

VANESSA GULLY SANTIAGO  
INTERVIEWED BY LAURA BROWN

**Laura Brown:** Could we talk about the exhibition title, *Young Professional*?

**Vanessa Gully Santiago:** It's a generic term for a certain demographic that makes a good salary but doesn't do very interesting work, which is a situation I'm reflecting on in this body of work. There's also a bit of humor in the title, considering the darkness of the images against the assumption of the professional millennial as a well-paid, successful person with a 'good career' who should be happy, and then the kind of emptiness created from a life or career that has no purpose.

**Would you say that you're depicting yourself in the work? Are these scenes taken from memory or imagination?**

A lot of the inspiration for this work comes from emotional and psychological responses to experiences I've had in my life, as well as an empathy for the experiences I imagine other people having. I relate to the conflicted states that the women in these works find themselves in, where there's a tension between a situation that one can't control and what is desired. They desperately try to find a way out but are ultimately trapped.

**You've used various structures and backdrops over time. Why this corporate setting?**

My work has always dealt with themes of exploitation, alienation, power, and a sense of emptiness. I wanted to build on those themes within a setting that reflected the cultural and political climate of the country being run like a business. I was interested in creating a backdrop that was claustrophobic and repressive, exemplifying corporatization from the top down, and the characters in this who lack a voice going to extremes to feel free in a dehumanizing environment. While my previous works presented figures in a void of technological isolation, these works show interior spaces that are closed off, where figures become cornered in a suffocating reality.

**There's also a way in which certain things appear between or across the works.**

For the singular objects, without figures, I wanted to create an experience for the viewer, where you arrive at this painting of some Amazon boxes or a copy machine and you're confronted with this object that is utterly banal but also menacing in its bluntness. It's a different experience from looking at a scene with someone else in that situation, and I like the interplay between those two approaches.

**The expressions of the figures are often totally blank as well. So this quality of blankness bounces between both the objects and the figures, and then the viewer.**

Yes, I don't want to prescribe the emotions of the characters too strongly. I'd rather let the viewer decide what they think the character may be feeling. Their impassiveness turns these situations into dark jokes, rather than melodramas. There is always something unsettling in an absence of emotion, because there's a hopelessness and spiritual death within that, as if they are no longer human, and more like the empty objects that surround them.

**It seems that this intensity arrives through various formal elements that occur over and over again.**

I use a lot of light and shadow in my work, I love deep shading, because it refers to the hidden or forbidden parts of life and the mind, what we don't want people to see or what is secretly desired. I work with a limited or monochromatic palette, which changes according to the subject matter. With this body of work, the color is a lot more subdued. There is a lot of black, white, and gray, with occasional primary colors that are reflective of the tones found in a work environment or, similarly, in a corporate logo. I like to use a very blunt composition, with a figure or object in the center. It's a straightforward and unapologetic way to present subjects and wields a certain power. In other images the character is surrounded by spirals or circles, a pattern that makes the image feel like it will go on endlessly, playing on a loop. In both approaches, a feeling of being trapped is created, through direct confrontation or endless repetition.

**What is the relation between the drawings and the larger works? There's an obvious continuation in terms of subject.**

There is an element of drawing in all of the work, although I do make a decision about whether an idea is going to work better as a painting or a drawing. I also feel that drawing provides a sense of physical touch, because a lot of the time my fingerprints are left on the surface, which is a very important quality for certain images. In the paintings, you can also see my hand through the execution, in lines that are not perfectly straight or with some visible brush strokes. Even though I depict these cold, still objects and situations, my style has a human touch, which in turn anthropomorphizes them. I think that is where some hope lies in the work.-

**Yes, I was looking at the Amazon boxes and thinking, they're smiling at me!**

Yes, although there's a creepiness to them. It's not a sleek, Pop approach to this sort of subject matter. There is a feeling, an ambience to the works. It poses the question: How might we find humanity within an inhuman environment? I try to achieve this through the execution, those formal choices, and the fact that I made them all by hand. Personal touch and physical connectedness is something we are losing more and more. I think it is through using my hands and having an intimate experience with my process that I'm able to feel human and connected.

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Vanessa Gully Santiago, *Young Professional* is curated by Laura Brown. On view December 4, 2020 – January 1, 2021 at James Fuentes Online: <https://jamesfuentes.online/vanessa-gully-santiago>.

Vanessa Gully Santiago (b. 1984 Boston, MA, lives and works in Queens, NY) received her BFA from Cooper Union and MFA from Rutgers University. She has exhibited in solo and group presentations at Jack Barrett Gallery, Thierry Goldberg Gallery, American Medium, Marinaro Gallery, Helena Anrather, JTT, Foxy Production, and Smart Objects, among others. Her work has been written about in Artforum and Forbes, and she has been in residence at the Vermont Studio Center and Byrdcliffe Art Colony.

Laura Brown (b. 1993, KZN, South Africa, lives in New York, NY) is a writer, editor, and curator. She received her MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. She has presented projects at Participant Inc, James Fuentes, the Hessel Museum of Art, The Kitchen, and AIR Gallery in New York; Kayne Griffin Corcoran and Actual Size in Los Angeles; and West Space, Melbourne, among others. She is published in BOMB, Mousse, Flash Art, X-TRA Quarterly, Cultured, AQNB, and Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles.