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LA
SOMBRA
Y EL
ESPIRITU:

WOMENS'
HEALING
RITUALS IN THE
DIASPORA

THE WORK OF,

LUCÍA
MENDEZ

AND

WENDY
PHILLIPS

FEBRUARY 4 –
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The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum
The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture
and History

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Wendy Phillips, La Sombra Series #5, 2008

ABOUT THE ROBERT AND SALLIE BROWN GALLERY AND MUSEUM

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is dedicated to the enrichment of visual culture on campus and in the community. The Brown Gallery supports the Stone Center's commitment to the critical examination of all dimensions of African-American and African diaspora cultures through the formal exhibition of works of art, artifacts and material culture.

THIS EXHIBIT IS SUPPORTED BY THE GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS OF

The Friends of the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History
The Friends of the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum
Institute for the Study of the Americas
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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UNC Program in Latina/o Studies
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Kompleks Creative Inc.

On the cover: Wendy Phillips, La Limpia Series #12, 2004

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

La Sombra y el Espíritu: Womens' Healing Rituals in the Diaspora – The Work of Lucía Mendez and Wendy Phillips, brings together two innovative artists - Phillips, an Atlanta based photographer and painter Mendez from the Dominican Republic. The artists' meditations on rites, rituals and women's roles as healers, provide us with a new window on spirituality in the diaspora. Phillips' work, the *La Limpia* and *La Sombra Series*, are conceptual projects where she uses the camera to record the organic connections between the natural and spiritual worlds. Lucía Mendez' work reflects her interest in both our material investment in ritual and worship, as well as the subtlety implicit in our performance of those rituals.

BY JOSEPH JORDAN

La Sombra y el Espíritu: Womens' Healing Rituals in the Diaspora marks the 12th exhibition to be mounted in the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum since its opening in August of 2004. The work of Lucía

practices of communities in the diaspora is no easy task. In the eyes of many, such balancing acts are always failures. Fortunately, the insights conveyed through *La Sombra y el Espíritu's* artistic renderings of women engaged in healing and spiritual practices reflect

and African projects in modernity.

Both the Dominican Republic and Mexico were sites where Spanish conquistadors sought new lands and wealth during the European colonial expansion. Indigenous communities were the first to be subjected to the cruelties most identified with the Spanish incursions. In the early 16th century, and once the land and its people were sufficiently secured, colonists brought enslaved Africans to fuel the imperial endeavors of the crown. Enslaved Africans, as well as indigenous communities, suffered horrendous losses. Although there were others who were brought as bondsmen, servants or skilled labors, by far the greatest number were subject to the moral obscenity of chattel slavery. Despite generations of resistance by both indigenous communities and those of African descent, the course of history in the Americas was irreversibly altered and

In the midst of these challenges those affected struggled mightily to maintain a practice of communion with the spiritual world that sustained them when the physical world, it seemed, had abandoned them to fates much closer to eternal death, than to eternal life. It is within those traditions and tenacious practices of remembrance that women, often the least valued among those who were in bondage, also sought strength for the journey.

In Phillips' and Mendez' work we can find the vestiges of the organized church even as its staid rituals become more animated and less remote. Found objects are transformed into vessels suitable for sacraments and tributes. These practices may also be recognizable because they incorporate elements of the European and the indigenous. Lay viewers will see that the images in the exhibition demonstrate simple gestures that are nonetheless invest-

correspondences between the women and the divine, the relationship of spiritual world to the secular, and the ways that everyday practices mark the time between birth, death and the afterlife.

begin to appreciate the rites and rituals of syncretic spiritual practice in the diaspora as depicted in *La Sombra y el Espíritu*, they then also begin to understand the value of African cultural retentions, traditions and identities. Moreover, they begin to see

the diaspora as not only a space where things have been torn apart, but also as a point and place of regeneration, rebirth, and healing in *La Sombra y el Espíritu*.

“DESPITE GENERATIONS OF RESISTANCE BY BOTH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND THOSE OF AFRICAN DESCENT, THE COURSE OF HISTORY IN THE AMERICAS WAS IRREVERSIBLY ALTERED AND THE SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS OF THE CONQUERED WERE SUPPRESSED, BUT NEVER FULLY ERASED.”

Mendez and Wendy Phillips explores themes that are, implicitly as well as explicitly, central to the work of the Stone Center and reflects the current University-wide focus on diaspora under Carolina Performing Arts' Creative Campus Initiative. The University's creative focus provides a suitable context as well as an additional opportunity to define the Brown Gallery and Museum as a place where the African presence in the Americas is examined critically and openly.

The work of Wendy Phillips with Afro-Mexican communities and Lucía Mendez' reflexive project on Afro-Dominican spirituality are deeply invested in exploring the possibilities for women-centered practices of cultural recovery and spiritual well-being. Balancing aesthetic sensibilities with respect for the sacred

the utmost respect. Furthermore, the stories told in and through these works are largely open-ended and speculative, as well as narrative. Appropriate space is left for viewers to imagine the processes and rituals depicted in each piece.

But what of this diaspora, and how does it relate to their work? The transnational movement of various African communities and ideas pre-dates encounters in Europe and the Americas by hundreds of years, yet our sense of the African diaspora is heavily influenced, if not burdened, by exceptionalist notions of western history. This concept of diaspora vindicates Europe in the interests of modernity and progress but it also, inevitably, must consider the other side of the ledger where the human costs of empire temporarily interrupted the American

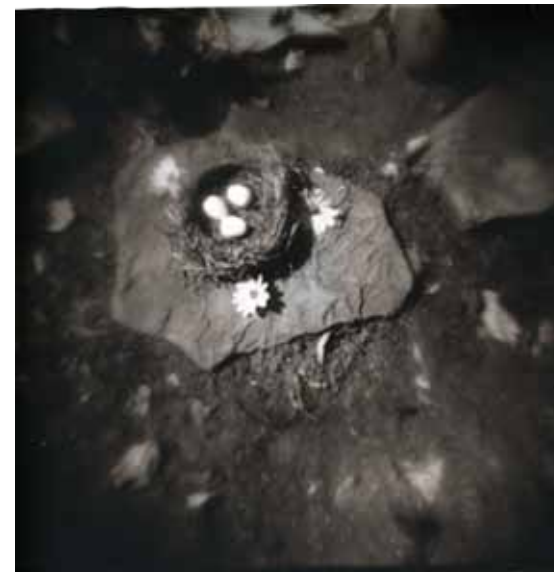
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ed with complex meanings that are recognizable and discernible only to the initiate. Only the initiate knows how to acknowledge the



Wendy Phillips, *La Sombra Series #2*, 2006



Wendy Phillips, *La Sombra Series #8*



Lucía Mendez, *El Saludo*, Oil on Canvas, 45"x20"

WENDY PHILLIPS

Wendy Phillips, La Limpia Series #10, 2006

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

LA LIMPIA PROJECT

This work is based in my search for the beliefs, philosophies, and healing practices that may have been those of my ancestors. Written records of world history, as well as the oral histories of my ancestors, inform me of my West African and Native American (Iroquois) heritage. Unfortunately, the cultural and political climate in which my great-grandmothers lived did not encourage or permit the holding on to, practice, or expression of their traditional West African and North American indigenous beliefs and healing practices and all but a few nuances of these were lost to me.

My research on the people of African and indigenous descent who live on the southern coast of Mexico

has included oral history about traditional beliefs and ritual practices and making black and white photographs including portraiture and documentation of rituals and daily life in their communities. From the women there, I have learned how a woman protects herself from negative spiritual influences in pregnancy and after the birth of her infant, rituals for energetic cleansing and the treatment of illness, and rites marking an individual's passage from this world into the next. Although the women do not identify themselves or know that they are of African descent, their rituals and practices seem to refer directly to Akan and Yoruba (African) practices. As I spent time with the Mexican women, learning about their traditions, I felt as if I had found

the knowledge that my foremothers were unable to pass down to me.

Thinking about what the Mexican women taught me, I made portraits of myself together with the objects and materials that are components of their traditional African-indigenous rituals. My body gestures refer to ways of positioning the body that confer meaning according to Kongo spiritual and cultural systems. In the Kongo culture, bodily gestures represent those personal characteristics that are valued. These gestures are often seen in Kongo sculptural art. I also made still lives of the objects that are symbols or are important components of the rituals. These images represent my thoughts about these practices in

relation to my own body, soul and spirit. The images are printed by silver gelatin process on fiber and are sepia toned. Certain objects in each composition are highlighted by surface painting using gold leaf and mica pigments. Each piece measures 19" x 19" unframed. I continue working on this project. Recently I have been making photographs of myself giving myself some of these spiritual treatments, focusing on the movements of the body involved in the ritual.

NOTE: "La Limpia" means "Energetic Cleansing"

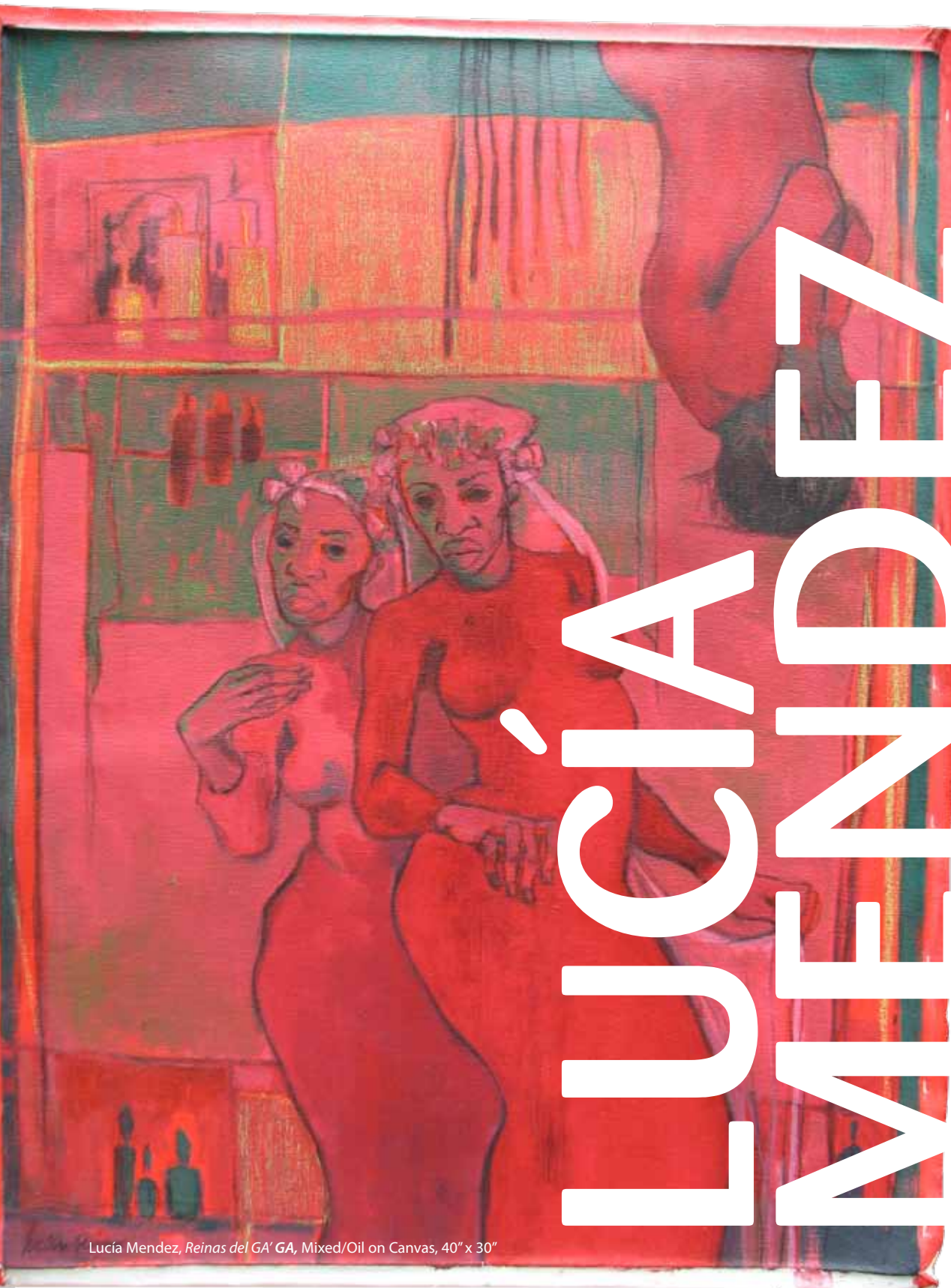
BIOGRAPHY

Wendy Phillips is a photographer and visual artist based in Atlanta. Her recent work has focused on the documentation of the lives of women of African descent in Latin America. Her projects often combine ethnographic interviews with photographic images. Her ethnographic work provides inspiration for her conceptual art projects. Wendy has studied photography at the International Center for Photography, Maine Photography Workshops, The Penland School of Crafts, and at the Manuel Alvarez Bravo Center for

Photography in Oaxaca, Mexico. She is also trained as a psychologist. She is drawn to the alchemy of the darkroom, and her favorite medium is silver gelatin printing on fiber. She has recently begun studying some of the traditional photographic processes, including wet plate collodion and ambrotypes. Wendy incorporates photography and visual art in her work with youth in their communities, incarcerated women, and with her adult and child psychotherapy clients. She has found that photo making helps support the

process of individuation: self-discovery and individual growth. Wendy also values the experience of working with other artists within the structure of the Artists' Collective. She has participated in and served as co-chairperson of the Latin American Artists' Circle in Atlanta, collaborating with artists who work in varied mediums. She has been a member of Sistagraphy, The Collective of African American Women Photographers for eight years and served three years as Executive Director. She has also enjoyed joint projects with fellow

artists in Cuba, Mexico and Spain. Wendy's photographic work was recently presented in *Exposure Magazine* and *Fotozoom Magazine* (Mexico). Her work was recently exhibited at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco and the Mobile Museum of Art in Mobile, Alabama. She is currently on faculty at Goddard College in Vermont and Pacifica Graduate Institute in California.



Lucía Mendez, *Reinas del GA' GA*, Mixed/Oil on Canvas, 40" x 30"

LUCÍA MENDEZ

BIOGRAPHY



Lucía Mendez (Rivas) was born in Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic. She is a cum laude graduate of Universidad Acción Pro-Educación y Cultura in Commercial Art and also completed postgraduate work in visual arts at the

Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes. She has completed additional post-graduate work in Afro-Latin Studies at the Catholic University of Santo Domingo.

Her first solo exhibition was the inaugural show in

the exhibition hall of the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1996. She was also featured in the *Second Individual Rites Exhibition* at the Casa de Italia in 2001.

Her work is on permanent display in the Bank of America Building in Washington, D.C. and she has been a part of numerous collective shows including *Interpretations* at Café Benetton; the *XXI Biennial of the Visual Arts at the Museum of Modern Arts* in Santo Domingo; the *First Exhibition of Feminine String* at the Foundation for New Contemporary Art; and *100/Obras/100 Artistas at the Exposición Cultural/Homenaje a Pablo Neruda: Metáfora Sobre Papel*, at the Sala Paul Giudicelli de Casa de Teatro.

She has served as organizer and coordinator of the Children's Art Workshop in the office of the Director-General for Culture, and has served as a professor

of art history, anatomy and painting at the Politécnico Maria de la Altagracia. She occupies a permanent appointment in program assessment in the office of the Director-General for Culture.

GALERIA EXODO

SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO

A GALLERY AND SPACE OF CONVERGENCE

Housed in a colonial structure in Old San Juan, Galeria Exodo is a space where stories about change and the passage of time are brought into vivid relief. From this timeless barrio, not far

from the sea, we can find the works of artists from all corners of the world. In this eclectic space, diverse artistic views converge, and even the most sharply divergent voices find ways to salute each other. Galeria Exodo provides some of the invisible thread that traverses Ciudad Juarez to Paris and Cameroon,

crossing through the Caribbean and North America, and connects and unites each perspective.



Lucía Mendez, *Con los Seres en la Cabeza*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 12" x 9"



Wendy Phillips, *La Limpia Series #15*, 2005



Wendy Phillips, *La Limpia Series #25*, 2005



Wendy Phillips, *La Limpia Series #16*, 2002



Wendy Phillips, *La Limpia Series #23*, 2005

HISTORY AND OVERVIEW OF THE CENTER

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is part of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a center within the University's Academic Affairs Division, we have a central role in supporting the University's academic mission. We have a commitment to broaden the range of intellectual discourse about African-Americans and to encourage better understanding of the peoples of the African diaspora and their perspectives on important social and cultural issues.



UNC
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www.unc.edu/depts/stonecenter

On the back cover: Lucía Mendez, *Servidoras de Misterios con Flores para los Seres III*, Acrylic on Canvas, 72"x14"

