



## SOLUTION

by Alpesh Kantilal Patel

Cassils' work *Solution*, which premiered at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art as part of the artist's first solo exhibition in Texas, is their most ambitious to date in terms of thinking through how trans issues intersect with other marginalized positions. For the work, they invited three artists to collaborate with them: Rafa Esparza, who has an interest in "browning" white cube/museum space and often works with queer brown collaborators; Fanaa, whose body of work stems from the complexities of inhabiting multiple personas (woman, Muslim, and immigrant); and Keijaun Thomas, who often explores black femme subjectivity. While these artists' subject positions differ, all of their civil rights are being eroded by the current US presidential administration. As Cassils described in an email to me on May 8, 2019, of particular interest for them was thinking about how "the rhetoric of 'religious freedom' is being used as justification for curtailing the civil rights of minoritized groups."<sup>1</sup> Cassils further explains the inspiration for the work as follows:

What if the constitutional right to religious freedom were invoked to protect a religion where our deities were brown people, Muslims, women and queers? What if to harm such a body was framed, not as the quotidian victim of police brutality, xenophobia or transphobia but as an act of religious persecution: would the sanctity of our lives finally be given value?<sup>2</sup>

### *Solution*, 2018

Installation included four projected videos on frosted acrylic sheets and an acrylic column containing melted ice sculpture, gold leaf, sweat, pubic hair, dirt.

(Frosted acrylic sheets) 61 in. x 31 in.

(Acrylic column) 78 in. x 20 in. x 20 in.

*Solutions*, installation view at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, TX, 2018.



To further animate the reference to religion, Cassils modelled the exhibition specifically after the Greek Temple of Athena, Goddess of War.<sup>3</sup>

Cassils asked all artists to respond to the issue of religious freedom vs. civic rights by choosing a sacred symbol of their own and then constructing it in ice—in a fashion similar to their 2011 video *Tiresias*. The title refers to the blind Greek prophet of the same name who was turned into a woman for seven years. In the work, Cassils’ presses their body against the torso of a Greek statue made out of ice. The durational work involved them melting the ice through their own body heat. It is both a testament to the stubborn rigidity of gender identities as well as their metaphorical (and in this case literal) fluidity.

For *Solution*, Esparza constructed a wooden cross onto which he laid blocks of ice. In his video, he lies on the ice, arms outstretched at first and wearing nothing but black-colored briefs, which we find out later are ass-less when there is a quick cut to a shot of Esparza on the cross with his ass in the air. As he lies prostrate on the cross, he begins to lick the ice and at some point, he gets off the cross to kiss, suck, and lick all the blocks of ice. The work brings to the surface the perverse relationship between the Christian religion and colonialism and alludes to the violence against Latinx bodies and culture. Keijaun in her video caresses her ice sculpture of Yemaya, a Yoruba goddess, with gray plastic gloves and scrubs the ice with a rag, referencing the often invisible and marginalized gendered black body in domestic service. Finally, Fanaa decided to construct a Burāq figure, thought to have transported the Prophet Muhammed to heaven: a half-horse, half-human, winged female constructed out of ice. In the video, Fanaa attempts to gild the object as if to preserve its magnificence: the final shot is that of the fully-gilded sculpture, which we know of course will melt. The shots of gold leaf dissolving as the ice melts are particularly striking as are those of Fanaa’s feet, turned golden by the dripping ice.

Each of the videos, including that of Cassils, is approximately 15 minutes long and was projected onto plexiglass dangling from the ceiling in a room and then all arranged in a semi-circle that was meant to formally reference the classical sculptures of divine figures found in temples of worship.<sup>4</sup> Cassils writes that *Solution* represented the “coming together of diverging expressions, the power of performative actions, and the generation of collective creative forces.” In front of these projections was a vertical column of water, the remnant of a performance done on opening night—which was two nights before the 2018 US midterm elections in which Democrats were able to secure a majority in the House of Representatives—



Cassils, *Tiresias*, 2013  
Video, run time 15:05 min.



Fanaa, *Solution*, 2018  
Video, run time 14:43 min.

—with all artists present. The artists engaged collectively with a column of ice as if in worship. The melted ice (as well as bits and pieces of the artists’ props) was recovered and remains in a long vertical column.<sup>5</sup>

The use of ice has important political meanings in this work, not the least of which is that the acronym for Immigration and Customs Enforcement of the Department of Homeland Security is ICE. Cassil further expands on ice as a metaphor:

...ice functions as a lens. There is transparency but there is warping. You can look through it but the subject is freezing—undergoing pain on the other side. All four artists are often defined by our subjectivities in a way that can be limiting and quite paralyzing. Melting the ice was also about dissolving the neoliberalist narratives often employed by the art industrial complex to rarify, exoticize and commodify us. The way the “left,” the “other,” and “minorities” are constantly being splintered by the right. This division is further fostered by internet culture and via social media. Finger pointing and righteous impulsive comment threads isolate us further, making us increasingly lonely. The resulting alienation, separation and stress suppresses our empathy, curiosity, understanding and cooperation.

I would add that ice can be seen as always becoming an “other” state—liquid or even directly to gas under the right conditions—and yet it remains the same: that is, the chemical makeup remains fixed. Often, as ice melts, two states exist in the same space and time—a potent metaphor for the consideration of identity as plural and intersectional.

To theorize how the work brings together the vastly different subject positions on a bodily level, I consider queer and performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz’s theorization of “racial performativity” and “feeling brown.”<sup>6</sup> Muñoz describes racial performativity as generated by an “affective particularity...which is supposed to be descriptive of the receptors we use to hear each other and the frequencies on which certain subalterns speak and are heard, or more importantly, *felt*.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he posits that ethnicity is “‘a structure of feeling,’ as a way of being in the world, a path that produces experiences that do not conform to the conventions of a ‘majoritarian public sphere.’”<sup>8</sup> Muñoz does so to theorize “feeling brown” as a useful mode of understanding *latinidad*, which can be defined as characteristics that those of Latin American origin might share without reducing them to essentialized traits.<sup>9</sup>

Though Muñoz theorizes “brown” in “feeling brown” through a viewpoint that is *latinidad*, he notes that “feeling brown” is meant to ‘surpass epistemological renderings of race.’<sup>10</sup> Following on this point, Cassils’ work can be read as instantiating this specific affective



Keijaun Thomas, *Solution*, 2018  
Video, run time 15:35 min.



Rafa Esparza, *Solution*, 2018  
Video, run time 15:31 min.

condition of “feeling brown” that allows the disparate subject positions of each artist to unite across geographical/national as well as racial, gendered, class, faith-based, and sexual categories – among other affiliations that have yet to be named and are merely experienced or felt – against a majoritarian affect that is trans-phobic, anti-black, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, and misogynistic. Specifically, I would argue that it is the repetitive motion of washing, gliding, and licking ice and in the case of Cassils’ video, pressing against ice, that brings into being “feeling brown.” The repetition productively suggests the sameness in difference even as it underscores the intransigence of identity or multiple acts of subjection, in this case. That is, there is not a break in the repetition that per performativity is requisite for meaning to be redirected. At the same time, the column of water collectively melted in the performance that is in the center of the installation dissolves the way the dominant commercial artworld and current right wing-government as well as LGBTQIA+ movements in the U.S.--which Urvashi Vaid noted as early as 1995 have only achieved “virtual equality”--and well-meaning identity politics more generally manage difference into non-overlapping silos or categories.<sup>11</sup> *Solution* confronts the latter and in so doing is an example of the importance of coalitional activist thinking (and art-making).

## NOTES

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**1** The quotes in the remainder of this essay are all from this email communication. Many thanks to Cassils for generously sharing their thoughts on the intent behind the work as well as reading a draft of the essay.

**2** It is worth providing the following, as well, that Cassils shared with me in this same email: “The world seems upside down. As an antidote I return to art as strategy to invoke rituals of both the sacred and the profane. I draw solace from the words of Susan Stryker who recently wrote: ‘If anti trans discrimination is the worst thing that has ever happened to you, remember that there are others here today whose people have survived occupation, slavery, genocide, and holocaust; learn from the traditions and history of the oppressed.’”

**3** As Cassils explained, the work *PISSED* functioned as an altar with the vertical installation of the urine capture containers meant to reference columns.

**4** While Cassils’ video is an edited version of their 4-5 hour durational performance, the other artists’ videos are not based on live performances.

**5** Since I was not at the performance, I wanted to share Cassils’ description of the night: “For the opening performance, against the backdrop of these films, we four artists collectively melted a column of ice, shifting the frozen obstacle from body to body, placing our own warm flesh between the ice and the body of another as one started to shake uncontrollable from the cold. Together we scrubbed this barrier, licked it, rubbed it, humped it, stroked it and finally gilding it, until it melted. The collective run-off flooded and gilded the gallery floor.”

**6** José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” *Signs* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 678.

**7** Emphasis mine. *Ibid.*, 677.

**8** José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs),” *Theatre Journal*, 52, no. 1 (2000): 67-8; 79. Muñoz is drawing here on the work of British cultural theorist Raymond Williams, who describes a ‘structure of feeling’ as connecting different groups – the Marxist Williams was referring to working class groups – to social experiences that can be ‘in process’ and yet historically situated.

**9** *Ibid.*

**10** José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” 687.

**11** Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Anchor Books) 1995.



