

Peruvian artist's latest work addresses the trauma of the Latina immigrant experience

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By Contributor

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Mabel Valdiviezo and Juliana Mendonca perform "Metamorphosis" at CounterPulse in San Francisco, on Thursday, July 18, 2019. "Metamorphosis" combines dance performance, interactive visuals, and shamanic storytelling to explore the rising mental health crisis among Latinx immigrant women as a result of their undocumented status and forced family separation. Courtesy: Robbie Sweeny

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In response to the increasingly severe climate of tragedy and trauma within the immigrant community, Peruvian artist Mabel Valdiviezo is forging a path to healing with her upcoming performance piece "Metamorphosis: Phase 1."

Coming to San Francisco's CounterPulse this September, "Metamorphosis: Phase 1" is a multimedia dance performance that combines shamanic storytelling with interactive visuals and sounds to explore the intersection of forced family separation, trauma, and the well-

being of Latinx immigrant women.

In addition to the physical obstacles that immigrants face during their journeys, Valdiviezo aims to shine a light on the mental and spiritual borders that are crossed, specifically for Latinx immigrant women.





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“Immigrant women have historically had to endure deeply embedded traumas throughout their physical journey from their countries of origin to somewhere new, but they also suffer internal trauma upon arrival,” said Valdiviezo. “The criminalization of immigrant families in the U.S. creates a mental and spiritual wound in these women, which is occurring more now than ever before. The purpose of this piece is to combine the practice of Indigenous dance and technology to help find a transition from their trials and tribulations to a place that can lead to healing in gender, community, and cultural contexts.”

Valdiviezo’s experimental approach, combining Indigenous healing practices with computer technology, produces an innovative opportunity for viewers to reflect on the trauma inflicted on immigrant women on a regular basis. Valdiviezo says this fusion of elements can also serve as a vehicle of healing for viewers depending on their interpretation. She describes a specific scene in her piece in detail, which utilizes thermography to illustrate moments of pain and fear without subjecting the audience to graphic images of violence.

“We see a woman who serves as an archetype of all Latinx immigrant women, who crosses the desert and finds herself in a place of death both in body and spirit,” said Valdiviezo. “In her spiritual death, she experiences an attack by an unknown force, possibly ICE officers, coyotes, the voices in her mind or hallucinations from lack of food and water. So we chose this type of technology to be mindful about how certain imagery can be used in this moment not to inflict more trauma but to be used in a way that can be symbolic.”



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Valdiviezo’s intention to facilitate healing has been unwavering in every decision made throughout the production of “Metamorphosi: Phase 1.” The incorporation of technology was handled particularly carefully considering today’s news media culture which often instigates retraumatization for profit.

With graphic images of pain, suffering, and even death within the immigrant community circulating through every media platform on a daily basis, Valdiviezo and her project partner Travis Bennet made a tremendous effort to implement technology in a way that would promote reflection, education, and healing.

“There is a rapacious culture, in that sense, in media today that is intentionally acted on. I make an effort to not feed into that kind of work because I see how a person’s nervous system can be harmed in being exposed to this kind of imagery all over again,” Valdiviezo

said. "This is not a reflection of my values nor Travis'. We consciously work in a way to avoid using technology in that way and only want to serve the purpose of honoring our stories and rehumanizing the story of immigrants, refugees, and women."



Mabel Valdiviezo, left, and Juliana Mendonca, right, perform "Metamorphosis" at CounterPulse in San Francisco, on July 18, 2019. Courtesy: Robbie Sweeny

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Valdiviezo draws from her own personal experience as a Peruvian immigrant fleeing oppression, persecution and a crumbling economy in 1993. After witnessing close friends and comrades within the Peruvian punk movement fall into trouble with the government, Valdiviezo realized she could no longer live in a country that would restrict her freedom of expression.

"Much like today, young people were very rebellious and politically active," Valdiviezo said. "Once I began seeing my friends apprehended and thrown in jail, I knew I had to get out. I knew I couldn't find a way to live freely as a young woman, there was no way for me to develop myself there."

Valdiviezo sought out creative outlets that would promote healing of the trauma she carried with her upon her arrival to the United States. Various forms of art served her well as she moved from storytelling and filmmaking to dance. Valdiviezo continues to research the healing properties of Indigenous ceremonial dance, feeling the call to make these resources accessible to communities who suffer from similar traumas. It was from her personal journey of healing that this community-oriented performance piece was born.





Juliana Mendonca performs “Metamorphosis” at CounterPulse in San Francisco, on July 18, 2019. Courtesy: Robbie Sweeny

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“We are facilitating a series of free Art for Healing workshops for immigrant women at La Voz Latina in The Tenderloin and in the Mission District as a way of building empowerment and resilience through collage, drawing, painting, and dance movement,” Valdiviezo said. “The performance and the workshops aim to alleviate the stress felt by the Latinx community due to inhumane immigration policies that are directly impacting immigrant families and exposing them to post-traumatic stress. We will honor the creativity and courage of immigrant women with a community art exhibit at CounterPulse during our September performances.”

The choices that immigrant women are forced to make to ensure survival can be very difficult. Upon her exploration of questions like “How do I survive these experiences? What does survival look like?,” Valdiviezo’s liberating performance piece enlightens viewers to the answer that the goal is not to merely survive, but to live free of the traumas that weigh us down.

“Metamorphosis: Phase 1” will run Sept.12-14 and Sept 19-21, 8 p.m. at CounterPulse, 80 Turk St. San Francisco

Story by: Elissa Jimenez