



Culture

Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski's Art Explores Freedom and Fantasy

The visual artist uses agency and storytelling to reimagine a world for black and brown femmes.

BY KIARA VENTURA

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Teen Vogue is highlighting the work of visual artists through intimate profiles about their experiences, career, and muses with our new column, Art School. Every month Artsy Window founder, Kiara Ventura, leads the discussion by centering artists of color and telling their stories through an informed gaze.

One year ago, I went to visit MFA artist studios at Yale University. There was one studio that I would never forget. Reflective surfaces all around the room: sculptures made of mirrors, glittery fabrics, shiny clear six-inch platform heels hanging from sculpture, and a metallic stripping pole right smack in the middle of the room. The walls were covered with nine-foot works on paper with silvery pastel pinks and purples embellishing huge fairytale-like scenes with thick femme women of color prancing within them. The studio was an extension of the playful paintings. This studio belonged to Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski. I met her that day but left with questions about the imaginary realms within her paintings.

Ventura, Kiara. "Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski's Art Explores Freedom and Fantasy." *Teen Vogue*, Teen Vogue, 26 Jan. 2020, www.teenvogue.com/gallery/amaryllis-dejesus-moleskis.

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Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski is an Afro-Boriquén interdisciplinary artist that imagines worlds where femmes of color are included in the historical narratives that define foundational spiritual and religious stories many believe in today. She graduated with an M.F.A in painting and printmaking from the Yale School of Art last year and recently showed in *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art 50 Years After Stonewall* at the Brooklyn Museum. In working with large scale drawings on paper, gouache, watercolor, and markers, object and installation video and light, Moleski seeks to transport viewers into a visual narrative that is queer, loud, and femme. This artistic voice came from a childhood that was driven by fantasy and mobility.

Moleski was raised by a nomadic single mother. By the time Moleski was 14 years old, she had moved 16 times along the East Coast, South, and Midwest. “It was just us on the road,” she simply puts it. “There was a certain feature in every place that felt like home and one of those places was the public library. The public library quickly became a sanctuary for me. Also, my mom had a strong love for books that she passed along to me. Being in constant transition, this place was my anchor.” Moleski dove into unknown worlds through libraries finding herself drawn to book series like *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Narnia Chronicles*, and *Kindred*, *Fledgling*, *The Parable* series by Octavia Butler.

Her father was incarcerated on and off her whole life but they would communicate through letters and drawings. “All of the stories I’ve loved were of fantasy and mythology. My mother saw that I loved drawing and strongly supported that. When my father was locked up on and off, he would get his friends who were locked up with him to draw cartoons. My favorite drawing was of Garfield with a ball and chain. I loved the Garfield comics. He would even get artists to draw cartoons on the envelopes. These were things that were important to me including this connection to that style of visual culture.”

Growing up with fantastical books, cartoon drawings sent by her incarcerated father, and an amalgamation of experiences from states across the country all thrown into the foundation for her visual soup, Moleski cooked up her own unique visual narrative. In her drawings, we see large thick black and brown femmes with their third-eye open physically engaging one another whether it be through playing on a sports team, playing a rockstar guitar, engaging in sexual activities, practicing spells, connecting with the cosmos and more. The figures connect with earthly elements: raindrops, stones and gems, bones, rainbows, flowers, mountains, and thunder. Each element is symbolic of their own nature. Her drawings read like books—an unspoken continuous narrative.

Moleski is very much concerned with agency and storytelling as she references yet challenges early societal and religious text to inform her work even down to the mediums she works with. “They are inspired by alchemical, religious, spiritual, and ancient drawings that are made to be read as texts,” she says. “I see the drawings as being one ongoing continuation of repeating those symbols. Asking is it possible to shift symbols for being human? For the drawings, I’m looking at the most basic of human stories about genesis, where we originate, where we go, all these stories we’ve inherited about being and belonging, and who gets to exist and why. And what would our lives be like if we inherited a different genesis? What if we inherited a queer thick black and brown earthbound femme loud flamboyant genesis?”

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For example, in Moleski's drawing *Instructions For a Freedom* (2015), which was shown at the Brooklyn Museum, she portrays a protagonist character pointing forward on a galloping horse leaving a rainbow behind them for others to follow. The protagonist is reminiscent of the Neoclassical painting, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1801), by Jacques-Louis David. Challenging the narrative of Western history and art history, Moleski depicts a femme leader of color leading other femmes to a sense of freedom. The rainbow motif that connects the protagonist with the cluster of figures symbolizes the LGBTQ+ community, a bridge between life and death, body and spirit, and connection to other dimensions. The protagonist is moving toward the changing moon phases on the bottom right of the image symbolizing timing and alignment with the cosmos. Her work is a visual spell making viewers imagine entering another freedom. Call it artistic *brujería* (witchcraft) if you will.



Instructions for a Freedom, 42 x 105, 2015, gouache, watercolor, tea, marker, and acrylic on paper

Moleski challenges the foundational texts many live by and believe in by creating fantasies of her own that tell stories of earthly and cosmic creations. “I love fantasy so much. If I am going to work on something for 15 hours at a time, I have to love it. Fantasy and Mythology have always been exciting to me because everything from these types of stories are rooted in this world. For me, art represents life experiences we don’t yet have language for. Art at its greatest potential is able to do something that language can’t do. I’m also curious about whose fantasies we are already experiencing. Fantasy and reality are mutually exclusive. For example, race is a fantasy but it’s very much real. And we are living and dying within that fantasy. It can’t be extracted from history. It is completely intertwined. I am curious about these symbiotic relationships between reality and history.”

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At a very pressing time personally and politically, Moleski and her work push us to question our reality, our fantasies, and our history by recreating foundational stories. As we are stepping into a new decade, Moleski reminds us that we are the creators of our own realities and fantasies - it just starts by imagining it first.

Moleski's work will be shown at the following exhibitions this year:

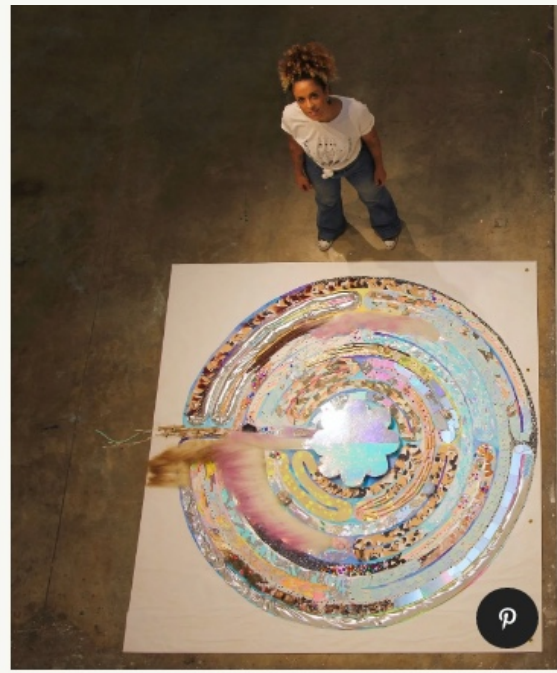
Zona Marco, Luce Gallery, February 5-9, Mexico City

Fragmented Bodies, opening February 27th at Albertz Benda Gallery, NYC

Even there, there are stars, curated by A.L. Rickard at the Cue Foundation, opening May 28th, NYC

Cruising the Horizon, curated by Marissa Del Toro
September 5, 2020 - January 17, 2021, Phoenix Art Museum

Moleski also has a few solo shows coming up later this year. To see what she is up to, follow [@wildhomegirl](#).



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