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August 31, 2019 - November 3, 2019

### Opening Reception

5:30pm, Friday, September 13, 2019

*Fertile Ground* brings together the aesthetically and conceptually layered works of **María Berrío, Zoë Charlton, and Joiri Minaya**. Through their depictions of women's bodies enveloped by nature—often juxtaposing wild and cultivated landscapes—these artists challenge romantic tropes of “nature” with powerful personal, cultural, and political narratives.

Berrío, Charlton, and Minaya reference the land in which they were raised—Bogotá, Colombia; Tallahassee, Florida; and the Dominican Republic, respectively. They explore relationships between cross-cultural, gendered personifications of nature and historic conquest and colonization of the natural landscape. When bodies are equated with land, they are subject to ownership and cultivation. The artists complicate traditional narratives to expose power dynamics and assert ownership over body and land. Yet none of the work presents a clear and tidy outcome—the works relay an emotional, visceral, messy, ongoing struggle. Ultimately, each artist's subjects demand acknowledgment and self-determination.

**María Berrío's** large and colorful collages on canvas depict surrealist narratives that blur her memories of the countryside surrounding Bogotá with myths and contemporary challenges. Nearly always featuring centralized female figures, her pieces address immigrant experiences and identities, intercultural connectivity, and migration. Whether the figures are indoors or outside, part of the land or separate from it, the landscape is a partner to the women, seeping through windows, merging with the patterns on their clothes, and filling the air with a density that is at once nourishing and suffocating.

Berrío describes her women as courageous, vulnerable, and compassionate guiding spirits. She mines romantic tropes associated with Mother Nature to emphasize qualities of tenderness, intuition, and strength. She is full of hope. At the same time, her practice

acknowledges the realities of the world in which we live, where injustice touches everyone and perilous artificial borders divide beautiful landscapes. Subjects are often seen in preparation for travel or captured in moments of transition. The purposeful use of symbols with global connotations allows for widespread access and interpretation. For instance, birds—a symbol of freedom—appear most often, whether held gingerly by her stoic female subject as in *Untitled*, or flying just out of reach as seen in *El Cielo Tiene Jardines*. The women are shepherds, mothers, and spiritual leaders. Their melancholy gazes and warm gestures defy easy categorization, indicating myriad conflicting realities and deep, prelinguistic understandings.

**Zoë Charlton** marks her intersecting interests in identity, race, place, and cultural tokenism through large-scale collages. By combining hundreds of stickers with cut paper and gouache, she creates sprawling, layered narratives that explode beyond the edges of the paper. Renderings of life-size figures tower over viewers, naked and confrontational. The land is not something on which they stand firmly; rather it envelopes them, swirling energetically from their bodies and concealing their identities.

Charlton addresses race explicitly. Over the years, she has depicted different genders and races to convey personal and political narratives related to labor, the body, and home. In this series, all the titles are phrases taken from Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech "The Meaning of July 4<sup>th</sup> to the Negro," which highlighted the hypocrisy and brutality of America. Charlton is also referencing her grandmother, Everlena Bates, who bought ten acres of land in rural Florida at a time in the early twentieth century when few women of color owned land in the United States. The resulting collages show bodies similar to her grandmother's, erupting into a profusion of Floridian birds and plant life ranging from palm trees to oaks to Spanish moss, and cultural objects, such as African masks. The pieces reference violence and fertility. They also address the influence of place on identity and the incredibly complicated relationship between black female bodies and land in the United States.

**Joiri Minaya** studies identity construction in an effort to reassert the Self. Recent works examine historic and contemporary representations of black and brown womanhood in relation to fabricated tropical identities that are toxically intertwined with the neocolonialism of the tourist industry. According to Minaya, tropical identity is a product that is bought and sold; Outsiders define what island labor, beauty, leisure, decoration, and service look like and residents perform those expectations.

Specifically, Minaya investigates the manipulation of female bodies and land in the Caribbean. Most of her imagery comes from extensive research using Google images and social media (mining hashtags such as #dominicanwomen) to discover how Caribbean women represent themselves online. In her photographic series, *Containers*, women wear artist-made, tropical-print Spandex bodysuits that freeze them in the poses women adopt online and Minaya camouflages them back into the same constructed landscapes—fabricated resorts, gardens, and refurbished beaches—seen in the online images. In her related Spandex installations, she stretches tropical-print fabrics around structures akin to beach cabanas. Inside, viewers lounge in beach chairs and watch videos related to tourism. The video *Labadee*, for example, narrates contemporary documentation of a fenced-in Royal Caribbean docking space on the shore of Haiti with text from Christopher Columbus's diary, affirming decolonial theories of continued subjugation of both body and land.

LOCATION **BELL GALLERY**