



body | armor

February 2 – March 3, 2018

**Work by Chelsea A. Flowers, Luan Joy Sherman, Marcela Torres, and Kim Ye
Curated by Lauren Leving**

For years, the health needs of marginalized groups have been pushed aside, overlooked by systems developed by and favoring white patriarchal values. People existing outside of this very small faction are ignored; their medical issues go unnoticed and undiagnosed. During the civil rights movement, self-care was created as a political act to foster self-preservation and well-being amongst the oppressed. The Black Panthers established free programs so that Black people had access to adequate health care and safe spaces to cope with the unjust treatment they experienced in daily life. Following suit, feminist activists of the 1960s opened clinics catering specifically to the needs of women. However, many second wave feminists deliberately excluded the care of transgender individuals, perpetuating dominant understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality. In more recent decades, the writing of trans activists and scholar Emi Koyama's coining of the term "transfeminism" combats trans-exclusionary feminism, building self-care in the form of intersectional and inclusive discourse.

In 2016, the concept of self-care saw a surge in popularity. Immediately following the presidential election, Google searches for the term spiked. More and more, arts organizations are making themselves known as safe havens for art lovers and novices alike. Simone Leigh's 2016 exhibition, *The Waiting Room*, at the New Museum showcased alternative medicinal practices, and offered healing gatherings the artist deemed "care sessions," while both the California African American Museum and the Bronx Museum provide free radical self-care workshops. Each of these programs target audiences of color, defining radical self-care as, "the bold act of making your quality of life primary." Though the prominence of these resources makes the act of self-care less than "radical", it is still seen as such, especially within marginalized communities, because even decades after the civil rights movement, they are forced time and time again to prove their worth within white-created systems of oppression.

The artists in *body | armor*, **Chelsea A. Flowers**, **Marcela Torres**, **Luan Joy Sherman**, and **Kim Ye**, unabashedly rupture these structures of injustice with their individual practices. While it can be argued that the process of making artwork is inherently an act of self-care, these artists go one step further, drawing from their lived experiences to create performances, objects, and video that connect with audiences on a personal level. In turn, their work promotes healing, shows the importance of holistic healthcare, and cultivates empowerment through community building.

Chelsea A. Flowers draws from popular culture and historical archetypes to explore ideas of "otherness." Through participatory performance, she addresses stereotypes of African Americans, subverting the institutions from which they stem and those which continue to perpetuate them.

In her installation, *Thanks for the Memories*, she uses karaoke and standup comedy—two popular and highly visible forms of entertainment within contemporary culture—to address racism and dissect language surrounding discrimination. A form of self-care, standup provides Flowers with a platform to express herself, critiquing power imbalances in the institutions of which she is a part, though they systematically hold her back. Furthermore, employing lived experiences as material and sharing stories forges a sense of community, fostering care because strength exists in numbers.

Flowers' work is a form of activism, using humor to shape a safe environment in which she educates others about oppressive institutional structures. At the same time, by utilizing karaoke as a vehicle to cultivate awareness surrounding topics of oppression, the artist is removed yet present in these potentially uncomfortable dialogues. The visitor shifts into the role of performer, reading aloud Flowers' narrative, which creates a unique situation in which audience members are simultaneously speaking to and confronting themselves.

Like Flowers, **Marcela Torres** addresses ideas of otherness, using her practice to transform and destabilize oppressive ideologies. She develops performances and participatory workshops to tackle issues of prejudice head on, frequently employing boxing techniques as a metaphor for the battles underrepresented communities must fight against unjust governmental and cultural politics.

Torres' application of martial arts is not only a demonstration of highlighting often-unseen labor, it is also a strategy for collaborative healing in which group activities foster individual self-care. In a previous project, *Good Enough: A Convention on Forms of Self-Reparation*, the artist created programming centered on the notion of being "good enough." Each activity promoted self-acceptance and well-being, aiming to deconstruct and dismantle systems upholding traditional interpretations of success.

Within *body | armor*, Torres continues to expand upon these ideas, featuring a new series of objects. During the exhibition's opening reception, Mexican American performers including Torres create a sound piece activating these sculptures. It is no secret that many art organizations are predominately white spaces. While ACRE is committed to equal representation within the arts, this performance puts its whiteness on display, demanding viewers face their own privilege, gentrification—particularly within the Pilsen neighborhood—and how the communities we have invaded maintain their wellbeing.

Luan Joy Sherman's work disrupts the traditional art historical canon, simultaneously showing the vulnerability and strength that come with the experience of being a transgender man living in America. He unhesitatingly draws from deeply personal moments to create space for and highlight the importance of queer perspectives, making contemporary art accessible to audiences regardless of their knowledge or interest in art. By using bodily imagery and textual documentation from his own transition, he examines politics surrounding trans people and the hardships they endure merely by existing as themselves.

For the past two years, he has been printing photographs of torsos onto woven blankets. In 2016, he labeled the majority as *Untitled (Cis-male)* with a number one through six, and in 2017 shifted to the documentation of trans bodies, including his own, each titled using the individual's name. Trans people have been erased from history, while cisgender men are prominently featured in textbooks, iconography, and stories passed down generationally. Sherman's titles (or lack thereof) subtly critique and reverse this power imbalance. He uses his artistic practice as a public platform to reclaim space and rupture the gender binary, promoting the personal welfare and self-care of those with similar stories, while simultaneously educating others on multifaceted queer experiences.

Lines are blurred between pain and healing within the BDSM community, paralleling **Kim Ye's** practices as an artist and dominatrix.

In both, she assumes the roles of performer and therapist, and has a knack for quickly establishing intimate relationships. Using sex toys and latex, Ye creates comfortable, safe spaces in which participants can be vulnerable yet not feel exploited (unless that is what they want). She employs elements of BDSM culture in her artwork to reduce stigma surrounding "alternative" sexual behaviors and examines how the enacting of fetishes manifests as self-care. Her work challenges negative opinions of sadomasochistic activities, highlighting how listening to one's body and desires fosters self-acceptance and wellbeing.

Furthermore, Ye's artistic practice subverts traditional gender roles as a form of empowerment and care, stemming from her work as a dominatrix. In a performance created specifically for *body | armor* entitled *TAKEN DOWN*, she will instruct a white cis male to deinstall the exhibition. Giving orders from behind a camera, she intersperses directions about the removal of artwork with the removal of clothing. As the gallery space becomes bare, so does the performer. *TAKEN DOWN* engages with the concept of self-care by reversing the hegemony of the male gaze. As an Asian woman, Ye is constantly fetishized, especially by straight men. By removing herself from view during this performance and taking on the position of Director, she is the creator rather than an object. Ye describes this work as both a metaphorical and literal act of reparations, drawing on desire as a tactic for moving towards parity.

About the Artists

Based in Detroit, **Chelsea A. Flowers** holds an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art. She has shown work at various galleries and alternative spaces in Columbus and Cleveland OH including Marcia Evans Gallery, and Junctionview Studios, with an upcoming exhibit at Muted Horn Gallery. Additionally, she has held performances at Hatch Gallery in Detroit and the Museum of Human Achievement in Austin. She has expanded her skills and research by attending ACRE, Unlisted Projects, and Real Time and Space residencies, culminating in performances at the various establishments. She explores ideas of "otherness" through comedic troupes, physical play, nostalgic memorabilia, and participatory performance.

Luan Joy Sherman (b. 1993) is a queer, trans male artist living and working in Brooklyn, NY. He works with embroidery, photography, sculpture, performance, video, and sound, to explore gender, queer theory, and body politics. He has attended residencies at The Chautauqua School of Art (2014), Black Mountain School (2016), School of the Alternative (2017), The Mall of Found (2017), and ACRE (2017), for which he received a Brenda Greene Gender Inclusivity scholarship. In 2016, he taught a course on queer theory and intersectionality in Brooklyn, NY for the experimental education initiative, "Sunday School." In 2017, he taught a course titled "Queering Masculinity" while serving as faculty for the School of the Alternative in Black Mountain, NC. He graduated from The Savannah College of Art and Design in 2015 with a B.F.A. in Painting and Art History.

Marcela Torres' practice attempts to repair, transform, and destabilize cultural ideologies that target and oppress "the other." She enmeshes the physicality of martial arts with bastardized political encounters to create modes of collaborative healing and utilizes these strategies to set up performative situations that uncover the reality of the varied and differentially weighted interpellations in which we reside. Marcela has an MFA in Performance from the School of the Art Institute and a dual BA/BFA in Sculpture and Art History from the University of Utah.

Kim Ye (b. 1984, Beijing, China) is an interdisciplinary artist whose work incorporates performance, sculpture, video, installation, text, and painting. She received her MFA from UCLA (2012), and BA from Pomona College (2007). Exploring themes of labor, intimacy, taboo, sexuality, and the power exchange between artist and audience, Ye uses the body and its accessories to give form to power as a non-binary force. She has exhibited and performed nationally and internationally at the Hammer Museum, Getty Center, Moran Bondaroff, Alter Space, Material Art Fair, Visitor Welcome Center, Human Resources, and Pomona College Museum of Art, among others.