

CLOSE UP Dulce Pinzón: The Unexpected Hero

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Associate Curator

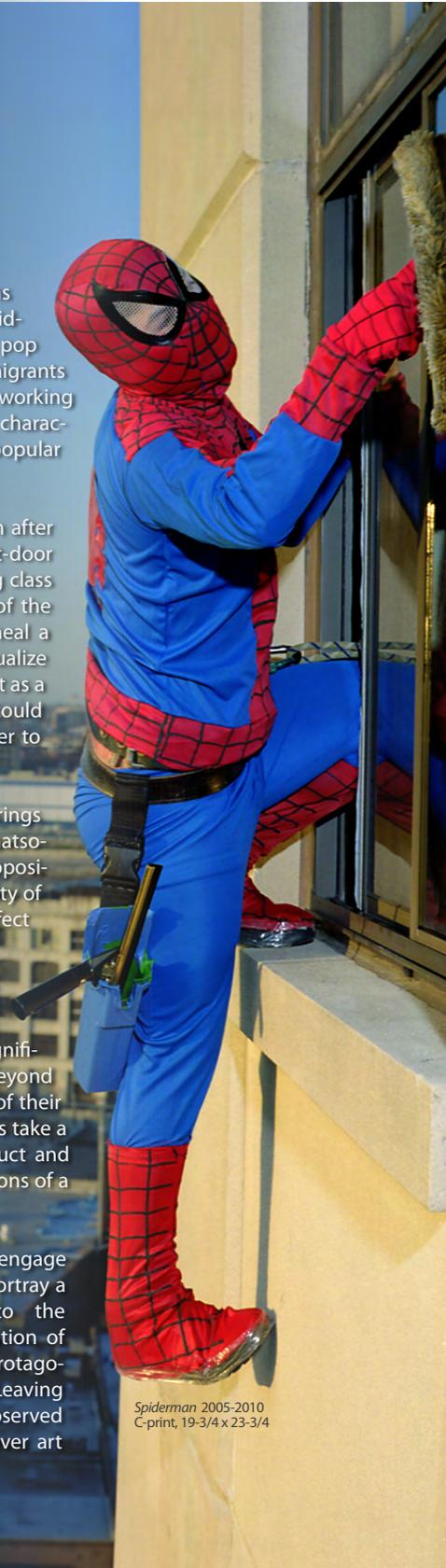
Dulce Pinzón has a tale to tell. In a collection of photographs that she started around 2005, the artist captures the quotidian immigrant worker in a visionary transfiguration of pop culture superheroes. The artist creates pictures of immigrants from different Latin American countries in their common working routines, but in this case with a different perspective. Each character that forms this collection of heroic acts represents a popular and widely-known American or Mexican superhero.

According to Pinzón, her intention was to find inspiration after the September 11, 2001, tragedy when the need of a next-door savior was urgent. Pinzón decided to portray the working class who were struggling to rebuild the metropolis as part of the conglomerate of intrepid forces that were needed to heal a deeply wounded city. Hers 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 bigger-than-life power to save the day.

This direct, bold aspect of the premeditated motif brings sincerity to the subjectivity of the artist. There is no fear whatsoever in being humorous or in highlighting an awkward proposition. This eventually becomes a statement about the vitality of presence beyond the paradigmatic flawlessness of the perfect person.

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 significant others. The Superheroes are on a mission to build beyond boundaries, even if we don't fully understand the might of their plight. The images of the developing construction workers take a predominant role. The ongoing desire to evolve, construct and move forward is a constant drive pushing beyond limitations of a marginal existence.

What is most powerful in Pinzón's work is her ability to disengage from the formality of gratification. Pinzón's dexterity to portray a hero in different directions—from the sublime to the unflattering—succeeds in releasing her from the obligation of being benevolent to her subjects. The real essence of the protagonists is always above the superhero image they represent. Leaving ultimately the triumph of making the commonly unobserved minority extraordinary—a gratifying incitement to discover art and heroes in the most unexpected places.



Spiderman 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Dulce Pinzón was born in Mexico City in 1974. She studied mass media communications at the Universidad de las Américas in Puebla and photography at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. In 1995 she moved to New York, where she studied at the International Center of Photography.

Pinzón's work has been exhibited, published, and collected internationally. In 2001, her photos were used for the cover of *La otra historia de los Estados Unidos*, the Spanish-language edition of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. In 2002 she was awarded the prestigious Mexican Jóvenes Creadores grant. In 2004 she won first prize in the two-dimensional category at the fourth Encuentro Estatal de Arte Contemporáneo in Puebla. In 2006 she won first prize at the 12th Photography Biennial of the Centro de la Imagen in Mexico City. In that same year she was a fellow at the New York Foundation for the Arts and in 2009 she was awarded a grant from the Ford Foundation and nominated in 2012 to the Prix Pictet.

Earlier this year, she was invited to take part at the renowned photography festival Les Rencontres d'Arles in France. She has also taken part in the Photolreland Festival in Dublin and in Más allá de la Reportería Fotográfica in Bogotá, Colombia.

Her work has appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers, including *Esopus*, *Marie Claire* (South Africa and Thailand editions), *Mother Jones*, *Rolling Stone* (Italian edition), *Vice*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *La Jornada* (Mexico), *Reforma* (Mexico), and *El País* (Spain).

GALLERY at the CENTER
Columbia University
Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race
420 Hamilton Hall
New York City
Gallery hours: 11:00am - 4:00pm, Monday thru Friday

ILAS

Bohemia

MITOTE

FONCA

MACONACULTA

CATALOGUE

Spiderman 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Bernabe Méndez from the state of Guerrero works as a professional window washer in New York. He sends home 500 dollars a month.

Catwoman 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Minerva Valencia from Puebla works as a nanny in New York. She sends home 400 dollars a week.

Batman 1 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Federico Martínez from the state of Puebla works as a taxi driver in New York. He sends home 250 dollars a week.

Batman 2 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Federico Martínez from the state of Puebla works as a taxi driver in New York. He sends home 250 dollars a week.

Robin 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Ernesto Méndez from Mexico City works as a gigolo in Times Square, New York. He sends home 200 dollars a week.

Green Lantern 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Román Romero from Tlapa, Guerrero, works as a superintendent in New York. He sends home 800 dollars a month.

Aquaman 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Juventino Rosas from the State of Mexico works in a fish market in New York. He sends home 400 dollars a week.

Mr. Elastic 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Sergio García from the State of Mexico works as a waiter in New York. He sends home 350 dollars a week.

Human Torch 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Oscar González from the state of Oaxaca works as a cook in New York. He sends home 350 dollars a week.

Wonder Woman 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Maria Luisa Romero from the state of Puebla works at a laundromat in Brooklyn, New York. She sends home 150 dollars a week.

Superman 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Noe Reyes from the state of Puebla works as a deliveryman in Brooklyn, New York. He sends home 500 dollars a week.

Flash 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4
Alvaro Cruz from the State of Mexico works as a cook and runs with Los Compadres. He sends home 300 dollars a month.

DULCE PINZÓN SUPERHEROES

Latino Immigrants Who Make New York



GALLERY at the CENTER
Columbia University
November 8, 2012 - May 15, 2013

Pow! Thwack! and Pop!: 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 both 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 is why, there was 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 superhero-clad 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



Superman, 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4

compelling inquiry does, regardless of medium and genre: changing how and what we see.

In part, the sway of Pinzón’s images comes from how she critically engages with two post-9/11 America discourses: 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 the heroic narrative underscored the decency and courage of ethnic white public servants, the second was bent on demonizing the new immigrant Latino everyman and woman without whom the economy of cities like New York would be paralyzed and the fabric of U.S. society unrecognizable. In looking at immigrant Latinos, Pinzón thus classically asks, are they not (super)heroes?

She says yes, and it’s hard to argue. Millions of Latino immigrants literally fulfill all fundamental superhero criteria: They face implacable forces like racism and capitalism. They triumph over them by never giving up, showing inhuman energy, and developing extraordinary powers like skillfully riding bicycles through New York City traffic without getting killed and supporting entire communities with remittances earned from criminally-low wages. To avoid detection by an often corrupt and inept government, many have a secret identity.

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 by most television news, newspapers, and Hollywood drama. She accomplishes this by both boldly importing the color palette of the comic book, with its bright reds, yellows, and greens, and by intricately threading together various genres like science fiction, the fantastic, and what we could call *surrealismo 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 *lucha libre* traditions, to picture superheroes that are not interested in having power over others. Instead, they are invested in posing questions of power, including the power to make visible (or invisible) and to visualize richer worlds. In this regard, although photographing Latinos performing low-wage tasks may appear to confirm stereotypes, this fact is neither diminishing nor part of an essential identity. Not only because the superheroes do their work superbly—with skill, dedication and style—but also because they are clearly not just born to labor. Instead, they are protagonists of their own story, singular travelers who live on with imagination and grit.

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



Flash, 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4



Wonderwoman, 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4

Pinzón’s *Spiderman*, for instance, are held up by cheap tape. On the other hand, there is no universal acceptance of the Latino *superhéroe*. Poignantly, 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.



Mr. Elastic, 2005-2010
C-print, 19-3/4 x 23-3/4

Acknowledgements

Founding “Gallery at the Center” was a group effort, and I am deeply grateful to everyone that made it possible. Let us count the ways.

My deepest gratitude goes to the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race’s staff, Teresa Aguayo and Josephine Caputo, who were involved in all aspects of the gallery’s creation, including construction, exhibition, and promotion with great humor and inventiveness. I also thank associate curator José Correa Vigier, whose experience and wisdom were indispensable to our success. Thanks *también* to graphic designer Sarabel Santos Negrón, who was responsible for the exceptional poster and catalog and to Samuel Robson, Gabriel Herrera, and Leonard Rosenbaum for thoroughly reading all materials.

Of course, the gallery space would have been nothing but a dream without the generous support of Susan Mescher, Columbia’s Deputy Vice President of Strategic Planning, and the determination of David Dewhurst, Director of Campus Operations. Likewise, I am grateful to architect Woodley Vericain; County Line Interior executives Julian Rodríguez and Brandon Rodríguez; and the painting and construction crew: Edilson Cruz (Tobi), William Ortiz, Pablo Hernando, and Cynthia McCullin. Big thanks also to Frank Fiordalise and his team from Peeq Media, who masterfully polished the photographs to add that superhero glow.

The show, of course, belongs to Dulce Pinzón. I am deeply grateful that she had faith in our effort and trusted us with her phenomenal work.

See you at the Center.