

AUNT CHLOE

ISSUE 2021

Nydia Blas

“I Attempt to Communicate Magic”

AUNT CHLOE: Why photography? What about it engages you? If not photography, what other medium would you work in?

BLAS: I was lucky enough to take a darkroom photography class in middle school, so at this point I have been making photos for over twenty-five years! Before photography I was into collage, which makes sense to me now because both are about arranging the world within four corners, a rectangle. Whether it is on a piece of paper or through the viewfinder of a camera, I like trying to make sense of the world. I am a composer. But there is something about photography, the ability to hide (behind the camera) and simultaneously take control.

In terms of another artistic medium, I would love to learn how to paint, so maybe painting. But maybe if I wasn't a photographer, writing would be my medium.

AUNT CHLOE: Which photograph from your body of work might best represent your total practice?

BLAS: I always think of the photograph entitled Honey Belly from my series *The Girls Who Spun Gold* as that photograph. I often end an artist talk with it and this poem by Lucille Clifton:



Honey Belly, 2016, *The Girls Who Spun Gold*

sisters

for elaine philip on her birthday

me and you be sisters.

we be the same.

me and you

coming from the same place.

me and you

be greasing our legs

touching up our edges.

me and you

be scared of rats

be stepping on roaches.

me and you

come running high down purdy street one time

and mama laugh and shake her head at

me and you.

me and you

got babies

got thirty-five

got black

let our hair go back

be loving ourselves

be loving ourselves

be sisters.

only where you sing

i poet.

Making a photograph is as much about the process as it is about the final image. I work in collaboration with my subjects and most importantly it is about spending time with each other. The photograph is just the proof of that exchange.

Samone was pregnant in her senior year of high school. I hadn't yet made an image of her pregnant belly and finally had a vision to "cover her belly in honey while [she is] wearing a fur coat." In retrospect, it is very much inspired by *Couple* (in raccoon coats), 1932, by James Van Der Zee, which is my favorite photograph of all time. On the day we made this photo we met at my friend Nia's house and decided to do it in her kitchen. We caught up, made dinner, made a cast of Samone's belly, we laughed, we cried, we drove Samone home in a snowstorm. For me, that day is just as memorable as the photograph that was made.



James Van Der Zee, *Couple*
(Harlem), 1932

AUNT CHLOE: In your work you have mentioned that "in order to maintain resiliency, a magical outlook is necessary." What do you mean by "magical outlook"? Where does yours come from? How does such an outlook maintain resiliency? Is it resiliency in terms of your own experiences, or others' experiences as well? How have you tried to translate that magical outlook into your work? Do you try to instill your subjects with it when you photograph them? If so, how?

BLAS: When I speak of magic, I am talking about belief. The choice to believe in something that we may not see. A fine line between what is real and what may be otherworldly. My magical outlook comes from childhood, when I was given the book *The People Could Fly*, a book of American Black folktales by Virginia Hamilton. In this book people fly and animals talk and I chose to believe what some would dispel. With the help of the beautiful illustrations these stories came to life and so did the magic within the pages. This continued as I read Zora Neale Hurston in high school and brought that magic to life. Today, magic is the beautiful light that comes through the window and dances on the wall, the woman in

Ikea that tells me my outfit is fire, seeing my students make beautiful work. Maybe it is confirmation that I should be here, that I am seen, that there is love, that there is god...

When I speak of resiliency, I am speaking about the power to endure. To be alive. To see a future for yourself and your people. To unapologetically stake that claim in a world that tries to kill you every day. I am saying life is hard and we need those bits of magic to push forward. To hold onto. To remind us of the warmth in an often cold world. But the magic is all around us, you just gotta tap in.

In my photographic work, I attempt to communicate this magic. Gold, bits of glitter, things that don't quite make sense. I cannot instill magic into my subjects; they are already magical beings. But I do attempt to reveal things they may not even see.

AUNT CHLOE: What subjects would you still like to explore with your work and why?

BLAS: I would like to photograph more boys and men. I enjoy photographing them in the same manner that I do girls and women. This is in collaboration, in a way that exposes who they are/how they present themselves, but also reveals the way in which I see/experience them.

AUNT CHLOE: Much of your work is informed by your own experiences as a "girl, woman, and mother," specifically presenting "through a Black feminine lens." How do you think your work is perceived through the Black masculine lens? What messages/narratives in your work would you like male viewers to understand?

BLAS: I don't usually think of the viewer when I am making images. I never really think about specifically addressing anyone other than the subject themselves. I believe that I make images in order to create a space for them to reside—to reveal the complicatedness of being a girl, woman, and mother. So, I guess in that way, if you are on the periphery, if you are looking in, the messages/narratives about this experience present themselves but you also have to be willing to meet them and ultimately yourself. You have to be willing to get curious about what you are looking at and how it relates to who you are—collectively and personally.

If anything, I want the images to implicate the viewer. When we look at anything, but specifically a piece of art, we are bringing our entire selves to it, our race, gender, sexuality, where we grew up, everything we have ever seen, etc. This shapes how we experience and make sense of what we are looking at.

I want male viewers to know that as girls and women we learn to please them. We learn to be agreeable, something to look at, to put others before ourselves, to compete with other women for their attention, to seek their approval, and be desired. We even learn that our bodies are about pleasing other people and not

ourselves. I want them to know how systems have been created to separate us, and that they also need to challenge the confines of gender and masculinity. That it is okay to have feelings, to cry, to be gentle, to heal, to not always be the problem solver...

Check out more visual art by Nydia Blas here.

(This interview was conducted via email by Abigail Gordon. Nydia Blas tintype photo on Aunt Chloe homepage by Rashod Taylor, 2021.)

Honey Belly, 2016, *The Girls Who Spun Gold*

James Van Der Zee, *Couple (Harlem)*, 1932

Nydia Blas, who grew up in Ithaca, New York, received a B.S. degree from Ithaca College and M.F.A. from Syracuse University's College of Visual and Performing Arts. She currently lives in Atlanta where she is an assistant professor in the department of Art and Visual Culture at Spelman College. Her photographs have been commissioned by The New York Times, The Atlantic, The New Yorker, and The Washington Post, among other publications. Her work has also been featured in several publications, including *Mfon: A Journal of Women Photographers of the African Diaspora*, The Huffington Post, The New York Times Style Magazine, Time, Refinery 29, and Frames Magazine. She has completed artist residencies at Constance Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts and The Center for Photography at Woodstock.

Nydia uses photography, collage, video, and books to address matters of sexuality, intimacy, and her lived experience as a girl, woman, and mother—weaving stories concerning circumstance, value, and power—to create a physical and allegorical space presented through a Black feminine lens. The result is an environment dependent upon the belief that in order to maintain resiliency a magical outlook is necessary.

Nydia is especially recognized for her work *The Girls Who Spun Gold*—a collection of images that resulted from the Girls Empowerment Group that she founded after observing a lack of space and community for teen girls of African descent in Ithaca, New York. In 2019, she was named “One to Watch” by the British Journal of Photography, and she was one of twelve participants for The World Press Photo Foundation's 26th edition of the Joop Swart Masterclass. In 2020, she was named on the Lit List, and in 2021, the Silver List.