

felipe baeza to feel a then and there

april 26 – july 19, 2025

Essay by Isis Yépez

What happens in the hands are gestures. A sequence of bodily displacements that begins in the palm and flows through the rest of the body. A half-open hand, the shifting tension of fingers poised on the threshold of movement, clear eyes, gazes held. These gestures, woven throughout Felipe Baeza's work, compose a visual lexicon that calls forth traces on the verge of erasure. Gestures carry ephemeral messages translated through the body. As with any act of translation, some things get lost, leaving only remnants behind. Sprouting from a materiality built up layer upon layer, the forms, bodies, and atmospheres in Baeza's work emerge slowly, subtly.

To Feel a Then and There is Baeza's first exhibition at kurimanzutto. A series of portraits, a glass sculpture, and pieces that combine techniques such as engraving, collage, and embroidery, form the core of this body of work. The exhibition title is drawn from the book by Cuban-American theorist José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer*

Futurity (2009). Muñoz proposes a displacement—a spatial shift toward a *there* and a temporal one toward a *then*—that reveals the insufficiency of the present world: the here and now. In doing so, he urges us to persist in imagining other possible worlds, grounding that imagining in the radical potential of utopia.

Queerness, as utopia, is—following Muñoz—a longing that propels us forward: “a desire for another way of being in both the world and in time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough.”¹ Utopia often speaks of worlds yet to be invented, created, or unveiled. Queer utopia, then, becomes a territory of hope—a place that does not yet exist, something we cannot quite touch, and may never fully feel, but that nonetheless allows us to imagine better lives. The works on view by Baeza open up the possibility of imagining different worlds—worlds that exist in another time, another place. At an exact moment capable of changing everything: in *a then and there*.

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The crossroads between suspended times and ambiguous spaces in Baeza's work allows us to imagine embodied possibilities for existing otherwise. For Muñoz, queer utopia is a rejection of the here and now—a refusal to continue building toward new social orders that only reproduce exclusion and marginality in different forms. The here and now may be understood as a kind of enclosure, a concrete trap from which there is no escape; it presumes a predetermined, finished, fixed world, with categories, exclusions and prescribed ways of life.

Baeza leans into the possibility of imagining external worlds from within, crafting escapes and alternative ways of inhabiting space on terms that refuse the status quo. His work reveals bodies that do not fit within the frames of the existing world—bodies that slip free of form: suspended, constantly transforming, open, unfinished, fugitive, migrant, unbound to any one place. Some may appear anchored, but even in their rootedness, they thrive and exist on their own terms. Baeza envisions and brings into being these modes of existence, using flight—as both a refusal and a generative force—as a creative source that counters the violences of the here and now.

At the heart of the exhibition is a series of eleven portraits representing Octavia, Marsha, Ana, Sylvia W., José, James, Audre, Belkis, Alicia,

Sylvia R., and Laura. These figures were writers, thinkers, and creators who, in one way or another, stepped outside the frames of the status quo in an effort to live life on their own terms—even when that meant moving through obscured and often stigmatized worlds. Rather than unmasking these individuals, Baeza seeks to let them speak from elsewhere—from a place that resists fixed forms of representation. What emerges are traces, faint sketches, subtle outlines that help us slip through the social structures that confine and exclude. These vestiges can be found in certain gestures, like the direction of their gazes, in the layers of color that cover them, revealing quiet clues to other ways of being.

These individuals lived in the in-between, in the liminal, at the threshold. In that space between outside and inside, in a place of constant negotiation with the self, where encounters with the limits of the world often compelled them to build possible worlds within a closed one that denied their existence. In Baeza's words, "they had to create another landscape in order to bloom."² Whether or not we know who these figures were, what they did, or what they endured, they are here—among us—carrying a legacy that allows us to keep claiming not a linear, foreseeable future, but a *yet-to-come*. Potential, as a site of transformation, is not located in the

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here and now but in an unfinished, open horizon of possibility—in the yet-to-come.

The yet-to-come is an opening toward the unpredictable. It is a renunciation of the kind of knowledge “that ends up knowing only what is already known.”³ Through this renunciation, space is made for the unexpected to emerge—for that which unsettles presumed knowledge, certainties, and established legalities, and activates the potential to imagine what has not yet arrived. In this sense, Baeza’s portraits are not meant to be fixed in place, nor monumentalized or reinscribed within the continuum of hetero-linear history. Instead, they embrace opacity as a way of refusing and resisting a system that seeks to uphold totality, exclusion, and static labels. With these portraits, He also asks how we may embody refusal—an active strategy of resistance that embraces the possibility of living otherwise.

A form that never settles and *A self that is not quite here but always in process* are titles of some of Baeza’s works that offer clues to this openness to the unpredictable, shifting entities, and the diverse forms of life that resist a fixed sense of belonging. Alongside these traces, which allow us to engage with the artist’s ways of relating to the world, it is important to note that engraving was Baeza’s first approach to art-making and has remained a close companion in his

practice. These material processes—like collage—have allowed him to explore visual languages rich in nuance and texture, yielding depths that are difficult to achieve through other means.

The material process in Baeza’s work is inseparable from the conceptual grounding of his practice. There is a liquidity in how he allows the materiality of color to merge with the paper; a permissiveness in letting the paper behave as such; a light relinquishing of control over the final outcome. This fluidity in his process mirrors the fluidity of movement—almost performative—that marks the corporealities emerging in his pieces. The floor of his studio becomes the surface on which paper is laid, pigmented, and left to absorb color that flows like water across its surface. This also happens with the glass sculpture, where the color and the material merge together in a random and free manner during the casting process. His ways of making speak to the ways we relate to the world. By allowing color to guide the grounding of each piece—layer upon layer—Baeza lets the materials themselves enter into dialogue with the outcome of the work.

The process of shaping bodies unfolds like a collage, built from fragments of paper the artist has safeguarded over the years. According to Baeza, “We are a combination of different times,” much like his works, that take form through materials drawn from his personal

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archive: traces of past and present moments, pieces of paper prepared with layers of color, plaster, and other substances.⁴ These elements contribute to the final surface—one that resembles skin, accumulating coating upon coating, constantly transforming. In this way, the paper itself begins to hold memory.

Works such as *This time and place is not enough*, *Unruly Forms IV*, and *Fragments of memories*, contain delicate textures and reliefs that accompany the bodies and environments that take shape in Baeza's work. At times, these raised surfaces visually expand the present corporealities; at others, they echo the gestures and movements of the bodies themselves. These textures arise through a range of techniques—threads, added inks, and collage—producing high and low reliefs that resemble a collagraph plate in the process of being built, yet never printed.⁵ With Baeza, there exists a plastic possibility: the erasure of boundaries between substrate and printing plate, without ever arriving at reproduction. This “incompleteness” allows his work to remain open to futures yet to come.

The images that emerge in Baeza's work require the labor of feeling with them. They invite a haptic visuality that moves toward texture and surface detail, evoking the sensation of touch, of physical contact. And at the same time, they produce images that are neither clear nor

distinct, but emergent, multiple, and ever-changing. Images that embrace becoming—as a process of coming into being—and the yet-to-come—as an opening to unanticipated futures. These images give way to ongoing cycles of transformation: of worlds, of bodies, of processes of individual and collective subjectivation—modes of expansion, of protection, and of joy.

In this encounter, a kind of nebulosity is produced—a certain opacity. Visibility is not entirely renounced, but rather there is a rejection of the metaphor of luminosity. As Argentinian writer and activist val flores has written, “light guided the epistemology of Modernity with its demands for transparency and clarity across all domains of life [...] light has always been revealing of knowledge, truth, health, divine presence, hygiene, security, history.”⁶ Regimes of light are epistemic constructions—ways of naturalizing certain conditions of vision, perception, and interpretation of bodies—all of which are deeply linked to how we inhabit the world. In Baeza's portrait series, the portrait functions as a strategy of refusal: to obscure is to deny a system that renders some lives fundamentally illegible and unintelligible.

How can we narrate other ways of making images—ways that unravel the opposition between hypervisibility and forced concealment? In

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Baeza's portraits, opacity takes on a central role, functioning as a refusal of the labels that fix and regulate what is visible and acceptable. It is also a rejection of the established forms through which the world is deemed habitable. These are images of refusal—refusal to explain, refusal to capitulate, refusal to display. They are silent images, and at the same time, a powerful way of acknowledging the ongoing impact of the struggle waged against bodies that are veiled, denied, expelled, confined, disidentified.

[1] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 96.

[2] Felipe Baeza in conversation with the author, March 9, 2025.

[3] Ricardo Nava Murcia, *Deconstruir el archivo: la historia, la huella, la ceniza* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2015), 88.

[4] Baeza in conversation with the author, March 31, 2025.

[5] Collography is a printmaking technique that involves using collage to incorporate textured elements, which can then be printed onto paper, similar to traditional printmaking methods.

[6] val flores, "Con Los Excrementos De La Luz. Interrogantes Para Una Insurgencia Sexo-política Disidente," *Boletín GEC*, no. 23 (June 2019): 139–47, 140.

about the artist

Felipe Baeza (1987, Celaya, Mexico) received a BFA from Cooper Union and an MFA from Yale. His residencies include the Federico Sevilla Sierra Residency, Mullowney Printing, Portland, OR (2023) and the Lower East Side Keyholder Residency, New York (2010). Baeza has been awarded fellowships such as the Latinx Artist Fellowship, US Latinx Art Forum (2023), NXTHVN Studio Fellowship Program, New Haven, CT (2019), and The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation Traveling Fellowship (2017). In 2022, he was a guest scholar at The Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. Baeza was awarded the Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise in Visual Arts (2024); the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant (2018); and the Michael S. Vivo Prize for Drawing (2009).

Solo exhibitions include: *Unruly Forms*, organized by the Public Art Fund, JCDcaux Bus Shelters throughout Chicago, New York, Boston, Mexico City, León, and Querétaro, Mexico (2023); *Made Into Being*, Fortnight Institute, New York (2022); *Unruly Suspension*, Maureen Paley, London (2021); *Through the Flesh to Elsewhere*, The Mistake Room, Los Angeles (2020); *La Emergencia de Hacer Memoria*, Fortnight Institute, New York (2019); and *Felipe Baeza*, Maureen Paley, London (2018).

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Group exhibitions include: *Ficciones Patógenas*, Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York (2025); *Tending and Dreaming: Stories from the Collection*, San José Museum of Art, CA (2025); *An Unlikely Inventory: Dialogues with Surrealism*, kurimanzutto, Mexico City (2024); *I Feel You*, Pinchuk Art Centre, Kyiv, Ukraine (2024); *Artefact 2024: At the Still Point of the Turning World*, Stuk Arts Center, Leuven, Belgium (2024); *Teddy Sandoval and the Butch Gardens School of Art*, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA (2024); *Following the Body*, Fragment Gallery, New York (2023); *Excavated Selves: Becoming Magic Bodies, The Immigrant Artist Biennial*, Alchemy Gallery, New York (2023); *outer view, inner world*, Maureen Paley: Morena di Luna, Hove, England (2023); *Aesthetics of Undocumentedness*, Ruffin Gallery, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA (2023); *The dreamers*, Sotheby's Institute of Art, New York (2023); *The Tale their Terror Tells*, Lyles & King, New York (2022); *Finding Home in My Own Flesh*, Desert X, Coachella Valley, Palm Springs, CA (2021); *RAÍZ*, Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, Quito, Ecuador (2021); *View From Here*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2020); *A Very Anxious Feeling: Voices of Unrest in the American Experience; 20 Years of the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection*, Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA (2020); *Right Behind Your Eyes*, Capsule, Shanghai, China (2019); *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art 50 Years After Stonewall Era*,

Brooklyn Museum, NY (2019); *Underlying Borders*, The Mexican Cultural Institute, Washington, D.C. (2019); *XL Catlin Art Prize*, San Francisco Art Institute, CA; Linda Warren Projects, Chicago, IL; New York Academy of Art (2018); among others.

Baeza participated in *La voz de la montaña* as part of Bienal FEMSA, León, Guanajuato (2024); and *The Milk of Dreams* as part of the the 59th Venice Biennale (2022).

Baeza's work is included in the collections of: Columbus Museum of Art, OH; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh; San Jose Museum of Art (SJMA), CA; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Baeza lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

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