

Pilar Corrias

Conversation #1

Ana Benaroya & Didier William



Ana Benaroya, *The Arrival of the Queen*, 2023



Didier William, *Redemption, Resurrection*, 2023

Didier William In the 1990s, after my family moved to the United States, cartoons were the source of my curiosity: Woody Woodpecker, the Gargoyles, the Looney Tunes gang. They offered foundations for learning English, and helped me understand how exaggeration, caricature and humour could affect how I read people in this new land. I wonder about fantastical rendering in your work – if and how it's affected by the cartoons that permeated much of '90s/early 2000s pop culture?

Ana Benaroya Growing up, I was a huge tomboy and collected action figures and any superhero comics I could get my hands on. I spent my days copying from the comics I collected, sports cards, any kind of imagery featuring these hyper-masculine bodies that I felt very connected to as a little girl. In large part because I wasn't seeing depictions of female characters or storylines in the media where I felt like, 'Oh yeah, that's my story'. So I latched onto these male figures because I thought they looked cool aesthetically and their stories were more compelling. They felt like the main character. That has stayed with me when I depict women today.

DW How were you reading gender in some of these fantastical cartoon narratives? And does that complexity of gender reflect itself in the work now? Your figures are epic, and to a certain extent larger than life. I think something is lost by calling them human, let alone women. They feel like totemic accumulations that become superhuman bodies that transcend any binary notion of gender.

AB I feel like the gender binary was clearly defined in the '90s, and so I turned to the fantastical world of comics and cartoons. The way that these hyper-masculine figures jumped through the air in these skintight, colourful costumes was very flamboyant. I was also really interested in how that binary reveals itself. Obviously as a kid I wasn't thinking about these things, but now I'm thinking about how I can use those stereotypes in a way where I'm combining both ends of the spectrum to complicate and confuse it. I like that you mentioned looking at the figures in my work as superhuman. It's almost a disservice to categorise them in any sort of way.

When looking at your figures, I'm always taken by their bulbous nature. I see musculature in them, but the bodies are faceless and almost amorphous. How do you relate to the world of comics in the bodies you depict?

DW The cartoons I've always been drawn to are the ones where superhuman feats are performed. The Incredible Hulk can move a building. The Juggernaut can run as fast as a bullet and barrel through concrete. All these creatures accomplish the impossible and transcend the limits of their human bodies. Of course, this is the undercurrent of many popular cartoons and animation strategies, and not dissimilar from how Rubens builds a body in one of his paintings – it's not that far from the tradition of academic figure painting.

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I wanted to give a full range of complex emotions to these characters that sometimes are referencing myself, friends and family, historical figures, etc. In their attempt to contain a complexity that spans multiple geographies and crosses multiple periods of time, they need to be larger than life. So I became interested in augmenting and exaggerating anatomy, in some cases inventing muscles that make no anatomical sense to highlight how these creatures have to adjust to a space in which gravity and ground are absent. Their bodies have to evolve.

AB How would you define where these figures live in the world of your paintings?

DW It's changed several times. In the most recent body of work, I've started to return to fantasy. I am looking at family narratives and am trying to retell those stories with their grandeur and mythos intact. As a child who left behind the country I understood to be home, my parents brought textiles that contained all these patterns, surfaces and iconography from someplace I had an ancestral relationship to but no memory of. So Haiti existed in the material world that surrounded us – it was both a physical and psychological condition. Space continues to change in my work. Currently, I'm looking at Louisiana as a site of contestation, a space that was sold to the United States to recoup the losses of the Haitian Revolution after Napoleon was defeated by Jean-Jacques Dessalines. That becomes a site of overlap between my adopted identity as an American and my ancestral identity as a Haitian.

I feel like there has been a deliberate turn to the fantastical by many artists our age. I have an idea why that is, but I'm curious to hear your thoughts on why so many of us seem to be looking at other worlds and at speculative futures where the bodies we're interested in might exist.

AB I can only speak to my own reasons for entering fantasy. As a child, I made up storylines and dialogues between all the action figures I collected. That kind of make-believe or fantasy is something I've held onto. Like you, I have these different places that my work takes place in. I often start with a very broad, stereotypical idea of how women have been depicted in popular culture or art history. My last body of work featured women by the water, and before that, women in cars. I start from a point where there's a lot of imagery to pull from as far as how feminine bodies have been seen through a male lens, and reinterpret it in my own language. I'm interested in fantasy's ability in making that translation possible. Not in such a literal way, but by inserting my own humour and playfulness in building these new worlds.

Thinking back to our discussion of comics: the special effects that appear in a comic like the *BOOM* and *POW*, the explosive lights, and almost abstract imagery that appears as a visualisation of action, is that something that you think about in the kinds of textures you create?

DW I love that question. I think about it two ways. Those areas allow me to give form to something that is essentially formless: a sound or an energy or a temperature; something that can be felt, but not really seen. Those are some of the toughest things to paint. How do I take those moments that are sensual and tactile and make them visible for the viewer, as a conduit to understanding the psychological condition of the body in front of them? But I also think of those moments as the parts of self that remain with and haunt you throughout life.

In my case, that could represent a moment when my family was trying to learn English or an experience with my parents at work; or my own experience as a foreign kid, a Haitian immigrant in Miami, traversing the different forms of legibility that I had to – be that linguistic or because I was queer and trying to hide it. The moments that were felt and never seen or spoken of. Those moments materialise in the air that's in the painting. I want to thicken those areas so that they almost become heavy and dense. That's often where a lot of the pattern and texture in the paintings comes from. I'm trying to make these things visible; oftentimes that's the evidentiary material that the viewer is going to use to understand what the body is doing, what psychological state it's in, and how to relate to it.

AB Do you view the figures you create as these emotional self-portraits? People often will ask me, 'Oh, are these autobiographical in any way?' Even though nothing about them seems based in reality.

DW I think every painting I make is a self-portrait. We don't set different parts of ourselves aside when we paint. They surface and we dial them up or down as needed. Even if I'm working on a painting about a historical moment or figure, it's heavily biased by my perspective and therefore probably has more to do with my voice than it does with any kind of archival history. The degree to which our work is self-portraiture is less interesting to me. What's more interesting is how we extend that part of the self into something that can relate to a collective community. That's when it becomes powerful. That's when the work has a life unto itself. They image moments of intense emotion that we have to regulate in our daily lives in various ways. In our paintings, we can allow those moments to become loose and feral. Therein lies the magic of painting; it reveals something about the world that we didn't already know and couldn't know otherwise.

AB Or about ourselves. I don't know if it directly correlates to drag, but through painting I'm able to be louder, more exuberant, more outgoing, more romantic, more sexual, more violent, more everything. That to me is the beauty of being an artist, really. You get to be a larger version of yourself, or reveal yourself in a way that you never would present your actual self to the world for whatever variety of reasons.