

International Review Since 1913

Art in America

Realism Today: Global Artists, New Realities



September/October 2020

►► p. 64

Clotilde Jiménez
Pose No. 12, 2020

No One Could Afford Equipment, So We Shared

Clotilde Jiménez in Conversation with Joshua Bennett

I initially encountered the work of Clotilde Jiménez on a Facebook thread five years ago, crowdsourcing cover art recommendations for my first book, *The Sobbing School*. My former dissertation adviser, Imani Perry, was the first to mention his name. As someone who knows me and my work rather well, she also knew that Jiménez's central obsessions and sites of concern—gender performance, Black sociality, the psychic life of American athletics—were shared between us and might produce something worthwhile in a space of collaboration. The work I discovered was astonishing. The first piece that I found was titled, simply, *Standing Boxer* (2015). The collage's eponymous fighter is conventionally outfitted, though with a number of distinct alterations: his boxing gloves are bright pink, he is wearing a pair of black leather heels, and the white tape around his wrists is adorned with various drawings, including a family of stick-figure children, one of whom is holding what appears to be an easel. This sort of inordinately elaborate network of images within images, narratives within narratives building upon and complicating one another, is a hallmark of Jiménez's work. In a moment indelibly shaped by a wide range of Black visual artists working across mediums—Jiménez is a sculptor, painter, and collagist—his oeuvre stands out for both its conceptual daring and its striking consistency. The animating questions of his works are both ancient and right on time.

Jiménez is a joy to talk to, and he speaks about bodybuilding with the same facility and grace that he brings to a conversation about his art practice. He is a man in love with what the poet Adam Zagajewski once called the *mutilated world*. In the midst of a landscape marred by violence and unremitting constraint, he dares to assert intimacy, pleasure, and extravagance. Clotilde Jiménez was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1990. He received his BFA in printmaking from the Cleveland Institute of Art, and an MFA in painting from the Slade School of Fine Art in London. He currently resides in Mexico City, where he continues to make beautiful objects for a living.



Clotilde Jiménez: *Pose No. 6*, 2020, charcoal and mixed-medium collage on paper, 64 by 59 inches.



Eat the Booty Like Groceries, 2018, mixed-medium collage on paper, 22½ by 28½ inches.

JOSHUA BENNETT I've been thinking recently about the artists and authors who have depicted Black childhood in a way that is not just resonant but feels revolutionary—individuals who create an opening for us to shift our language and who help us imagine Black childhood in a way that might be liberatory for our little ones. It strikes me that childhood is more than a prevalent theme in your work; rather, you are perhaps giving us a more *useful* grammar to think about Black childhood—one that few of us had available while we were children. Could you say more on that particular theme in your work, why it matters to you, and how it has been generative for you?

CLOTILDE JIMÉNEZ Much of my work is autobiographical. I am after images that reflect my concern with sexuality, or my understanding of Blackness.

Manhood. Masculinity. I collided with all of these things when I was a child. It was very difficult, in part because my dad wasn't around when I was a kid. I was negotiating sexuality. I've come out as bisexual as an adult, but I didn't know what that was back then, or if it was right. I grew up religious as well. It was a big, chaotic mess. And I don't even really think I have all the answers to everything. I'm just going to ask questions. Sometimes the best way to have conversations is in a more simplified form. The way I remember it as a kid. Then maybe I can get answers out *in that way*. Maybe we can start there.

BENNETT That complexity, that chaos, is something that shines through, for sure. You've talked a bit about queerness and childhood, about not being *legibly masculine* if your favorite color was yellow or purple. Could you talk



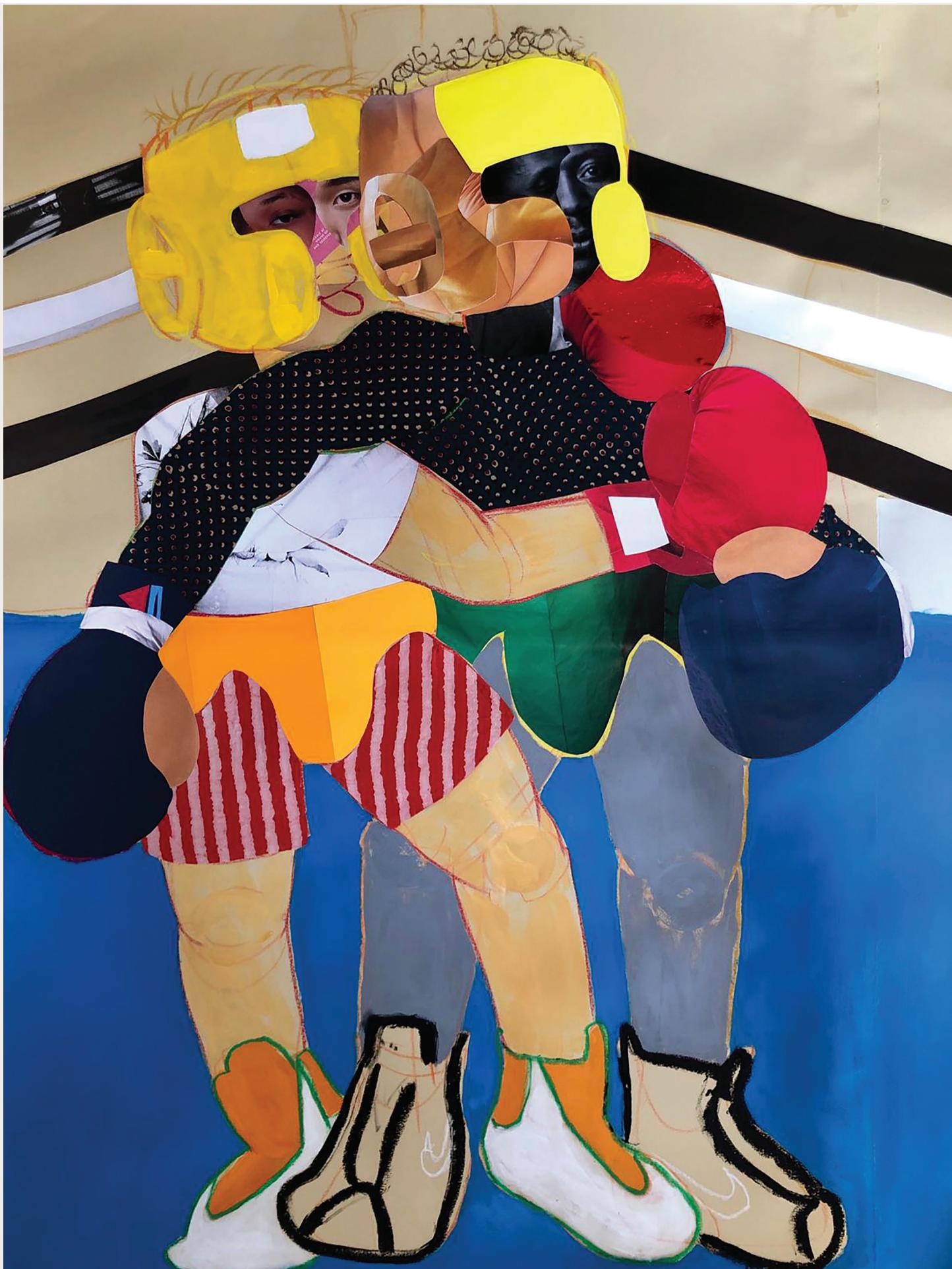
The Contest, 2019, mixed-medium collage on paper, 65 by 77 inches.

a bit not just about the color palette of your drawings and paintings, but specifically about their *brightness*? There's a persistent luminosity to your work. Is that brightness, that unkillable shimmer, also in part a reflection back on that time, a refusal of those imposed constraints?

JIMÉNEZ Some colors are. Pink, and lavender. When I was growing up, people would always kind of ask me if I painted my nails pink. As a teenager, this would happen a lot. I used to get a little annoyed. But I just have pinkish nails. I guess they're healthy. I'd like to think that. When I'm composing the work, I go back and sit with how that made me feel, and what the real context of the question was. Why they were asking me. When it comes to colors like that, and where I place them, or when I come back to this theme of boxing, this athleticism theme, I'm recalling the fact

that I used to box in the gym as a kid. It was like a community.

It was a gym in the ghetto. No one could afford equipment, so we shared. I remember no one would choose the pink boxing gloves. And I was one of the smaller boys. I went last, and that was the only thing that was left in the bin. I used them and it became my signature, in a way. I wasn't *out* as a queer, but people suspected, and here I am with these pink gloves. When it comes to colors, it's about what I'm drawn to as a person. That's what I'm calling on. Part of my family is African American. The other part is Puerto Rican. In both cultures, you know, this is the color palette that you see a lot. Especially in Latin America. People's houses are painted yellow, teal, pink. I try to stay true. I like the colors to tell a little bit of my history. And then I noticed in my studies in art school, everyone's color palette reminded me of earth. Gray, brown, kind of muddy. Colors tell a story in themselves.





Above left, *Black Boy Head*, 2018, bronze, 18 by 15 by 13 inches. Above right, *Blue Boxer*, 2019, bronze, 17½ by 10½ by 12½ inches. Opposite, *Dem Boys*, 2019, mixed-medium collage on paper, 44 by 33 inches.

In Puerto Rico and Black America, there's a certain perceived economic status. My life growing up was poverty. Like a lot of people that look like me, in the whole world. I'm conscious that color can point to the economic state of a place. If I make a chair *green*, then what does that mean? A green chair is just a green plastic chair sometimes. Or a yellow one. Sometimes you have a plastic yellow chair because that is what you want. Sometimes you have a plastic yellow chair because that is all you can afford.

BENNETT You're talking in part about an aesthetics of poor and working folks that you're pulling directly from your past. But you're not interested in taking it somewhere else, outside of that particular world of symbols. You're not aspiring to somehow raise the aesthetics of the everyday, as it were, to the status of high art. You're saying, actually, that your art practice is concerned

primarily with reflecting that life, as it is lived, in its most vivid terms. The color palette of these people you come from and live among. Your kin: blood and otherwise.

JIMÉNEZ Yeah. And I think I've picked up on that even more lately. I live in Mexico now, and so everyday aesthetics are even more prevalent in the work. I did my grad school in London, you know, where there are all kinds of resources. But here in Mexico, I'm noticing that a lot of things are limited, as far as materials go. I'm using just what's available in the street, at some shops, what's discarded. A lot of it is plasticky or it has this incredibly bright color to it. And so when I'm going to construct a garment that one of the figures in a collage might wear, it's going to reflect the material that I know, and where I am in life.

BENNETT You talked a bit earlier about being a boxer. Is there any relationship between boxing and visual art?

JIMÉNEZ It's all art at the end of the day. Even if you're shadowboxing, that's a kind of performative art in itself. In my works, you'll see a lot of boxing and bodybuilding and wrestling.

My dad is a bodybuilder, but he doesn't do too many competitions now. Like I said earlier, he wasn't around. So there's all this mystery, all these questions. He'd come around once a year, if that, maybe once every two years. I have an image of this big, brawny guy I never really knew. And that's the opposite of me as well. I'm not very brawny at all [*laughs*]. He represents, or he represented, in the past, the epitome of masculinity for me. Toxic and all. All of it. It comes back in the work. How far can I push it?

When I came out to my father, it was a pleasant experience, surprisingly. And now we have conversations about these men who build their muscles, put on Speedos, judge one another. To me, it's kind of queer. I think it's great. He says, *well, I guess you have a point*.

BENNETT I have some writing in this vein about the barbershop. It's one of the only venues in which boys and men learn a language for touch, how they want to be touched and touch one another. With the barber shop in particular, you go there to learn about beauty. You get to ask someone to make you glamorous. There's a shared, capacious language for that desire: *Caesar, fade, taper*. You develop this expansive vocabulary around how you would like to look. There's this implicit sense of vulnerability and shared openness, a desire for intimacy and proximity in that social space that calls us to study, think, and be together in a singular way.

Additionally, the way you're talking about your father resonates. My father was a very tall, beautiful Marine who would occasionally get into fights with people. I, too, am not very brawny at all. It comes back in the art: what it means to have a father who operates at a certain distance, along a number of different vectors. A father you admire for all sorts of reasons, while also being able to see the brutal limitations of a masculinity, imposed from outside, he's been made to live inside of.

Given all this, do you see fatherhood as another prominent theme of your work?

JIMÉNEZ It comes up every now and then, yes. As I think about the future, I know that I would like to have a family of my own. I think about what I might do differently. But I don't know what that looks like, to be honest. This is actually the first time I'm saying that out loud, and really giving it thought. I'll say this: I know what not to do.

BENNETT You've spoken elsewhere about being a *palpable voice*. Could you talk a bit more about the importance of materiality in your work. You're a sculptor, you do collage work, sometimes painting and drawing, and sometimes, not just a collision, but almost a conflagration of all those things. They explode into this beautiful, final form. I was wondering if there was a difference, for you, at the experiential level between working on something like the collages instead of the sculptures, and if so, what is it?

JIMÉNEZ I constantly think about material and what I'm doing, who I'm trying to reach. I'm not a perfectionist. At all. I think I am, perhaps, the opposite. Some have looked at my work and said, "Wow, it still has smudges all over that you could have cleaned off." But I always say *No, I don't think that's necessary*. I think about the material the way I think of a fraction, as if the work that I'm dealing with is this ugly, big number. How can I simplify? Normally, you can keep simplifying fractions a great deal until it's an easier number to look at. I like to use the material as a vehicle to help me do that.

As far as collage, drawing, and sculpture, they're just different. My own personal philosophy is that I identify as an artist. Not a painter or drawer. I'm a thinker. And I've always been like that. Instead of just being a painter's painter, as they say, we should choose the best mode of expression that gets us to where we want to go. Sometimes it's collage for me, sometimes it's sculpture. Sometimes it's a doodle. A sketch. I don't know. I think maybe I'm a little hyperaware because I felt put in a box my whole upbringing. If you're a man or boy, you have to do this, you have to like this. You have to. We grew up Baptist as well. And that was another layer of restrictions.

BENNETT When you describe yourself as a thinker, I realize that's precisely the thing I'm always working toward: to think for a living, to take the music of the beautiful and the terrible and craft it into something that resonates with people. Along those lines, to close: Who are you thinking with? Who are you watching? Who are you reading? Who are the thought partners that help make your work possible?

JIMÉNEZ Definitely James Baldwin. I started reading him in graduate school, and everything just made sense. I didn't feel alone. And then there's [cultural theorist] Richard Dyer. He was fairly pivotal as well, in terms of understanding the way I think about the Blackness, whiteness, their relationship to one another. Yukio Mishima. I'm just fascinated by his life. Some other thinking partners that inspire me would be the feminist social theorist bell hooks, for constantly challenging my perception and notion of gender in my work—and the composer and pianist Philip Glass, whose minimalist music, for me, inspires a more straightforward, clear way of thinking about the larger complexities of the piece I'm creating in the moment.

BENNETT A number of polymaths, which is fitting. This was an honor and a pleasure, Clotilde.

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Double Take, 2019, mixed-medium collage on paper, 27½ by 25 inches.