Abrams and Guerrero are not afraid of viewers and participants reading the work through whatever lens seems most meaningful. In fact, they celebrate and find strength, comfort, and generative vulnerability in the idea that each person who encounters the work will make their own connection.
Both Abrams and Guerrero take reverent inspiration from Afro-Caribbean culture in their personal biographies as well as in the pieces that manifest. Each has paid attention to notions of gender and expectations around performing in public what is often confined to private spaces. Abrams once staged a public reading of childhood journal entries to deal with the fear of sharing what she wrote over the previous twenty years. The queering of bodies and presence of Queer bodies, often CQCHIFRUIT’s own, push aside conventions about the performance of gender. While the overlaps and affinities between these two artists are fruitful, each addresses a range of emotions and histories in powerfully unique ways.

That Old Black Magic (2016), Abrams’ installation in ¿Qué Pasa, USA?, includes collaged images set in an underwater seascape. Projected text appears above the scene. Variations on the phrase “and they lived happily ever after” take turns appearing and disappearing. Each new iteration of the phrase within the loop replaces a pronoun to shift the subject’s gender, individual, or group identification. “she lived… he lived… they lived… we lived….” According to Abrams, this open-ended phrasing is designed to be both expansive and curious. The artist challenges the viewer to think about who is able to live happily and who is often excluded from such ever afters.

Those familiar with Drexciya will immediately make a connection between Abrams’ underwater collage and the story of Drexciyans who, according to lore, are descendants from pregnant women thrown into the Atlantic Ocean during the Middle Passage whose children adapted to life underwater. While this formal relationship is strong, the underlying idea makes for an even more meaningful connection. Abrams wants her work to help liberate “Black imagination from Black tragedy to Black fantasy.” This idea is the weft that holds together Abrams’ multifaceted practice which is just as likely to manifest in a two-dimensional work as in a performance. For ¿Qué Pasa, USA?, Abrams will also visit Charlotte Street Foundation and offer a workshop on making lavender honey and tea that functions both as performance and as literal space for healing and learning. Abrams draws on training in herbal healing as well as time spent in some of the most well-known art schools to create work that pushes on boundaries like water on a shore, constantly moving, adapting to our surroundings, and making an impact that may seem subtle up close, but that can actually define the way we see the world.

What if changing the world is not just about changing this world, but about making new ones as well? This, undoubtedly, is a power possessed by CQQCHIFRUIT.

Visitors to *¿Qué Pasa, USA?* will encounter Cqqchi’s installation *La Playa Sagrada / Glitter Beach* (2016). Guerrero has made these installations before—most recently in Chicago for an exhibition celebrating the ten-year anniversary of Chances Dances, a Queer nightlife collective where CQQCHIFRUIT is a DJ and organizer. The space of the installation in Chicago took weeks to transform and was crafted with deeply alluring materials (glitter, sand, sewn-together sequined dresses, etc…) but was also so elaborately constructed that visitors always registered but resisted the urge to play on the beach. Eventually, CQQCHIFRUIT and fellow artist Sofia Moreno activated the space through a performance that took place in the middle of the exhibition run. For the remaining weeks of the exhibition, the Glitter Beach showed the marks left by the bodies of the performers who had moved through the sand, mixing the neatly lined waves of glitter into a still-sparkling admixture of color and texture.

CQQCHIFRUIT creates installations, outfits, and DJ sets that are at once distinct and instantly recognizable as being of and by the same artist. When asked about the difference between an embodied performance piece and DJing, CQQCHIFRUIT noted, “My intentions are emotionally similar BUT there is a different kind of physical transcendence I am after—the release of energy from the inside out. For thousands of years, the vibrations of music and sound have been used for healing, and the potential for healing on the dance floor is huge.”

At a moment when stress, another one of those concepts that is easier to feel than to define, is in abundance in everyday life, Abrams and Guerrero make art that makes space for release. On the dance floor, over tea, underwater, or in the ever after, these artists draw in their publics to help us all go deeper.