Belonging Elsewhere: Felipe Baeza and Laura G. Gutiérrez in Conversation

Felipe Baeza and Laura G. Gutiérrez

On 10 September 2023, I greeted Felipe Baeza in Chicago at the National Museum of Mexican Art, a place that we had both visited on countless occasions but, to the best of our knowledge, never at the same time. The museum is in the Pilsen neighborhood, which has been home to different waves of migrants to the city, particularly people from Central and Eastern Europe and Mexico. The museum's building was a shared point of reference, familiar to both of us as immigrants to Chicago. We set out on a walking tour of Pilsen, where Felipe and his family had lived for several years after their arrival to the city. In our roaming, we walked to the different homes in which he had lived on Eighteenth Place, had coffee at Café Jumping Bean, and paused outside of the grade school he attended—Orozco Community Academy, named after Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco. We lingered for a long while before the images on the bus shelters at either corner of Eighteenth Street and Damen Avenue. From August to November of that year, *Felipe Baeza: Unruly Forms*, a project presented by Public Art Fund, was featured at those two bus shelters in addition to others throughout Chicago, New York, Boston, and three cities in Mexico: León, Mexico City, and Querétaro (figs. 1–3).

Although I had known of Felipe's work and had seen it on several occasions in group shows, the two of us did not meet in person until September 2022, when we were both at the Getty Research Institute as part of the Getty Scholars Program. Felipe was the artist in residence, and I was a residential scholar. The "and" in that year's theme, Art and Migration, describes at least one of the intersections that we both inhabit, albeit differently: We both make our livings through art, and we are both immigrants to this country. During our stay in Los Angeles, we came to the awareness that we had both immigrated to Chicago as children, but in different decades: Felipe in the 1990s, and I in the 1970s. While art and migration may define us, in our extended conversations, including the one that we had in Pilsen, we bonded over the complicated relationship to its two rubrics. In short, we share side-eyed (some would say queer or antinormative) approaches to the way that we represent and discuss migration in art and scholarship, respectively; we prefer the oblique and opaque. Meandering the streets of Pilsen, we were so wrapped up in the conversation that we forgot to hit record. Later, we met on

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FIG. 1. — Installation view of Felipe Baeza's *Unruly Forms* in Querétaro, Mexico, 2023. *Unruly Forms,* presented by Public Art Fund, is an exhibition on more than four hundred JCDecaux bus shelters and street furniture in New York, Boston, and Chicago in the United States; and in Mexico City, León, and Querétaro in Mexico, 9 August–19 November 2023. Photograph by Ramiro Chaves, courtesy Public Art Fund, NY.

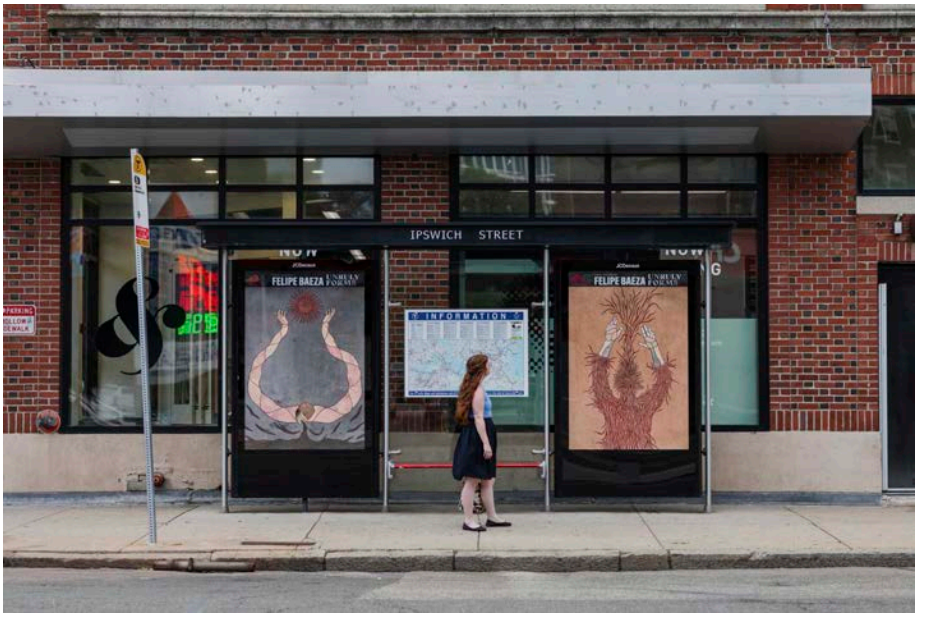

FIG. 2. — Installation view of Felipe Baeza's *Unruly Forms* in Boston, 2023. *Unruly Forms,* presented by Public Art Fund, is an exhibition on more than four hundred JCDecaux bus shelters and street furniture in New York, Boston, and Chicago in the United States; and in Mexico City, León, and Querétaro in Mexico, 9 August–19 November 2023. Photograph by Mel Taing, courtesy Public Art Fund, NY.

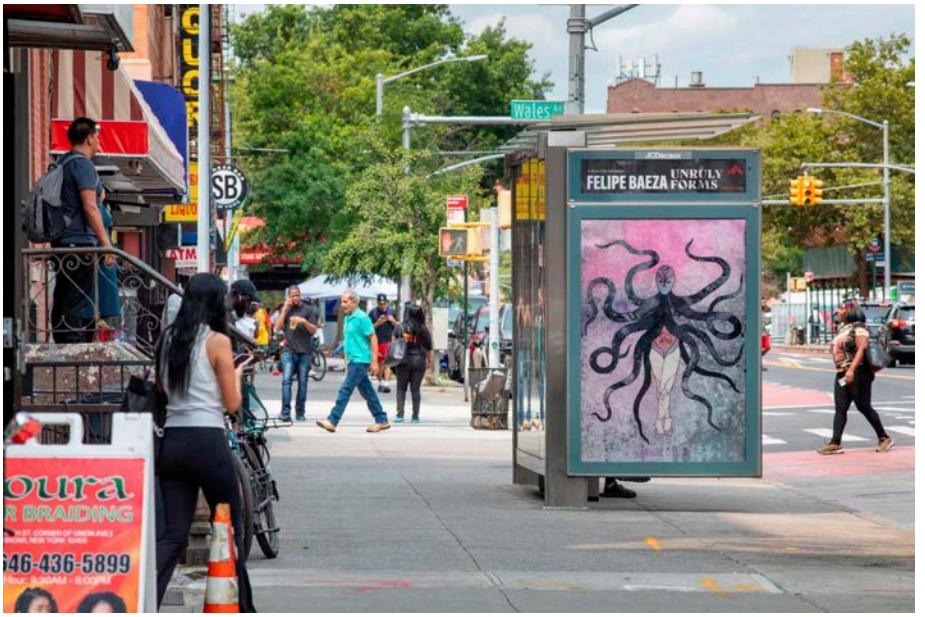

FIG. 3. — Installation view of Felipe Baeza's *Unruly Forms* in New York, 2023. *Unruly Forms,* presented by Public Art Fund, is an exhibition on more than four hundred JCDecaux bus shelters and street furniture in New York, Boston, and Chicago in the United States; and in Mexico City, León, and Querétaro in Mexico, 9 August–19 November 2023. Photograph by Nicholas Knight, courtesy Public Art Fund, NY.

Zoom to process our experience together on that Saturday afternoon of September, and this time we did record.

—Laura G. Gutiérrez

The conversation below took place in October 2023 on Zoom. It has been edited for length, repetition, and clarity. Italics have been added to capture words or phrases emphasized in the original dialogue.

Laura G. Gutiérrez: I've been thinking a lot about our visit to Chicago last September, which I would like to bring into our conversation about your Public Art Fund commission and the process of its making. I would love to start by talking about what we saw on our walk through the neighborhood of Pilsen, what we experienced that day, and the complex feelings that came from that shared time together.

Felipe Baeza: Meeting you in Chicago felt amazing—a familiar landscape that each of us has a different set of connections and attachments to. It was beautiful to share that space with you, so much so that we forgot to record our conversation on the ground that day! We were just in the moment, so many things happening simultaneously. . . .

My parents drove me to the Mexican Fine Arts Center [now known as the National Museum of Mexican Art] before we met, and somehow, we ended up inside the

museum. I didn't share this with you at the time, but that was the first time I had ever been to a museum with my parents. And just seeing how uncomfortable they were in that space, despite the fact that it's a Mexican museum in an immigrant neighborhood and they live nearby and know that building well—it threw me off.

But even so, that building has so many memories for me. It was probably the first museum I ever went to as a kid growing up in Pilsen. So they dropped me off, and then they left. And then we met, and we decided not to walk the museum, if I remember.

Laura: Yeah, I think the people working at the museum were a little thrown off. Because I walked in to join you, and then we walked out together! [*laughter*]

Felipe: But yeah, I completely forgot to share that. Because I was just very thrown off by that. And I think everything happened organically then. Because then we walked to the first bus shelter showcasing my Public Art Fund Project (figs. 4, 5). And I think it was walking in a landscape that I have, obviously, a lot of memories from. I think it was just a full circle of going back there. And then eventually we went to the same block where I grew up. And I remember we walked through every house that I grew up in.

Laura: Do you remember, I think we did it inversely—we walked down the block first, and then we walked to the bus stop.

Felipe: Oh, really? Yes! I mean, that whole day was just—wow!

Laura: There were a lot a lot of feelings.

Felipe: Yeah, it was a lot of—yeah. Because I mean, I had not been back to that block. I mean, obviously I'd been back to Pilsen since then but probably hadn't returned to that specific block since we moved out of there. So it felt so strange and so foreign. It didn't obviously feel the same.

Laura: And yet so familiar at the same time!

Felipe: Oh right, because your family used to live there too?

Laura: It's so wild! I forgot to tell you, I verified that my aunt and uncle's house was across the street from your childhood home! So I probably was there when you were a little kid, I was already—

Felipe: —causing trouble? [*laughter*]

Laura: But that was the moment in which we were so immersed in the conversation that we forgot to record. Because we were walking through the different houses where you had lived, and your memories of them.

Felipe: Exactly, with the purpose of recording, right? But I think it was good that we didn't record. We were just basically in the space and taking it in, and it was special to share it with you. And to see your connection to that landscape too; even though you didn't grow up in that neighborhood, you had also a strong attachment to it. The landscape looks strange, but familiar, and also very surreal. My time there feels like a dream somehow, as if it never happened. But obviously it had such an impact on me as a child that I have so many vivid memories of that block and playing with all of my friends. The neighborhood has changed so drastically. It seemed like such a vibrant neighborhood back then, right?

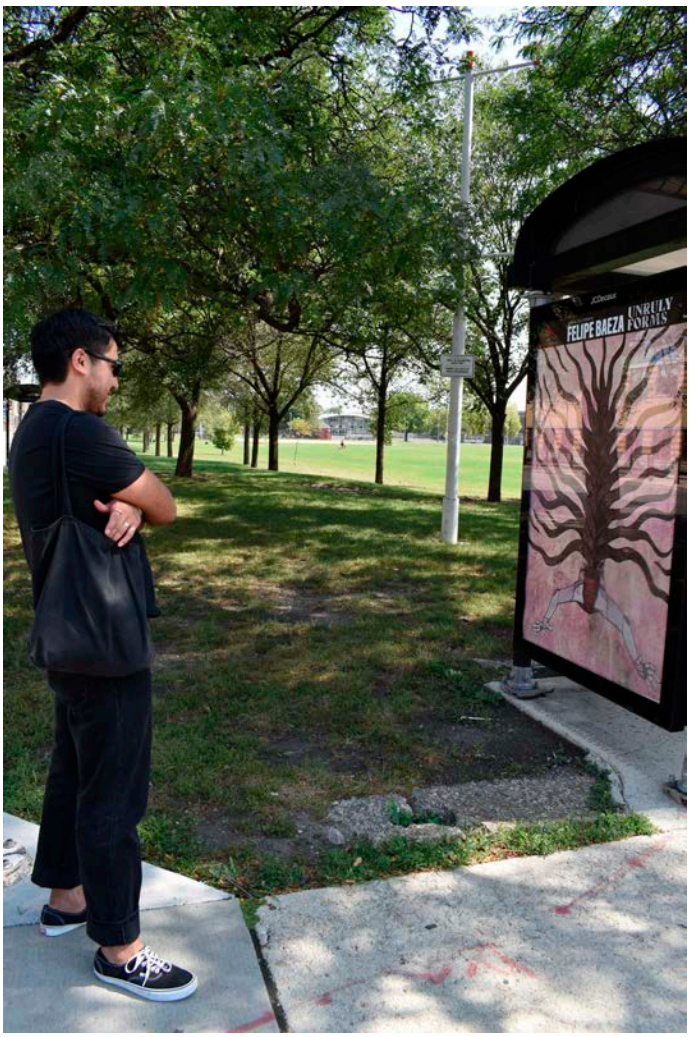

FIG. 4. — Felipe Baeza viewing a bus shelter located at the intersection of S. Damen and S. Blue Island Avenues in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago featuring Baeza's *Let yourself fall* (2023), part of the installation *Unruly Forms*. Photograph by Laura G. Gutiérrez, September 2023.

FIG. 5. — Felipe Baeza at a bus shelter located at the intersection of S. Damen Avenue and W. 18th Street in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago featuring Baeza's *to shape, shape self* (2023), part of the installation *Unruly Forms*. Photograph by Laura G. Gutiérrez, September 2023.

Laura: Yeah, that's why we would go to Pilsen when I was a kid, because it's where things were happening—the culture, the food; I wanted to be immersed in it. And as a young adult I wanted to be close to where Mexican art and Mexican migrant experiences were not only highly visible but were thriving.

Felipe: That's how I remember it. I arrived there when I was seven, about to turn eight. It seems so surreal, but the transition from Mexico to Pilsen wasn't so harsh. It seemed like I was coming from one brown place to another brown place. And it just so happened that a lot of the brown people in Pilsen spoke English.

Laura: You have these enclaves.

Felipe: And I always say that I feel like I never experienced Mexico until I left Mexico. And by that, I mean that when I grew up there, Pilsen embodied this kitschy idea of what Mexico is: murals everywhere, colors everywhere, this hybrid, nostalgic outcome of a lot of people trying to re-create home. I went through the public school system, attended José Clemente Orozco Academy, and literally 99 percent of my peers and faculty growing up were Mexican—either first- or second-generation immigrants. And there's even a Benito Juárez High School close by. So it was also surreal growing up there, especially coming from Mexico. I just felt like I was transported to a different Mexican city.

Laura: And an extension of Mexico, which actually Pilsen is. But this Mexico is re-created through these memories and nostalgia, this sense of "How do we sort of make it feel and look like Mexico?" But that also ends up serving as a mechanism to ground one in that space, doesn't it?

Felipe: Yes, exactly. It is another mode of survival to re-create not necessarily home but that sort of structure, right, that allows you to flourish. And I think, as I said, sadly, this is only made possible by how segregated Chicago is, which has allowed for certain communities to stick together. I've been in New York since 2005, and it's obviously a whole different landscape; you just live where you can afford to, which doesn't happen so much in Chicago. But yeah, it was surreal going back to Pilsen and doing the same walks that I did as a child—

Laura: With the added layer of surrealism—

Felipe: So many layers! That's why it feels so surreal, because I don't have the language to describe it. When you left that afternoon, I was like, "Wait, what just happened? Was I just with Laura, hanging out in Pilsen?"

Laura: But also you were walking through streets you once knew well; you were in front of Orozco Academy, which is kitty-corner to two bus stops where your work is currently installed. Let's talk about that?

Felipe: I'm sure those bus stops have always been there, but to see my work in there was [*pauses*]. . . . It still hasn't hit me; I'm not sure how to feel about it! Even though the project was also installed in New York, I had only seen pictures sent by friends or sent through social media before that trip to Chicago. It was beautiful that the first time I saw it was with my parents when they drove me to the museum to meet you that day. It was surreal to see it through their eyes, and it's hard to describe that feeling or what that meant at the time. But I couldn't help imagining seven- or eight-year-old Felipe walking in those streets and being able to see something like those bus shelters. Even now that I've seen it a couple of times in New York, I haven't found the words yet, beyond it feeling a bit cringey. [*laughter*]

From that bus shelter I recall we went to a well-known neighborhood coffee shop, Café Jumping Bean, that was the site of my first job.

Laura: And I was like wait, this is just more than perfect!

Felipe: Like you, I was also someone who was very much interested in making, even though I didn't have that concept of *Art* with a capital *A*. I remember encountering that coffee shop as a kid for the first time and thinking it was the coolest place ever.

Laura: I used to drive to Pilsen from the North Side, just to go to that coffee shop, because it was the coolest one in Chicago.

Felipe: There were so many writers and artists hanging out there. And as a ten-year-old, that was my only aspiration: I want to work here one day. I owe a lot to that neighborhood. I'm sure you remember the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum used to have a program called Yollocalli [Arts Reach], which I think still exists?

Laura: Oh, and the community radio for youth?

Felipe: Yes, Radio Arte. And it used to be on the corner of Blue Island and 18th, literally a block away. And I was part of both. I think I was part of Radio Arte for a minute, thinking that I wanted to be a radio DJ, but that never happened. [*laughter*] But Yollocalli was such a transformative space for me and so many kids in the neighborhood. I took my first art class there, in photography, an interest that later evolved into many other creative languages. It was thriving; there was a huge population of young kids who were all taking art classes there, making together, and participating in Radio Arte. There was another community center up the block called Casa Aztlán.

Laura: Oh yeah, I remember Casa Aztlán.

Felipe: Yeah, which sadly doesn't exist anymore. But they had an amazing ceramic studio, which I was also part of. I was always connected to making and fortunate to have access to these classes and spend time with other people, making. It was extremely transformative and provided a community. I owe a lot to the many mentors and amazing people along the way who guided me to be where I am now, in this conversation with you.

Laura: I'm thinking of the generational shifts that happened, maybe in the eighties or nineties, that turned Pilsen into such a thriving arts community beyond the commercial businesses that were always successful. I remember my family would go there to get Mexican bread at the panaderías, to attend mass, and to visit relatives living there.

But in terms of the community art making, it was my generation and maybe earlier ones that began to build the infrastructure to get kids like you into those spaces, to allow them to create. I saw that happening from a distance, before my eyes, and now I see that

you come out of that. It wasn't just Orozco Academy—all of Pilsen was your school, with its murals and public art.

Felipe: Yeah, I mean, having access to all that enriched my childhood. But things have changed with gentrification—so many families have left, including mine. I owe so much to those spaces that are no longer there. Casa Aztlán and Radio Arte don't exist anymore. As children growing up in Pilsen in the late nineties, we had access to so many things and a sense of community. I arrived there in 1995 and attended St. Ann School for third grade, which I think you mentioned your cousin went to. The following year I moved to a public school that was named after Peter Cooper, the same founder of Cooper Union in New York, where I earned my BFA.

Laura: So many layers–

Felipe: So many layers to this, which I didn't realize until later!

It's surreal to go back to a place that has impacted my life and see it again through a very different lens. And to return with you this time, travel down memory lane with the added layer of seeing my own work in that space—and try to comprehend, what is going on? I mean, that whole day was a lot of layers. Going with my parents to a museum for the first time and seeing them walking and interacting with that space.

It was quite emotional because I think they just felt uncomfortable. And then I wonder where that's coming from, but I do know where that's coming from, right? A lot of us feel unwelcomed by those spaces, not really knowing how to navigate them. I remember the first time I went to the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] in Chicago—I must have been eleven. I went by myself and had to figure out, "Wait, how do I get in? Do I pay?" It was intimidating.

Laura: For me, it was the Art Institute [of Chicago]. As a child, I wanted to go, but I was scared to. I had the same feelings as you, I think in large part because both of our families migrated to Chicago from rural Mexico for economic reasons. Going to museums was not part of what we did. The arts were not supposed to be part of our trajectories. But to start seeking those spaces as kids, I'm going to venture out and say something: Speaking for myself at that age, I knew I was weird. But I didn't know I was queer in terms of sexuality. I was seeking out the kinds of images that more or less fit with this little developing queer in me; I was trying to find spaces.

Felipe: That was true for my weird queer self too as a kid. For me it was a sort of doubleness. And by that, I mean dealing with my status—that I had to come out as undocumented, and also as queer. As kids we feel weird and wonder, "Why am I feeling this way?" We don't know how to name it. But also there's some shame in it as a recovering Catholic.

Laura: Oh, yeah, for sure.

Felipe: But even before I arrived in Chicago, my earliest experiences with that "weirdness" at that age was going to church and noticing how beautiful these bodies of crucified Jesus were, and feeling complete euphoria. As you know, these images in Mexican churches are so dramatic in their depiction and I was so attracted to them. And I was just like, "Wait, what is going on?" Naming it happened in Pilsen, years later. My first and closest friend, Nicólas González-Medina, was an artist and also queer. We never came out to each other, but we both knew without speaking about it.

Laura: You had a different language that wasn't verbal.

Felipe: It was super nonverbal whatsoever, and maybe that's why we gravitated to each other. Even to this day, as I get older, I start accepting parts of myself that I never accepted about my queerness. I think as queer folks, we're just fragmented individuals. And as queer folks of color, we shielded ourselves and performed other personas as kids, didn't we? To the point that we forgot what the truth is? I think part of the process now is to shed those layers and try to rediscover which parts are true and which parts are not. There were other queer individuals in the community in Pilsen, and even though we never named it, we supported one another. I never feared rejection.

There were two visual markers for me during that period that expanded on these ideas of fragmentation and performance. One was Nahum Zenil. I'm not sure how I encountered his work the first time, but it was extremely transformative.

Laura: I was going to ask you about that! I could imagine Nahum's work in one of the group shows at the National Museum of Mexican Art. My own interest in performance studies came from attending the different performances that were curated and programmed through that museum. I saw many artists there for the first time—like Luis Alfaro. I think that there were people on the museum's curatorial or programming team that were queer and brought queer visual or performance artists into that space. And I will forever be grateful to whoever was doing that! But I imagine Nahum might have been shown there, or maybe you saw his work in an art or art history book. . . .

Felipe: I wouldn't disregard it. But whatever the source, those markers were quite important for nine- or ten-year-old Felipe. Another influential image was that amazing photograph by Graciela Iturbide of Magnolia, which she took in Juchitán (fig. 6). I saw myself reflected in that image but didn't know how to name it. It wasn't obviously gay or queer in the beginning—it was just *the other.* I didn't know anything about Graciela or this individual in the picture—only that this person, who was living their true existence, reflected me in ways that I didn't have words for.

So those were two visual markers that I encountered in Pilsen that have had a lasting impact. It's surreal to consider the impact of my images that are publicly exhibited

FIG. 6. — Graciela Iturbide (Mexican, b. 1942). *Magnolia, Juchitán, Oaxaca,* 1986 (negative); 2005 (print). Gelatin silver print, 44.5 × 31.5 cm. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007.65.25. Gift of Susan Steinhauser and Daniel Greenberg. © Graciela Iturbide.

right now through the Public Art Fund on other children today. Certainly this is what attracted me to the power and limits of art. Obviously as a kid I had no idea who Nahum was, but encountering an image of his work has affected me to this day—it made me stop and realize, "Wait, I want to do whatever this person is doing. I want to spend the rest of my life making worlds and images."

Laura: Do you remember what Nahum image you saw as a nine- or ten-year-old? Because I can picture Iturbide's *Magnolia* perfectly.

Felipe: Well, there's two that I remember. One is a triptych of him being penetrated by the Mexican flag (fig. 7).

Laura: That's the image that came to my mind when you mentioned his name.

Felipe: Oh really!? That particular image I'm sure I encountered way later. But the first image wasn't sexual at all; it was a self-portrait of him with thorns around his head.[1]

Laura: Were you aware then that it was a self-portrait?

Felipe: No, definitely not! I learned that later on. As a child, I didn't know that he was queer; there was just something in the image that attracted me.

Laura: I'm totally geeking out here! [*laughter*]

Felipe: Those images still have a very powerful impact on me—especially in their representation of a body and the possibilities of a body; that is important to my work. Also the idea of queerness as fragmentation, as incompleteness. We will never be complete individuals, but the process of this life is to find those pieces and maybe shed other pieces away. I could say that I acquired many pieces of myself growing up in Pilsen.

Laura: I wanted to ask about the title of your Public Art Fund project, *Unruly Forms,* because what you've been saying makes me think of those two words together. When we think of the word *form,* we think of something that is perhaps fully formed with strict contours and definition, and yet, when you put *unruly* in front, it becomes unwieldy, right? What are your thoughts around unruly bodies and queerness?

Felipe: Well, the title came in some way from Gayatri Gopinath's book *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* [Duke University Press, 2018]. My language to describe what I'm interested in has changed over the years, even though the terms are very much connected. In the beginning, I embraced the idea of illegality. Then, I began to work through the idea of fugitivity and later modes of suspension, though fugitivity is also a mode of suspension. And then I explored waywardness. And now, I'm investigating the unruly, though they are all very much the same.

Laura: They're all connected.

Felipe: Right, they're all connected. But I think we always run at the risk of romanticizing fugitivity, don't we? It's an extremely violent way of living—Black radical thinkers like Fred Moten and Sylvia Wynter have spoken to that. When you speak about fugitivity, you have to be aware that it's a very exhausting way of living because you're always on the run. But what I was very much attracted to in the concept of fugitivity is this idea of *choosing not to belong*, choosing to live outside, while still within—how is that made possible?

FIG. 7. — Nahum B. Zenil (Mexican, b. 1947). *¡Oh, santa bandera! (A Enrique Guzmán)* (Oh, Holy Flag! [For Enrique Guzmán]), 1996, ink, acrylic, and oil on paper, triptych: 238 × 71.5 cm. Mexico City, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (DiGAV, UNAM). Acquisition through funds from the Programa de Egresos de la Federación, 2013. Photo by Francisco Kochen, courtesy MUAC. By permission of the artist.

And thinking through my own life experience, that I came to this country at seven, and now I'm thirty-six. And I have lived in some mode of fugitivity that entire time—I was put outside by force, not by choice. At the same time, I've learned to thrive within this country, but from the outside—if that makes sense? And I think that's very much in connection to the unruly. How does one live outside citizenship? Is that possible? And how does one live outside of the norm? That's what I've been trying to explore—not just in my art practice, but in my day-to-day life. In terms of citizenship, what does it mean to desire a country that doesn't desire you? As we know, Laura, citizenship does not protect you.

Maybe I'm just jaded, but as we know, the American dream has been the biggest scam. Before, I used to think, "I can't live like this anymore. I don't want to live in this liminal space for the rest of my life." But since then, I've learned to embrace it, asking instead, "How does one flourish in a space that doesn't allow you to flourish?" As we saw in Pilsen, the possibility of flourishing is there. But it means finding community and building the structures that allow you to flourish.

So that's what I mean when I speak about the unruly. Embracing that unruliness in its many forms that allow for survival in a landscape where one wasn't meant to flourish. And in that sense, it was beautiful to see the work that I'd made for the Public Art Fund in Pilsen. Because everyone that I grew up with in that neighborhood had very similar experiences—of migrating to this country and trying to envision a world where they were flourishing. I think that is the power of the queer migrant imaginary, that you're able to thrive in conditions where you weren't supposed to thrive. And that's what has shaped the work and its making.

Laura: Oh, yeah, you've just said so much! I want to respond to everything.

Felipe: As people who flee home either by choice or by force, it's human nature to want to belong, to be part of something. And I think for me, as I grow older, I'm just starting to accept parts of myself but also reach toward things other than citizenship and ideas of belonging. Now I'm in this space where I choose not to belong. And I think, ultimately, that's how you attain freedom: you realize you don't belong anywhere. We've spoken before about what it means to feel Mexican or not—and at some point I decided that I honestly didn't care.

Laura: Exactly. I have something to say about that. We are so alike in that sense.

Felipe: But the outside world does care. As I've been showing my work in different spaces, they consistently label me as "Felipe Baeza, the Mexican artist." But never as "Felipe Baeza, the American artist." That's another landscape to navigate, to observe

from the outside. But getting back to ideas of belonging, that's also where the unruly allows this choice of not being fixed as something. Rather, you can choose to be legible on your own terms, to select people. For example, with my childhood friend Nicólas, we spoke in a coded language; we didn't have to name it, but we understood one another.

Laura: Or perhaps just remain illegible. Not to romanticize that, but I don't really care to be legible. You can retain the power to just keep them guessing.

Felipe: It's true. Definitely—beyond opacity, I think we're refusing to be legible in the way the state, the law, and even society demands. To be legible only to those that you care about. That's been a learning process for me as I've grown up in this country, where I'm forever foreign. I went back to Mexico for the first time in 2016, when I was thirty, after having left when I was seven. So that was surreal to experience, to go back to a place to which I never thought I was going to return and see family I thought I was never going to see again.

I bring this up because I also felt extremely foreign there. But I've gone back many times recently, and every time, it's felt more like home—whatever home is! [*laughter*] But it felt comfortable; I didn't have to justify my existence to anybody there. Maybe the process is to reject the idea of belonging and legibility, and refuse to be coherent for others.

Laura: Yeah, I am all for that! When my family migrated across the border, I was two weeks short of nine and remained undocumented for a few years after that. But my circumstances were different than yours because at that moment, we still had the Family Reunification Act. Because my youngest sister was an anchor baby born in Chicago, my family got our green cards. So for me, it's about choosing to stay in that limbo, not because I love Mexico or want to be binational, but I embrace that in-between space. It is a privileged limbo space since my green card allows me mobility, but I also give the government the power to track me as I cross borders and move around. Nevertheless, I embrace my resident-alien status.

Felipe: I want to become a resident alien! [*laughter*]

Laura: When my friends get residency, I always say "Welcome to resident alienation!" I didn't choose that status; my parents embarked on the process for me, and choosing to stay has been important for many reasons. But I've consciously chosen not to become a US citizen because the American dream is bankrupt for me—

Felipe: It's a trap!

What you said about resident alienation reminded me of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which came out under President Obama, our Deporter in Chief. It was started in 2012, but I didn't apply until 2013. The application process was extremely

infantilizing and dehumanizing: we had to provide every single address that we'd ever lived at, basically tracking our location since we stepped foot in this country. And of course there's also the concern: What happens if someone like Trump gets into office and wants to cancel this program, when all of our information is there?

I have to reapply for DACA every two years, providing updated addresses and a new set of fingerprints. So as much as I like to say that I live outside of the system, I'm very much tracked within it. Under DACA, I have to apply for a travel permit called Advance Parole every time I want to leave the country.

Laura: Who comes up with these names, by the way?

Felipe: Exactly! It's such a broken system, dehumanizing in so many ways. And while I don't want to give it credit, this "immigration protection" has allowed me mobility—including returning to Mexico under very specific conditions, though you're not guaranteed re-entry to the US. They could decide, you know what, we're not going to let you in. So there's always that concern, but I obviously have to learn to let that concern go. What's the worst that can happen? I can't come back.

Laura: I think that's really important to lose the fear of not returning, to not give it so much power over you—even while that fear is completely understandable. This is what I stress to those I know who have DACA status, including many of my students at UT Austin.

Felipe: The first time I traveled to Mexico was just before Trump came into power, and I was worried. So I made a point to return before he took office just to be sure I'd make it back. But it's vital to lose that fear and take that power back from the oppressor. The ultimate freedom is realizing you don't belong anywhere. I have nothing to lose, right? If anything, the only people I care about who have a lot to lose are my parents—they are already living a very different reality than I am.

I often think about their journey to this country. My mom was in her late twenties, and my dad in his early thirties, and they already had a life for themselves in Mexico. The decision to embark on a journey to this unknown land, whether by choice or by force, was quite powerful. As immigrants, they had to have imagined that there was something better out there, coming with this idea of the American dream. But once you arrive here, you find a space that mirrors where you left behind, or is even worse.

Now I'm seeing them getting older, and my mom has since retired. In many ways she seems like a teenager to me because she's trying to discover herself, figuring out what she likes and enjoys doing in her free time now that she's not constantly working.

Laura: That is beautiful though, and equally sad.

Felipe: True, it's beautiful but also sad that she spent a significant part of her life working and worrying about other things. Now she's at the stage where she has some time to attend to herself. And I'm seeing that with my dad, too. Obviously, their bodies are changing. I left Chicago when I was eighteen, and I feel that I've missed out on so many things in their lives. Every time I see them, they've gotten older. Ultimately, my only responsibility is to give them the best life possible. Right? Because I don't think the answer for them is returning to Mexico, to a landscape that is very unknown to them now. And selfishly, I don't want them to return; I just want them in close proximity to me. But that's where I'm coming from, my only responsibility is to my parents and otherwise I really have nothing to lose.

Laura: [*Pauses*] Wow—

Felipe: That was a lot! [*laughter*]

Laura: I've been thinking a lot about my own parents in relation to these questions and have much more to say. As you might remember, my father passed away only a few months ago, after being sick for a few months, in large part due to the lack of mobility caused by the pandemic. To think that my dad's biggest dream was to return to our town in Durango, where I was born, is devastating. He was never able to do that. I now want to do an action in our town, an art intervention, as a way of honoring him and bringing him back home.

But maybe this is a good moment to pivot back more directly to your work?

I was remembering our time at the Getty in Los Angeles, and the privilege of being able to pop my head into your studio and see your work in process (figs. 8, 9). After seeing you make work on such a small, intimate scale, it's surprising to see those same works blown up and installed in bus shelters across six cities in the United States and Mexico for this Public Art Fund commission!

Perhaps we could start by talking about the Mesoamerican artifacts these works were based on. Beyond specific identifications of the objects, their references, and symbolism, I'm interested in your own mythmaking with and through them.

Felipe: More than answers, questions guide my practice—and I think that is what makes the studio and the process of making so important for me. I'm trying to explore those answers through materiality. My interest in Mesoamerican artifacts has changed over time.

For this commission, I looked primarily at objects from what is now known as Mexico currently in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Art Institute of Chicago. These were the three cities I was initially given by the Public Art Fund, and I tried to unify them. Once I did

FIG. 8. — Felipe Baeza working in his studio at the Getty Research Institute, 2022. Photograph courtesy the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

FIG. 9. — Felipe Baeza in his studio at the Getty Research Institute, 2022. Photograph courtesy the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

some research, it turned out that several Mesoamerican objects I'd been attracted to for a long time happened to be in these three museum collections.

Rather than tracing these objects back to their original contexts, I'm interested in them as vehicles for broader conversations about migration and displacement. How is meaning added to objects? What does it mean for an artifact to be taken far from of its original context and then fixed in a very clinical state within a museum, where it's never meant to change?

Laura: There's so much science around defining the exact provenance, the location, date, the maker if known, and all of that.

Felipe: It's such a violent extraction. This project attempts to imagine a liberatory force that would allow this object to thrive in these displaced conditions far from its place of origin, even while carrying the name of a wealthy white donor for the rest of its life.

What if the object was never meant to be displayed? What if it was meant to be buried for the rest of its life? I believe these objects still carry so much energy; they're vessels of energy. As viewers, we sometimes struggle to acknowledge that the object was made by a being, by a person—we see it as an object, rather than a vehicle. For a lot of cultures, not just Mesoamerican ones, mythmaking was a way to create portals into the afterlife, a means of survival and regeneration. We tend to think of living as spanning from the moment we're born until we die—but so much of life happens beyond death, in giving life to other forms.

For me, that public commission expanded in so many directions. Having time and space to research while in residence at the Getty allowed me to take a deep dive into this project. The process, as you know well, was very layered and happened organically.

Laura: Your work is quite literally layered, and also very minute in the details.

Felipe: A lot of the work that I've been doing has addressed an erasure that removes voices from a history of making. I'm deeply interested in archaeology, which is an extremely problematic discipline. One example of this is the Mexican National Anthropology Museum [Museo Nacional de Antropología]: a violent, nationalist project that has extracted so many objects from communities that are still thriving across Mexico into a single location.

Laura: For those communities, the "artifact" is not an artifact but a living object with a spiritual function in the community. It's not meant to be in a museum, part of a national project.

Felipe: It's an extremely violent extraction. The answer for these objects that are in collections in the States and all over the world is not to repatriate them, because they will never be able to go back to their original places. But this raises questions about institutional responsibility to care for and contextualize these objects. This is another way that my Public Art Fund project opens up many more questions than answers.

FIG. 10. — Codex-style plate, Maya, late classic period, 640–740 CE, earthenware; red and black on cream slip paint, diam.: 5.8 × 32 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1993.565, gift of Landon T. Clay. Photograph © 2025 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

There is one object that I had been particularly obsessed with: a Maya plate that turned out to be at the MFA in Boston of all places, the only city of the initial three that I had no personal connection to (fig. 10). Like many of the objects that I picked for this project, this plate depicts transformation and regeneration. Here it's a maize god rebirthing from the shell of a turtle while aided by an individual on each side. Together they make a collective that allows you to come into existence, to be present.

Laura: That's one of my favorite images that you work with. And it was mind-blowing to see *to shape, shape self* (2023; fig. 11) at a bus stop—you're doing a new kind of mythmaking, for a public audience (see fig. 5).

Felipe: Thank you for sharing that! It's been hard to take in this project when I see it firsthand on the streets, but it's beautiful to see it through the eyes of friends and family, and to witness their excitement at seeing an image in public made by someone they know.

As an artist, public art is an important responsibility, and I haven't fully absorbed or comprehended what it means. But especially in the context of Chicago, I imagine my younger self walking in that landscape, and imagine my work in that public setting having an impact on someone. I like that there's no context to these images whatsoever—there's really nothing beyond the title of the project and my name.

FIG. 11. — Felipe Baeza (Mexican, b. 1987, active in the US). *to shape, shape self*, 2023, ink, acrylic, graphite, varnish, and cut paper on panel, 40.6 × 30.5 cm (16 × 12 in.). © Felipe Baeza. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London; kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York. Photograph by Brad Farwell.

Laura: Yes, but people are left to deal with the image in their own way. Which is what happened that evening after we met in Pilsen. I went to have dinner with my sister and eleven-year-old niece on the North Side, and we drove past some of the bus shelters where your project was displayed. We stopped at one of them and got out of the car. My niece was stunned and speechless for a bit as she confronted the image. Then she commented, "Oh, it's scary . . . but I like it." She examined it really closely, fixating on certain details, and then pulled back and asked me to take a picture of her and my sister

in front of the work. She had no idea about the artifacts the image was based on, or who you were exactly, but nonetheless had to reckon with the image.

Felipe: Well, I want to return to what you said about the work's format and scale, because I agree that the enlargement makes them feel very different. I worked on these images at the Getty on a very different scale, as panels—and the largest one was probably sixteen by twelve inches, so very intimate (figs. 12, 13). I worked on them one by one. And obviously I knew they were going to be enlarged and printed. But I didn't comprehend that scale until I got the proofs. And I was like, "Whoa!" The prints take up space in a very different way than the smaller ones; the images feel so different.

And that was also my feeling when I first opened the proofs—like your niece, I was like, "These are so scary!," but also beautiful in how they take up space and have agency, as if to reclaim space: I'm here, and you're forced to deal with me. And I think that's also why it was hard to encounter them at first, hard to know how to respond to them. I wondered if they were taking up too much space. . . .

Laura: Because you're a quiet person who likes to hide in the corner! [*laughter*]

Felipe: I mean, that's true! Because I thought, "Oh my God, they're out there. And they're living and they're taking up space in a very different way than they have in the studio!" In the studio they're just so intimate; only one person is able to view them at a time. But on the subject of scale, this project situated in the spaces of public transit felt important for me to do because that's also how I experienced Chicago and how I continue to move around. I don't drive; I never had a desire to learn how to drive. So public transportation has always been my mode of getting around, of learning my landscape and discovering new ones. There's a cycle of mobility and waiting built into that experience, of riding one bus and then waiting for the next one, pausing and then resuming movement again. It's a mode of bodily suspension. Hopefully I'm not scaring a lot of individuals while they are waiting for the bus! [*laughter*]

Laura: I loved observing passengers inhabiting the bus shelter and moving through space—not just because I'm interested in the body's movement as performance studies but also because I have a deep love and appreciation for you and your work. As I stood there, I observed people sitting on benches, standing, and leaning against the shelters, and engaging with your images in various ways until the bus arrived and they started piling onto it. It felt deeply ritualistic, almost like I was attending church. Through this project, you're not just enacting new myths but also new rituals.

Felipe: Religion has informed the work. Growing up Catholic on one side of my family and evangelical Christian on the other, I experienced two very different types of interactions with images. Long before I first saw the work of Nahum Zenil or Graciela Iturbide (see figs. 6, 7), church was the context in which I first experienced the body in space or in a landscape and reckoned with the power of the image beyond desire. These

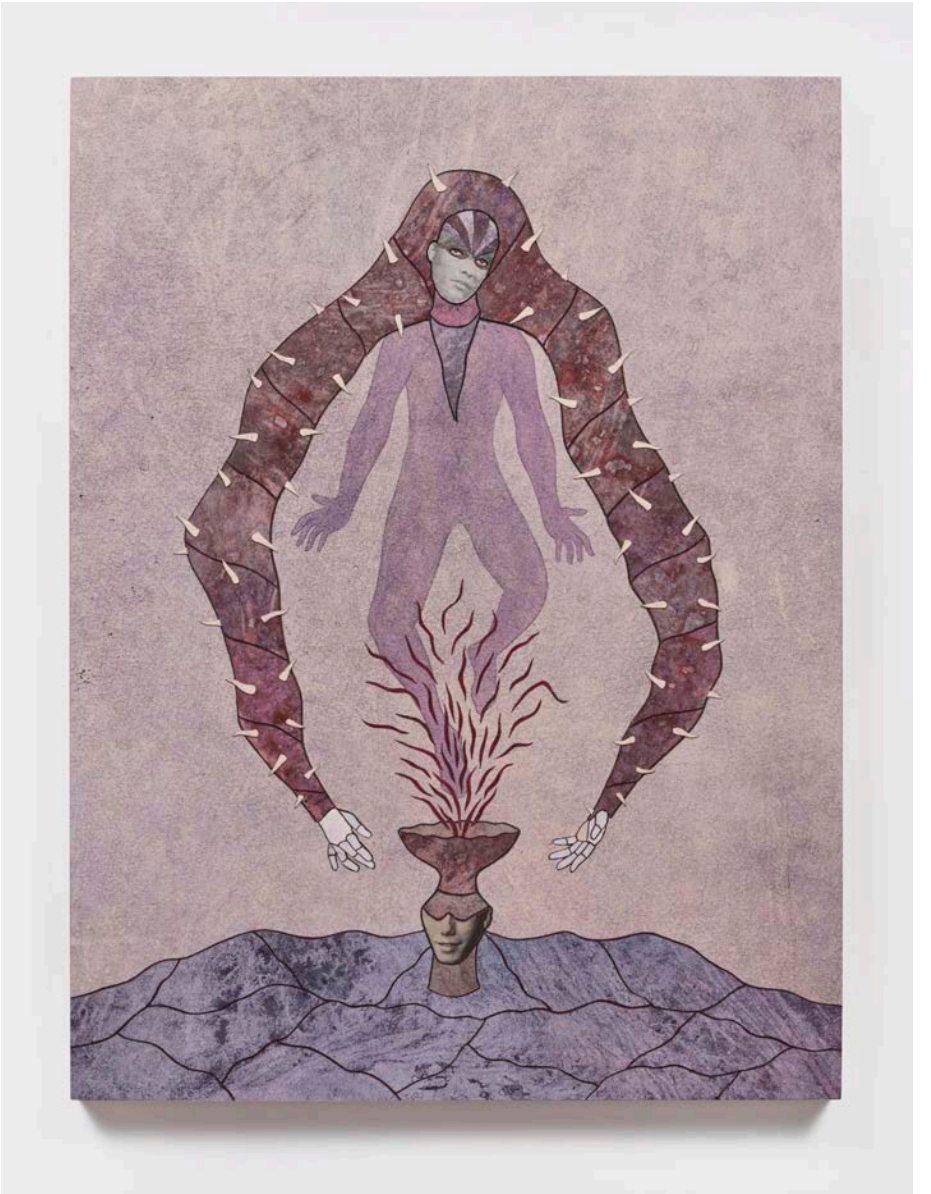

FIG. 12. — Felipe Baeza (Mexican, b. 1987, active in the US). *Our shadows merging*, 2023, ink, graphite, varnish, and cut paper on panel, 40.6 × 30.5 cm (16 × 12 in.). © Felipe Baeza. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London; kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York. Photograph by Brad Farwell.

issues are still very much at the forefront of my work, which questions the possibility of the body, the kind of energy the body carries, and the space it can occupy. In a lot of my work, the body doesn't have or even inhabit a landscape—rather, the body itself is the actual space, is the landscape itself. The body is a vessel that carries energy. There have always been ritualistic aspects of the work, as well as poetic ones. The bodies have become more abstract and fragmented in embodying the refusal we discussed earlier, but they also exist in their full totality, despite this fragmentation. The work tries to

FIG. 13. — Felipe Baeza (Mexican, b. 1987, active in the US). *Confined but still intoxicated with freedom*, 2022, ink, graphite, varnish, and cut paper on panel, 35.6 × 27.9 cm (14 × 11 in.). © Felipe Baeza. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London; kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York. Photograph courtesy the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

build back a history or myth, to reconstruct a unity that will never be totally right, but the challenge is to learn to sit with that and be OK with it.

Laura: The regeneration that you spoke about earlier is key to this. But the other dimension of the bodies depicted in your work that is equally important to me is their appendages—roots, wings, or arms that reach out. Almost like tentacles. And the teeth or thorns that grasp or ground the bodies. As a viewer, I desire to be grabbed by this

body that is a vessel, to be pulled in through the portal. I want to use these bodies as a vehicle for my own journey into and through the work.

Felipe: Wow, thank you for that! I would say that what I'm trying to do not just in my work but in my day-to-day life is respond to a need and a desire to create portals. To go back to our earlier discussion about not belonging, maybe the essence of not just my practice but also my very being is to belong—anywhere, everywhere, and elsewhere, right? And I'm so thankful that I'm an artist, because it has allowed me to figure all these things out for myself. The journey of art making has been my exploration to find my language. Making has allowed me to work out and fully express these ideas in ways that words have not. Materiality has been extremely important to this process, and I'm interested in how materiality can also sit eye to eye with the content.

I don't work in a traditional manner; it's a layered process that I don't fully comprehend and can't control. When I walk into the studio, I'm not in a comfortable state because it's always a space of failure. But I enjoy that failure because it allows for so many surprises to happen. The studio practice is fairly new to me. Every day, I confront that fear of not having or knowing what freedom is. For a long time, I couldn't name it. And I was like wait, this is what I'm able to do now. This is my space. I don't have to respond to anybody. I can just come to the studio and lose track of anything and fully absorb myself in the making. And yeah, and I'm still trying to figure that out for myself. And I think sometimes there's also that guilt, feeling like it's such a selfish practice.

Laura: Recovering Catholics! [*laughter*]

Felipe: Guilt is still very much embedded in there! Guilt that I get to do this, and trying to sit comfortably with that. So yeah, there's a lot of figuring out happening.

Laura: OK, maybe this is a good moment to pause.

Felipe: Thank you so much for that.

Felipe Baeza and Laura G. Gutiérrez at a bus shelter located at the intersection of S. Damen Avenue and W. 18th Street in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago featuring Baeza's *to shape, shape self* (2023), part of the installation *Unruly Forms*. Photo by Laura G. Gutiérrez.

Felipe Baeza is a visual artist living and working in the United States.

Laura G. Gutiérrez is an art critic and performance curator based in Austin, Texas, and a professor and administrator at The University of Texas at Austin.

Notes

1. Nahum B. Zenil (Mexican, b. 1947), *Self-Portrait with Thorns*, 1992, oil on wood, 70 × 50 cm, private collection. An image of the work is viewable on the website of the Grey Art Museum, New York University, in the context of the exhibition *Nahum Zenil: Witness to the Self*, 2 September to 1 November 1997, https://greyartmuseum.nyu.edu/exhibition/nahum-zenil-090297-110197/sec/images/.