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Davidoff Art Initiative's Resident Artist Monica Ferreras: Mambo with her self

By Jorge Alberto Perez Tuesday, March 4th, 2014 Categories: [Features](#), [Updates](#)

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In Dominican slang, to have ‘mambo’ with or against something means to be in battle with it, in a struggle, to question, to oppose it, to risk losing.

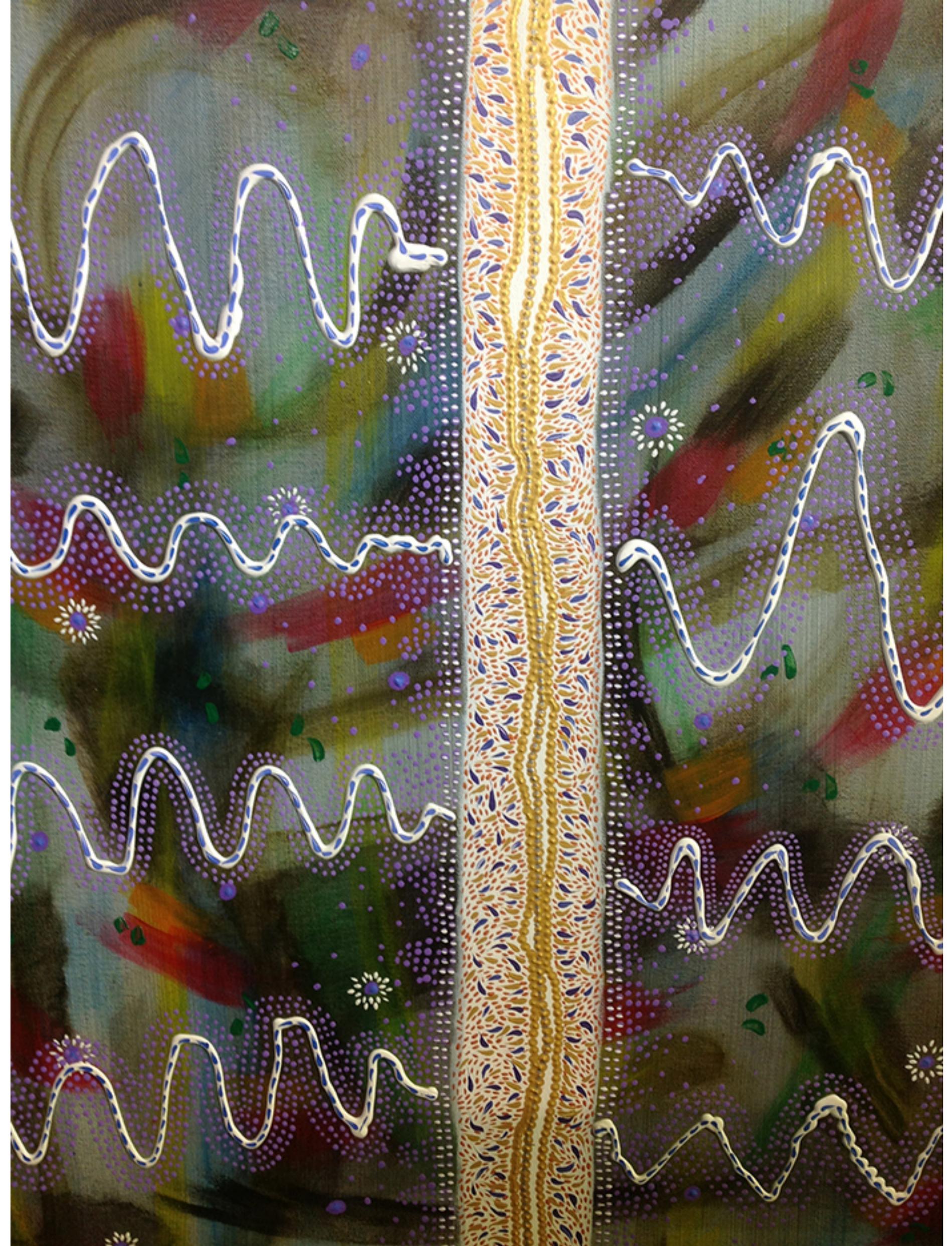
Months after meeting with Monica Ferreras de la Maza while she was in residence in New York City, months later after a brief 2 hour meeting and studio visit, her “Genesis” series of paintings came back to me like an unexpected deep breath, an unconscious reptilian brain inhalation of understanding. I got it. And how that understanding came to me is as unexpected as it could be.



Dominican Artist Mónica Ferreras De la Maza, participant of the Davidoff Art Residency program 2013 in partnership with ISCP.

Imagine the subway, post-rush hour: cold, wet New York City, post-holidays, before the snows, mid-week maybe, happy to get a seat, still plowing through “Goldfinch” steadily. Out of the corner of my eye I feel something, movement, something odd, not registering quite right. I look to see, to confirm, to make my awareness known as much as to become more aware. Already something is accumulating, leading me toward some overwhelming question. How can it be that the train grows silent because one person doesn’t speak, can’t speak, won’t speak? But he looks, looks at us all, each, as he moves through the train front to back with a gentle tiredness, an empty persistence, an openness to the ongoing moment, the condition he is in, with us, with me. It is hard to describe. There are connections. My head is tilted sideways, as I do, when waiting to understand what I am seeing, like a dog upon hearing a high-pitched sound unfamiliar to him. I am taken by the sudden silence and the theatricality of this figure of a young man, shuffling quietly alongside the benches of spectators, holding out his hand and looking into each face, not judgmentally if they don’t give, not accusingly if they turn away, but there is no apology either for his having asked, for being in need; there is dignity. He is present in his condition. That is how I summarize it. Or – he has surrendered. Something between the two.

Did I think all this before or after we looked into each other’s eyes?



Work from Monica Ferreras de la Maza's series 'Genesis' (2013). Photograph by Holly Bynoe.

Still from afar, I look at his clothes, his shoes, to understand the why and how of this scenario playing out before me. Wrong shoes for the cold rain. Yesterday's choice? Dressy, not new, but not worn out. Trousers, not jeans,

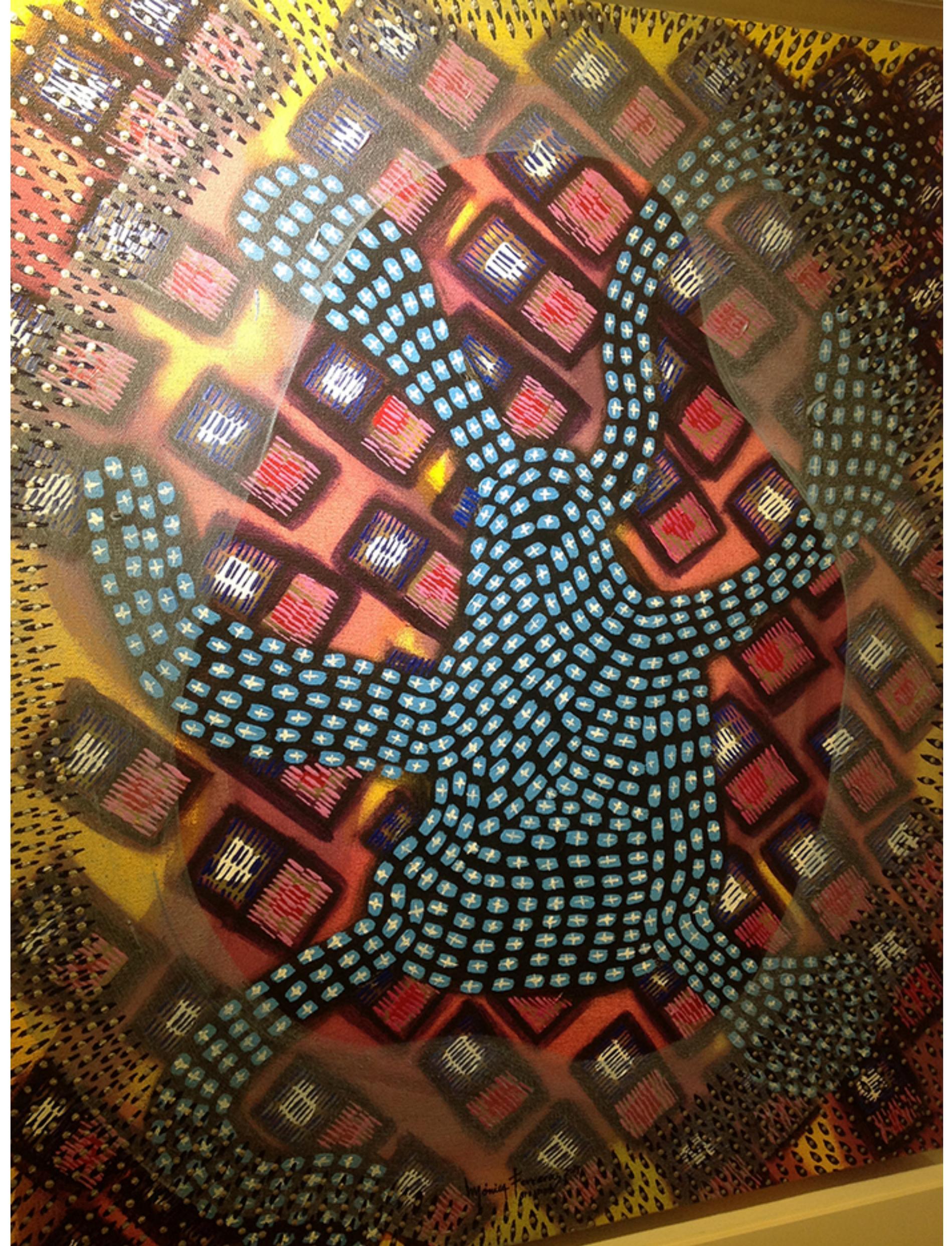
wet at the cuff. He has been walking outside recently. His sweater too is damp, I assume. His hair is neither messy nor neat. He shaved yesterday. He is getting closer. Other evaluations: he is not “white”, but maybe not “latino” either. Here again he is between things. I finally look away to check in with others in my vicinity, to gauge if anyone else has noticed how poignant this all appears, a scene of [Noh](#) theater, except that the human and the spirit have merged into one. He is ghostly I realize, a faraway apparition materializing before us. Is the train still moving? And like in Noh, I seem to be switching between two or more time frames, my thoughts, the train, a soaring sensation, the real, etc. He appears to float in his gravitas.



Work from Monica Ferreras de la Maza's series 'Genesis' (2013). Photograph by Holly Bynoe.

He is closer now, just turning slowly from the row of viewers opposite me. Finally I am able look into his eyes because I want to understand... it is a glance that lingers far longer than it should. His eyes are both empty and

full, both receptacle and reflection – and that is when I saw it, like a painting of light, an essential thing about him was revealed to me (and I to him?). This is when I took a deeper breath, an inspiration, because what came to mind was being in the studio with Monica and looking at her paintings, recalling our conversation. Because in that moment I understood what that indefinable energetic thing is that we humans carry around with us and only rarely reveal, by intention or not. It is what she had tried to put onto canvas... In that moment, and I know this all sounds so odd to some, but in that moment, I was present with him in that situation. I accepted him in his entirety and felt the reciprocation in kind. Whatever happened to make him be on that train that day asking for money (but not just money, a look of kindness?), whatever series of events led him to be on that train did not matter in the least. Our paths crossed and there was an exchange of – what? Vibration? Energy? Love? Souls?



Work from Monica Ferreras de la Maza's series 'Genesis' (2013). Photograph by Holly Bynoe.

[Ferreras](#) explained the fundamental aspect of the paintings in the "Genesis" series as representations of "el si mismo" which in Jungian terms is *the self* as a unification of an individual's consciousness and unconsciousness.

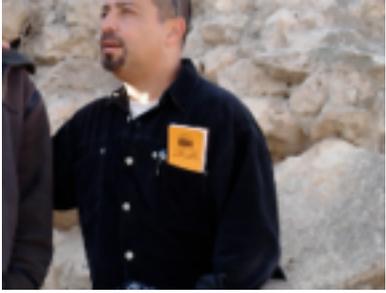
To her, this self is a merging of both the aspirational and the actual. Through the act of depicting her *self*, she becomes a contemporary with herself. These paintings also depict a moment of rebirth for the artist, a new genesis where other possibilities have become available. And oddly enough, like the man in the subway, there is a sincere and appropriate silence to her work that leaves it open, available to offer an exchange, as he did. There is an honest surrendering to the forces at play that have brought her to New York City. Having been selected as the first recipient of the Davidoff Art Initiative Residency program was the genesis of transformation as she tells it. Having previously been mired in bureaucratic frustration and artistic stagnation, the very sublimations of those emotions onto canvas became the catalyst for a change she could not have predicted. Perhaps it is the sincerity of the intention to depict, through an artistic language all her own, a new awareness about her *self*, (that may or may not be universal), an artistic utterance spoken so quietly and yet so deeply, that months later I am still haunted by it – in a good way. The canvases still reveal something, not just about her anymore, but about myself, about the human condition. Through her work, as with my experience in the train that day, I was reminded of our collective hope to overcome obstacles with dignity intact.

To me Ferreras' work has all the good qualities of [Yayoi Kusama](#) – lots of lovingly placed dots and lines, but repeating without the compulsiveness. Instead there is thankfulness there, perhaps in the gently hand-blended colors of the background which, because of their layered depths, harness the central emanation of light and anchor the more superficially placed patterns. The canvases feel more labyrinth-like rather than a mere surface. They are after all representations of a notion about being, and in this respect they glow, not just with a residue of spirituality, but also with the gentle coaxing light of hope, the kind of hope that shines brighter when countered by the weight of the risk inherent in a struggle, a mambo.



Work from Monica Ferreras de la Maza's series 'Genesis' (2013). Photograph by Holly Bynoe.

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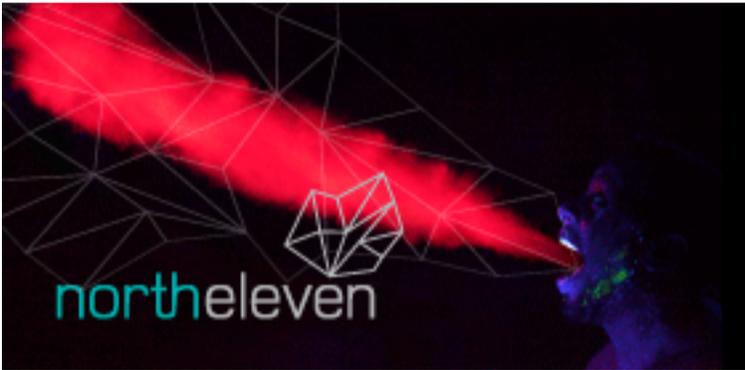


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