Uzumaki Cepeda: Safe Space
Tour Notes
On View September 20, 2019 - November 3, 2019

SUMMARY

Uzumaki Cepeda: Safe Space features a tableau of plush everyday objects and furred household goods in a living room interior and garden landscapes. Complicating reality and the imaginary, for her first solo show Uzumaki constructs a disorienting fur environment grounded in ordinary household goods, furniture, and references from popular culture, in her own interpretation of a safe space where Black and brown are welcome to exist as they are. Soft corners and plush grounds invite touch, tenderness, and play, while overwhelmingly bright and bold colors are mismatched together. Her soft, brightly-colored faux fur transforms ordinary spaces and discarded objects into kaleidoscopic environments that offer us another possible world—vibrant, inclusive, and safe for everyone.

FEATURED ARTIST

Julianna "Uzumaki" Cepeda (Bronx-born, Los Angeles-based) makes sculptures, paintings, installations, collage, and photography that examine how senses of safety, comfort, and agency are negotiated through objects and space. As a first-generation American woman of Dominican heritage, Uzumaki’s textile tableau act as safe spaces for Black and brown people who feel unprotected by American public life and policies. Her practice consists of transforming everyday, often found objects with brightly-colored faux fur to create interactive installations informed by traditional iconography of domestic spaces. Uzumaki’s dream-like and vibrant work draws from her childhood imagination growing up both on the islands of the Dominican Republic and in the Bronx. Cepeda’s interactive installations have been shown at the Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles, CA (2018) Contemporary Native Art Biennial, Art Mûr Montréal, Canada (2018); Agenda
Show, Los Angeles, CA (2018); Reparations Club Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (2019), Complex Con, Long Beach, CA (2016 and 2019), Refinery29 Rooms (2019). She has been featured in print and digital publications including Forbes, Teen Vogue, Paper, NYLON, i-D, Hypeallergic, L.A. Weekly and The Fader.
WHAT IS A SAFE SPACE?

“Safe Space” has been a popular term in the past few years, often referring to educational and political spaces. However, Cepeda’s exhibition centers the idea of the safe space within the context of black and brown individuals who often have nowhere to turn for peace of mind. Cepeda’s safe space also reflects her own upbringing, in which she often felt uncomfortable in her family’s home. The recreation of spaces such as bedrooms, living rooms, and backyards allows Cepeda to re-appropriate spaces that were often harsh and unwelcoming for her into surreal soft landscapes where all guests feel welcome.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a “safe space” is “a place (as on a college campus) intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations”\(^1\). Cepeda takes this definition a step further by creating spaces that are literally soft to the touch. The concept of the safe space has faced controversy in recent years, with many stating that they inhibit young people from learning about opposing points of views. The use of the term in Cepeda’s installation is less about the educational context of the term and more about the personal connection to a given space.

KEY TERMS

SAFE SPACE: a place in which individuals feel free of discrimination and criticism for the way in which they were born

INCLUSIVE: an environment in which individuals of various backgrounds are accepted

COMFORTABILITY: the condition of being at ease

TABLEAU: a graphic representation of a scene

DOMESTIC SPACE: a private household space

HOME: a place where an individual lives. This terms can also refer to a feeling that an individual feels when in a space that makes them feel safe and comfortable, whether it be

QUESTIONS

1. What is a “safe space”?
2. How can individuals create safe spaces?
3. Who benefits from the creation of safe spaces?
4. Why does Cepeda use fur as a medium in her artwork?
5. How does the use of fur relate to the concept of a safe space?
6. What objects are present in the exhibition? What is the purpose of these objects?
7. Why is the space split into two sections - living room and backyard? What feelings do each of these spaces evoke?
8. How do the bright colors used in the exhibition influence the overall experience?
9. In what ways are Black and Brown people often excluded from environments?
10. Which environments are Black and Brown people excluded from?
11. How can institutions create safer environments for Black and Brown people?
EXHIBITION THEMES

1. FAUX FUR

**Softness and Comfortability**

The main component of Safe Space and Cepeda’s general artistic practice is the use of faux fur. Fur serves as a comfortable, soft surface alluding to the concept of safety. Regular household decor involves hard floors, hard solid walls, and hard objects, however, Cepeda takes surfaces that are often hard and turns them into soft sculptures. Guests can touch and play with the fur on the walls and even lay on the floor.

2. PLAYFULNESS

**Interactive and Immersive**

Safe Space is an interactive experience involving touch. Every object and surface can be touched except for Cepeda’s paintings. This breaks the idea of a traditional museum setting in which visitors cannot even stand close to works of art.

3. HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS

**What Makes a House a Home?**

Safe Space is decorated with an array of objects such as: couch, a rocking chair, a functioning TV with a vintage video game console, a clothes line with real clothes hanging from it, religious statues surrounded by roses, an arch covered in vines, a functioning water fountain, and books. A variety of books rest on the fur-covered coffee table, available for visitors to read. The books cover different topics such as the African identity, sexuality, African art, and pop culture. The books are meant to not only reflect the array of books that build up over the years in someone’s home, but also the concepts present in the exhibition itself.

4. TWO DISTINCT SPACES: INDOOR VS. OUTDOOR

**Living Room**

The living room space features a couch, rocking chair, video game console, paintings, and books that visitors can interact with. The space is meant to mimic a traditional living room space, however, instead of blank walls and wood floors, Cepeda’s space is covered in faux fur to add a feeling of comfort.
**Backyard**

The space then transforms into a backyard, giving visitors a feeling that they are exiting their living room into a backyard setting. The backyard is differentiated from the living room space through the use of turf as the floor surface, representing grass. The backyard space also features a fountain with coins, a picnic basket, boom box, clothes line, and religious statue. The clothes line and the religious statute are meant to represent objects commonly found in the artist’s Dominican household.

**5. CEPEDA’S HERITAGE & BACKGROUND**

**Dominican Republic to the Bronx**

Cepeda’s family hails from the Dominican Republic, a tropical Caribbean island featuring colorful landscapes. Cepeda grew up in the Bronx in New York City which is known for being home to many vibrant cultures including individuals from the Dominican Republic. Her use of bright colors and soft textures is a direct response to her culture and upbringing. Cepeda’s work also caters to a diverse range of black and brown people who live in the Dominican Republic. Often times black and brown people are made to feel unsafe either at home, out of the home, or sometimes both. Cepeda’s work directly tackles this issue through an artistic medium.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & INFLUENCES**

**ANIME & MANGA**

Cepeda is deeply influenced by anime and manga because of the striking visual elements such as bright color palettes, stylized characters, and surreal other-worldly landscapes. Her main influences are as follows:

- **Hayao Miyazaki** (anime film director)

Miyazaki, b. 1941, is a Japanese animator, filmmaker, and manga artist. He is known for his mind-blowing films such as *Castle in the Sky*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, and *Spirited Away*. His films center on topics such as environmentalism, feminism, pacifism, love, and family. His characters often embark on a journey in which they must overcome some sort of adversity - whether external or internal. Cepeda’s work represents her own method of overcoming adversity in her personal life through creating her own world.
• **Yu Yu Hakusho**

Yu Yu Hakusho is a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Yoshihiro Togashi. The series tells the story of Yusuke Urameshi, a teenage delinquent who is struck and killed by a car while attempting to save a child’s life. Once in the underworld, he is appointed as an “Underworld Detective” who must investigate demons in the human world. Similar to Uzumaki’s work, the show uses bright colors and striking graphics and focuses on the theme of one’s personal journeys.

• **Samurai Champloo**

Samurai Champloo is an anime series that follows Mugen, an impudent and freedom-loving vagrant swordsman; Jin, a composed and stoic rōnin; and Fuu, a brave girl who asks them to accompany her in her quest across Japan to find the "samurai who smells of sunflowers". The word “Champloo” means “mixed up” or “stirred together,” which influences Cepeda’s mixed media style.

• **Naruto**

Naruto is a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Masashi Kishimoto. It tells the story of Naruto Uzumaki, a young ninja who seeks to gain recognition from his peers and also dreams of becoming the Hokage, the leader of his village. This relates to the ways in which Cepeda uses her art to create a new narrative of possibilities for herself and her family.

• **Avatar: The Last Airbender**

Avatar is an anime series following a young air bender who uses his skills to counteract elements such as air, water, and fire. The main character Aang, is on a quest to bring peace to the world by defeating a war started by the Fire Lord. Cepeda deeply resonates with the quest to ensure peace and safety.

• **Bleach**

Bleach is a manga turned anime series following the main character Ichigo, who is one of the few chosen guardians of the afterlife. Ichigo guides spirits to the afterlife and defends humans from the evil spirits. Bleach very much plays with the idea of safety and protection in the same way Cepeda’s installations focus on the creation of safe environments.

**BOOKS**

• **Magical Herbalism: The Secret Craft of the Wise** (Llewellyn's Practical Magick Series)
Magical Herbalism details a list of over 115 herbs and magical healing powers that are associated with each. Many of these herbs are meant to protect and heal, which relates to Cepeda’s desire to create healing spaces. The book also relates to the DIY elements and healing nature of Cepeda’s work. Cepeda creates all of the installations herself, teaching whoever is working with her at the time about her process and methods. Not only is the finished installation a healing endeavor, but the process of creating these soft spaces is also healing in itself.

VISUAL ARTISTS

- **JeeYoung Lee**

Lee is a South Korean visual artist who turns small rooms into surreal dreamscapes. Similar to Cepeda, Lee works to transform the entire space into an immersive interactive experience evoking a variety of emotions. She often uses bright colors and bold shapes.

- **Takashi Murakami**

Murakami is a contemporary Japanese artist who is known for his fine art and fashion pieces that blur the line between high and low art. He uses bright colors and cartoonish figures. You can see the connections between Cepeda and Murakami’s art through their playful use of materials.

- **Nick Cave**

Cave is an American sculptor, dancer, and performance artist. He often uses fabric within his work and is known for bringing sculpture to life with his “soundsuits.” Cave uses bright colors, various textures, and other worldly silhouettes to create his figures. Cepeda is inspired by Cave’s experimental and innovative approach to interactive artworks.
FEATURED WORKS

Safe Space features three of Cepeda’s large scale paintings which incorporates her signature use of fur along with paint and ink. Titles and sizes are as follows:

**Gemini**

Cepeda’s Gemini is large-scale mixed media painting featuring two components - painting on canvas as well as a large piece of fur that can be draped over the canvas in various ways. The title alludes to the duality of the gemini - how an individual can embody two identities at once.

**The person I loved fucked a wack artist**

Cepeda’s The person I loved fucked a wack artist is a large scale mixed media painting featuring abstract colorful brushstrokes of paint as well as collaged faux fur.

**777**

Cepeda’s 777, hanging above the couch, is a smaller scale piece featuring acrylic paint, ink, and collaged fur in her signature style.
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