The wounds of the Spirit heal and leave no scars behind.

—G. W. F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit

Dell Marie Hamilton is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, scholar, and independent curator. Working in the intersection of performance, video, painting, and photography, she uses the body to investigate the social and geopolitical constructions of memory, gender, history, and citizenship. Her lectures, solo performances, and collaborative projects have been presented to a wide variety of audiences as catalysts for social justice and equity. With roots in Belize, Honduras, and the Caribbean, she frequently draws upon the personal experiences of her family, as well as the history and folkloric traditions of her homelands, in the research and conception of her work.

All Languages Welcomed HERE, Hamilton’s first solo exhibition of photography and mixed-media sculptural works, is about formulating the vocabulary of what a work looks like, how it functions in the world, the space it occupies, and how viewers relate and move with/through it. Access and visibility are extremely important, relating to the immigrant and minoritarian experience. As such, Hamilton takes exponential risks working with multiple voices—migration, translation, dialectic, and navigation of this nepantla—the in-between-ness of what cannot be said or is untranslatable.1 She starts by making the works, then writing texts to contextualize them. “It is already in there, and it’s your job to get it out,” she says as we talk about the large works coming alive on the gallery walls.2 They are conceived using different weights of paper, found and given, along with ripped old drawings pieced and sewn together on the studio floor, some parts containing messages (such as “go last”) written to herself as reminders on how the work would finally come together. Indeed, the works offer a multitude of entry points through drawing, painting, sculpture, and photography, and Hamilton is constantly erecting new prisms for inhabiting and exploring. The photographs in the exhibition from her 2016 Emulsions in Departure series are the preface to her larger works on paper, windows to other worlds articulated with physicality, tactility, color, and stillness.

Punta: Pregunta, Hamilton’s new series of multimedia sculptural work debuted in this show, probes “the entangled connections between personal obsession and familial history,” interconnections (inter-inner-through-in-out) that are key points in psychoanalysis, dialectics, and philosophy.3 Punta refers to a contemporary dance originating within the rich traditions of the Garifuna people, a West African, Central American Amerindian, and Caribbean community, while the Spanish word pregunta translates to English as question.4 In this collection of work, Hamilton is building bridges between Honduras and Belize, navigating between these different voices and migrant spaces, and constructing her own discourse of resistance in trying to work with her personal memory and history. “Language can be as open and closed as we want it,” she states.5 Certainly, multiple layers of translation, back and forth, make sense of how we got here, our place in the world as migrants, citizens, and travelers.
survivors. For Hamilton, art making becomes a vehicle to sustain, main­tain, and create new narratives for survival. When she first began working on the series, the words of her mentor and teacher, Maria Magdalena Campos­Pons, expressed many years earlier, validated this new direction: “You are creating an umbilical cord between you and your history.”6

In the midst of this corpus of work, allowing it to affect my subjectivity in the space of its presentation, there is a sense of unlearning institutional language, paired with ways in which we experience our bodies in the current cultural climate. Hamilton’s works feel like a punch through your core, awakening you to other realities, possibilities, and languages you may speak or have spoken in the past. I am reminded of José Esteban Muñoz describing the disidentifying subject who holds onto an object in order to invest it with new life: “To disiden­titify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to connect with the disidentifying subject.”7 In the presence of Hamilton’s work, Peggy Phelan also comes to mind in the way the works ask us to study that which “becomes itself through disappearance.”

Trauma, resilience, reconstruction of the body, and navigation of dif­ferent language systems—the body and its visuals, the body as recorder, memory, land, and time—are traversed throughout Punta: Pregunta, which draws on topographical maps, ecol­ogy, Gray’s Anatomy, and linguistics. In Levithan, The Blue Knight aka The Beast (2017–18), the multidimensional cracking forms of the paper scrunched up together resemble shimmering metal. The work has been manipulated to look like a cut or a gash, recreat­ing a memory from the artist’s child­hood when her skin was sliced open by a parked car’s sharp and twisted metal edges. Reminiscent of the affective impact of this wound, she reconfigures the piece in an effort to tell another story about it. Hamilton explains that she fell off her ladder in the studio three times while making “the beast.” She recalls how she once heard artist Jack Whitten say that, for him, art making felt as though he was fighting for his life. Similarly, “it felt as though it [the work] wanted something from me,” she says.8

The influences of Jean­Michel Basquiat’s abstraction and figuration, the experimentation of Howardena Pinzell and Carolee Schneemann, as well as Mark Bradford’s nuanced trans­formation of materials and process are undeniably apparent in Hamilton’s work. In The Anatomy of Above and Below (2016–17), intended forms are in motion; fingertips and gloves speak to the body in chronic pain, the body as a map of healing scars. In this piece we clearly see configurations of ana­tomical drawings, economy of the body, labor, and methods of gathering the skin together. Purple, green, and blue marks lead the viewer throughout this active torrent, while the stitching seizes the hem, as if to prevent the suffering from spilling on the walls and floors of the gallery. “I know what it means to live with trauma,” Hamilton explains, “and I’m not interested in trivializing it.”9 The viewer becomes a small part of this tornado of speech, muscle memory, visual and theoretical connections, grammatology, and topo­graphical maps of land and the internal body.

How Does It Feel to Put Yourself Back Together After You’ve Been Torn Apart? (2017–18) spans fifteen feet across and ten feet high. The topo­graphically mapped­out piece was worked on both sides by Hamilton in her studio. Rooted in feminist and performance ideas, it is pieced to­gether in sewn sections, reminiscent of the artist’s mother making clothes in her studio. Rooted in feminist and performance ideas, it is pieced together in sewn sections, reminiscent of the artist’s mother making clothes in her studio. “A body without organs . . . made in such a way that it can be occupied, populated only by intensities. Only popu­lated yet sturdy enough to withstand the weight of bodies, incorporating a concept distinctive to Hamilton’s work: translating performance into objects.”10 What Hamilton’s work offers us is a vision that we go beyond what we usually con­ceive as artists, viewers, and citi­zens: an interlaced and crisscrossed reception, interpretation, and praxis of these relationships and discourses.

Catherine Malabou speaks of plasticity as the ability to recuperate and decon­struct—a “process of recovery, heal­ing, return, the re­knitting of the skin after the wound.”11 The stitching in Hamilton’s work recalls the healing of scars, the ongoing violence to bodies of color, decapitated limbs, and inher­ited and lived traumas. “How can we carry it all around with us every day?” Hamilton asks. “You begin sewing, you sew up the hole in your pants; you sew the skin around the glans to the glans itself, preventing the top from tearing.”12 Deleuze and Guattari suggest, “The question in Punta: Pregunta is not only how we make sense of all the trauma the body endures, but how we can continue to push through these boundaries and form new systems of survival. As Deleuze and Guattari pos­tulate, ‘the question is precisely whether it is necessary to find oneself.’” Perhaps not, or perhaps we can find a new, stronger self. Hamilton’s work asks us how we can build new narratives and on the other hand, to resist and move forward as citizens in a time when our government rejects the bodies we are offering to this earth: the migrant, the queer, the bodies of color? We push forward and piece ourselves one thread at a time—work­like patchwork, we resist and become more resilient, stronger, and more prismatic.

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Notes
2. Dell Marie Hamilton, interview by author, Boston, Massachusetts, January 9, 2019.