

BmoreArt

Reclamando Mi Tiempo, Reclamando Lo Mío: **Amber Robles-Gordon**

The DC-based artist's new new work explores community through reclaimed cultural practices around music and dance.

June 9, 2023

By Claudia M. Watts

A fixture on D.C.'s arts scene for roughly two decades, Amber Robles-Gordon has developed her artistic practice over a variety of media. Using collage, assemblage, textiles, and sculpture, she imbues found objects with new meaning to facilitate dialogues about history and heritage, theory and practice, spirit, and self.

Born in Puerto Rico and raised in Arlington, VA, she returned to her home country in 2019 at the age of 41 for an exhibition at the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, in San Juan. A pilgrimage of sorts, her time on the island inspired two additional series and led Robles-Gordon to engage with performance as the focus for her latest project. A catalyst for channeling spiritual action, this new work explores the layered meanings of community through reclaimed cultural practices around music and dance.



Portrait by Kelvin Bulluck

What drives you to be an artist? What's at stake for you in creation and how do you feel like it's evolved over time?

It began as learning how to listen to my connection to spirit. It started really early for me. Simple things like finding something sparkly on the ground, and being elated. I was that child that had to pick it up and that had to keep it.



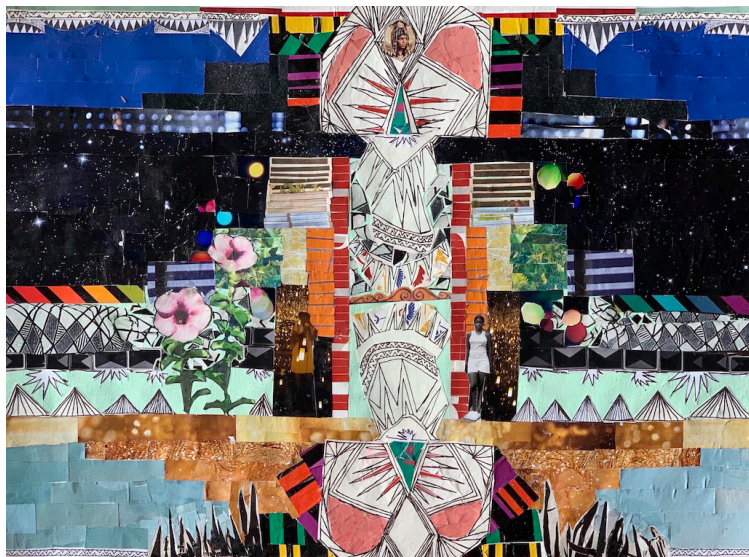
Tendederos, Comunidad y Energia, Mixed Media

Before I knew I was going to create, I knew I would be a collector, I knew that they were gifts. Seeing something that triggered a certain reaction in me, whether it's being drawn to the color, drawn to the material, to the texture, for me that has been something that is ingrained throughout my career, and existence.

It has absolutely evolved, the more you get exposed to the various aspects of society, science, politics, economics and some of the craziness in this world... Each adds layers to what I create and what I try to convey through my artwork.

In terms of the items you collect, in connection to Spirit, do any of them ever ask to be released, beyond being used in your artwork?

Huh. That's a neat question. <laugh>. So yes and no. Throughout the years I've given things away to someone with a more immediate need. Everything else is



Botanica del Amor, Autorreflexion y Espiritualidad, Mixed Media

deposited back into the database of materials.

Can you speak a little more about this database?

I have a system of boxes that are organized by materials or resources. Boxes of golf balls, <laugh>plastic flower pedals, jewelry, stamps and so on. It's a resource center. I'm so entrained to consider materiality versus my narrative. That I always need to have something in each category to utilize a visual reference.

So, based on what I've read, it seems your first adult trip back to Puerto Rico was very impactful for you. Looking at some of the different decisions you made in your 2021 series, *Breath and Birth*, I thought it was really interesting, across works, the central figure resembling roots, are all done in pen and surrounded by a mix of other materials. Can you speak to the significance of keeping that central imagery throughout and why you chose to use the ink pen?



Portrait by Kelvin Bulluck

I find it fascinating that the centering began from a promise to myself. I promised myself that for those two weeks I was going to draw every day. I was preparing for a solo show at Sacred Heart University in Puerto Rico and they have an arboretum on their campus. One of the first trees I encountered was this beautiful ficus elastica (rubber plant tree). I immediately thought this is what roots and ancestry looks like.

When I investigated the tree further, I found that the roots can sometimes be so thick that they literally cover the trunk of the tree. The roots go all the way up and then come down and hang. Above the roots you see the foliage. I remember going back to where we were staying on the university's campus and I just started drawing. After a few days, I realized, I am abstracting the rubber tree. And, I remember looking at my sketches and thinking, okay, this is going to

be the foundational layer.

Where are you drawing inspiration for your latest project, what's been calling you as you work through Reclamando Mi Tiempo, Reclamando Lo Mío (reclaiming my time, reclaiming what is mine)?

I am working in collaboration with CulturalDC where I'm exploring Bomba, an Afro-Puerto Rican dance. It's a community built through dance practice originally brought from West Africa to Puerto Rico by enslaved people.

I am approaching this as a theoretical practice. There are families that have historically taught, performed, and made it their own. It was like my ancestors were saying, 'Amber, you need to do this.' Not only is it a cultural journey, it's a spiritual and artistic journey and I've



Isla del Encanto II, Mixed Media

been working for a while trying to figure out how to make this happen.

The other aspect of this project is that I not only want to do two-dimensional artwork around it, I also want to be able to create a mini documentary about the experience of learning about the dance, the culture. I'm 45 (laughter) and I'm a pretty fit, but I'm not a dancer.

You're channeling the work through your body in a very different way than when you're making two-dimensional objects. Can you describe this change in media?

To some extent, I've always been an active person. I had herniated discs from a fall when I was twenty-four, so I decided to become a yoga and Pilates teacher in an attempt to manage the pain and stimulate healing.

A personal yoga practice isn't performance, yet while teaching it you're inviting people to experience it with you. To some extent, that is absolutely what I do through my artwork. It's an invitation to be participatory via action or contemplation. I can't recall the moment I realized I had to learn Bomba—I just knew all of a sudden, especially because it is practice for ongoing healing and joy.

I think that's really special, because Bomba is also giving you an opportunity to marry your African and Latinx heritage spiritually and physically.

I'm enjoying it. I finally found a teacher and I've also invited a group of women to do it with me. I've always tried to remind myself to invite others because I don't believe this world is only about solitary actions.

I specifically look for people that might benefit from the same search that I'm in for community, spirituality... For example, my mom. It just adds to the layers of things that we've been able to share and benefit from together and that feels beautiful. I've also got a curator that's doing this with me and another artist who was my apprentice for a while and now she's her own fully formed artist self and she's bringing her mother.

When does this exhibition open?

I can't even give you a date. It's a long-term project because we have to learn the dance. We are recording as we go along—information sessions and dialogue with the teacher and myself, individual interviews with some of the drummers, dancers, and other people who have been connoisseurs of Bomba. I am really excited and encouraged by what's coming next.

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