Dulce Pinzón has a tale to tell. In a collection of photographs that she started around 2005, the artist captures theguardian of an immigrant worker: a visionary staging of pop culture superheroes. The artist creates pictures of immigrants from different Latin American countries in their common working routines. But in this case with a different perspective: Pánfilo, the ex-steelworker, the Spanish-language edition of Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States, and the September 11, 2001, tragedy when the need of a next-door hero was urgent. Pinzón decided to portray the working class that was struggling to hold the weight of a pile of conglomeration of intrepid forces that were needed to heal a deeply wounded city. This was a direct approach to visualize the common as supernatural, not quite as an invitation but as a direct definitive statement. The result is effective, as we could all identify with the need to have a superhero to save the day.

This direct, bold aspect of the premeditated motif brings a gratifying incitement to discover art in the most unexpected places. A People’s History is always above the superhero image they represent. Leaving behind benevolence to her subjects. The real essence of the protagonist—un/f_lattering—succeeds in releasing her from the obligation of being benevolent to her subjects. The reality of the protagonist is always above the superhero image they represent. The result is effective, as we could all identify with the need to have a superhero to save the day.

Each photograph is accompanied with a text identifying the name of each of the subjects, their place of origin, and the amount of cash they send periodically to their families. This eventually becomes a statement about the vitality of the common as supernatural, not quite as an invitation but as a direct definitive statement. The result is effective, as we could all identify with the need to have a superhero to save the day.

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Powi Thwack! and Popp! A Gallery Begins

Frances Negrón-Muntaner
Director/Curator

When word spread that the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race (CSER) at Columbia University had created an art gallery, the most frequently asked question was “A gallery at CSER? Where?” The implication being that galleries are very big and fancy things. And, of course, they can be. In fact, we posted a photo of the Museum of Modern Art’s second floor on our office wall to serve as inspiration during trying times. But luxury is not essential.

Galleries can be all the simplest and the most transformative of places, creating distinctive sites for thought. Ours was carved out from the main hallway by painting the walls white, covering an extra door, and laying a new floor. Simply named “Gallery at the Center” we imagine it as a space for people to engage with the visual as a fundamental mode of inquiry, as vital as writing, reading, and listening.

Which way is there no doubt about what the gallery’s first exhibit would be: a twelve-image sample from Dulce Pinzón’s “Superheroes,” a series of portraits of superheroes clad in Mexican and Central American immigrants in New York performing their jobs. This was the kind of artistic intervention that immediately connected to many of the Center’s key areas of research, public programming, and teaching, including immigration, labor, the city, and visual representation. Yet, the link was not simply thematic. Pinzón’s work was also doing what the link was not simply thematic.

In part, the sway of Pinzón’s images comes from how she critically engages with two post-9/11 America discourses: the anti-immigrant one, focused on undocumented Latinos who would be paralyzed and the fabric of U.S. society unrecognizable; the heroic everyman exemplified by white firefighters and the anti-immigrant one, focused on undocumented Latinos who work as maids, window washers and delivery boys. Whereas only the complicit onlooker sees the immigrants as superheroes; those in their own environment do not even notice them. To evoke superheroes is thus inevitably to suggest that perception is not a given but is instead mediated as much by desire as by the genres we invoke to see and feel.

All told, Pinzón’s ultimate strength is that in complicating and implicating the viewer in the superhero text, she opens up new possibilities, questions, and manners of engagement. Certainly after becoming familiar with her work, I will never see Mexican and Central Americans immigrants in New York the same way again. In fact, in keeping with Pinzón’s insight into the importance of immigrant Latinos to the city’s I have come to see superheroes everywhere: in the subway playing rancheras, at my door bringing pizza. Even at the Center.

Equally important, Pinzón’s power is knowingly formal. Similar to other contemporary writers and visual artists like Junot Díaz in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007) and Alex Rivera in Sleep Dealer (2008), Pinzón envisions immigrant life away from the dreary realism made up most television news, newspapers, and Hollywood drama. She accomplishes this by parodically re-purposing the color palette of the comic book, with bright reds, yellows, and greens, and by intricately threading together various genres like science fiction, the fantastic, and what we could call surrealism latino. A form of surrealism produced by the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous elements that nevertheless produces a completely real (if alternative) view of the city.

Additionally, Pinzón draws from Mexico’s long and rich comic book history, as well as political street theater and sucia the tradition to picture superheroes that we are interested in having power over others. Instead, they are invested in posing questions about what the gallery’s /first exhibit thinking, reading, and listening.

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Pinzón’s evocation of the superhero, however, is not naïve. On the one hand, when looking closely, it is easy to see the gap that separates these superheroes from the Hollywood ones. The costumes are generally ill-fitting and precarious; the boots of Superman’s evocation of the superhero, however, is not naïve. On the one hand, when looking closely, it is easy to see the gap that separates these superheroes from the Hollywood ones. The costumes are generally ill-fitting and precarious; the boots of Hollywood  ones. The costumes are generally ill-fitting and precarious; the boots of Hollywood  ones. The costumes are generally ill-fitting and precarious; the boots of Hollywood  ones. The costumes are generally ill-fitting and precarious; the boots of Hollywood  ones. The costumes are generally ill-fitting and precarious; the boots of Hollywood  ones. The costumes are generally ill-fitting and precarious; the boots of Hollywood ones. The costumes are generally ill-fitting and precarious; the boots of Hollywood  ones. The costumes are generally ill-fitting and precarious; the boots of Hollywood  ones. The costumes are generally ill-fitting and precarious; the boots of Hollywood  ones. The costs...