

**IN THE FOREGROUND:
OBJECT STUDIES**

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“A MECHANISM OF SURVIVAL”:
MCCLAIN GROFF ON NIBIA PASTRANA SANTIAGO’S
*NO MORE EFFORTS***



nibia pastrana santiago, *NO MORE EFFORTS*, 2020. Video, 8:52 min.

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Transcript

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Join us for an immersive personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode, McClain Groff, a student in the Williams Graduate Program in the History of Art as well as a graduate curatorial intern at MASS MoCA, discusses a video from 2020 by Puerto Rican multidisciplinary artist nibia pastrana Santiago that uses humor, dance, and site-specificity to critique contemporary labor conditions and challenge histories of colonialism, dispossession, and marginalization.

McClain Groff

My name is McClain Groff, and today I'll be talking about the 2020 video *NO MORE EFFORTS* by Puerto Rican multidisciplinary artist nibia pastrana santiago. The video, which is about 9 minutes in length, begins with the artist lying horizontally atop a large pile of debris in the central atrium of the historic, now crumbling, Normandie Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico. pastrana santiago goes on to enact a series of simple poses—seated, on her back, and standing. The movements necessary to get into and out of these positions go unseen, leaving the viewer to simply witness moments of stillness. A few minute gestures, such as head turning and foot flexing, begin disturbing the artist's stilled state. Paired with these mundane, anticlimactic movements is an operatic song with lyrics written by pastrana santiago. The singers are repeatedly chanting the phrase "not necessarily require effort," while the artist poses amidst the ruin. As the music becomes increasingly dramatic, the artist's performance remains unspectacular, establishing a humorlessness that only increases as the video progresses. Humor is a key component in the artist's practice. For her, it serves as a mechanism for survival.

Beyond the movements she enacts, the site in which the artist performs is important to consider. When it opened in 1942, the Normandie Hotel became an

instant sensation among the island's social elite, in addition to major Hollywood and Latin American film stars. More than simply a symbol of wealth, the hotel signifies leisure for pastrana santiago. By inserting her body into this space, she raises questions such as: who gets to do nothing? And who can afford not to work?

While minoritarian subjects, such as the artist and other locals, are exploited through demanding labor emphasizing speed in order to make leisurely time even possible, tourists—such as the ones that occupied the Normandie—are afforded time, space, and money to relax. While pastrana santiago's laying around is interpreted as lazy, tourists' sunbathing and sightseeing are interpreted as leisurely. Now abandoned and deteriorating though, the Normandie serves as a reminder of the lasting effects of Hurricane Maria of 2017, and the island's ongoing government-debt crisis that began in 2014.

For the remainder of *NO MORE EFFORTS*, pastrana santiago performs in a nearby athletic stadium. Within this space that encourages athleticism, she increases her movement speed and energy output as she attempts to reach peak exhaustion. Relying on trial, error, and decision-making, the artist performs a continuous string of improvised actions that alternate between dancerly and pedestrian, loose and rigid, free and controlled. Here, the audience is introduced to an experimental movement style, also known as postmodern dance, that emerged in Puerto Rico at the end of the 1970s. As pastrana santiago states, "It is a movement that can cause problems, because its strangeness is risky." This unique approach to dance has allowed performers and choreographers to express political, ideological, and personal issues that directly grapple with identity in ways they have felt neither ballet nor modern dance offered. For pastrana santiago, the experimental produces aesthetics that challenge dance's histories of colonialism and marginalization.

The artist's experimental and laborious performance in the *NO MORE EFFORTS* video—consisting of running, rolling, and chasseeing—continues with her laying in the grass. Her limbs are splayed, and she breathes heavily. For a moment, she sticks her tongue out. In the background, we can see figures vigorously running

around the track and even further, the dilapidated Normandie Hotel where this performance began. Rather than ending here, however, the artist performs a final series of unchoreographed movements, which I interpret as a final act of endurance.

The video then concludes with a series of phrases in bold, red text that recalls American dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer's *No Manifesto* of 1965. Much like Rainer, pastrana santiago declares her resistance to traditional forms of dance and outlines the tenets of her radical new approach. pastrana santiago's phrases include: "no school," "no conservatory," "no workshop," "no factory," "no mirrors," and "no more efforts."

[musical interlude]

I first encountered this work of pastrana santiago's when I was doing research for an exhibition proposal a couple of years ago that focused on labor in dance practice. The video had just been released online by de Appel as part of their 2020 project entitled *This may or may not be a true story or a lesson in resistance*. As someone who has trained in ballet for nearly 24 years, I was fascinated by the artist's opposition to spectacle, grace, and the illusion of ease—some of ballet's key demands. Moreover, I became inspired by her deployment of laziness and boredom as a means of radically rethinking standards of progress, virtuosity, and success. Our capitalist society, within which dancers such as myself train and perform, so often demands continuous action for its subjects to succeed. Refusing an omnipresent sense of duty to produce and perform, pastrana santiago instead relies on experimental movement to resist, heal, and even fail. Her various acts of lazing, enduring, and slowing offer an expanded language of dance and suggest unique possibilities for its future.

Centering her own body in *NO MORE EFFORTS*, pastrana santiago illuminates the Puerto Rican experience, one marred by debt, dispossession, and displacement. The exhaustion that the artist enacts for the camera is derived from her real exhaustion with a mediocre government that continuously fails in the face of emergency. Puerto Ricans' long-standing struggle for economic and political self-

sufficiency has proven to be both tiring and disappointing. Reimagining her relationship to labor and exhaustion, the artist utilizes performance not only as a critical response to this ongoing trauma, but also as a form of resistance and as a tool for individual self-fashioning. pastrana santiago finds power in the act of expressing her body and uses performance to reclaim a sense of freedom and autonomy.

Beginning in April 2022, pastrana santiago's *NO MORE EFFORTS* will be on view for the first time in the two-person exhibition *Choreopolitics*, which I curated at MASS MoCA in North Adams.

Caitlin Woolsey

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Objects Studies*. For more information on this episode and the artwork discussed, please visit clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. *Object Studies* is created and produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with editing and musical interludes by John Buteyn, theme music by lightchaser, and additional support provided by Annie Jun, Jessie Sentivan, and Caroline Fowler. The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. As we learn, speak, and gather at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.