

Discovering the Aura with Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo)

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PHILLIP PYLE

When artist Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo made her gallery debut under the moniker “Puppies Puppies,” she ignored the formalities of didactic text, omitting her date of birth, nationality, and legal name.



Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), Brain on Estrogen, progesterone, spironolactone, Truvada, Advil and Marijuana, 2018

Her early performances, done in the guises (or through proxies) of SpongeBob, a Minion, Frozen's Olaf, or the Statue of Liberty, seemed to be about the postmodern conundrum of identity. Moving deftly between personas, characters, and various modes of expression, her practice suggested that contemporary identity, especially for the post-internet generation, is malleable precisely because of how fractured it has become.

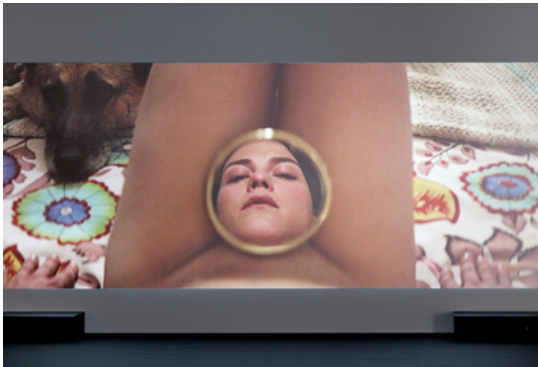
However liberating the original promises of this playful anonymity may have been, Kuriki-Olivo was still hiding behind her work. In 2017, the stuff of life began entering her work in increasingly tactile form, including her exhibition “Green Ghosts” at Overduin & Co. in LA, where she moved her and her then partner’s apartment inside the gallery. There, biography unfolded in real time, and one day, two estrogen pills marking her transition appeared on the gallery walls. Months later, she held a funeral for her dead name on a grassy lawn inside the artist-run space What Pipeline in Detroit, simultaneously marking a shift in the artist's relationship with transparency.



Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), Brain on Estrogen, progesterone, spironolactone, Truvada, Advil and Marijuana, 2018

For her recently closed solo show at the New Museum, “Nothing New,” Kuriki-Olivo—who added her name in parentheses to the end of *Puppies Puppies* in 2019—pushed themes of visibility and representation to the max. In a performance-activated installation that lasted nearly five months, Kuriki-Olivo recreated a version of her Lower East Side bedroom just blocks away in the museum lobby. Initially, she would go there day in and day out—and, eventually, more sporadically—and live her life on full-display behind a glass wall in a set of rooms made up of an entirely green bedroom, a kitchen, an entry-way rock garden, and a CBD cannabis plant greenhouse.

Collapsing relics of personal history, including a grid of MRI scans from a brain tumor she had removed in 2010, with her Japanese and indigenous Puerto Rican heritage, marked by a traditional Torii gate and a Taíno flag, “Nothing New” doubled down the artist’s interest in visibility and identity through the imposition of surveillance cameras. While she retained the ability to fog the glass that separated her from the audience, the cameras never stopped. They filmed her in the galleries, in her actual bedroom, and on her phone’s front-facing camera, projecting the four alternating views on a video monitor outside her museum chambers. One month prior to the show’s closing, I talked with Kuriki-Olivo about moving from proxies to community-based work, the shade of green that’s been following her since she was a teenager, and the necessity of transitioning work with oneself.



Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), Marina Vidal looking at herself in a small golden mirror placed between her legs (Daniela Vega looking at herself in a small golden mirror placed between her legs), 2018. Exhibition view: Trautwein Herleth, Berlin.



Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), *Body Fluid (Blood)*, 2019

PHILLIP PYLE: Previously, you relied on anonymity and proxies. Since you moved away from that, you’ve stayed invested in working in networks, communities, and with people. How has your approach to working with people changed?

PUPPIES PUPPIES (JADE GUANARO KURIKI-OLIVO): Before, I was basically hiring performers, actors, and actresses. It was very loose and distant, but I was closer with some of them. Like, for the Whitney Biennial, which was a Statue of Liberty performance [*Liberty (Liberté)*, 2017]. I used to do street performance, and I always admired these human statues. I did it for *Liberty Tax*—I was the Statue of Liberty—so I was mirroring that experience. With that one, I was able to talk to everybody. They were all artists and performers, and, for the span of three months, they kept doing it for me when I wasn’t in New York. That one felt closer, but there was always a distance. I was anonymous, I was concealing my identity.

Then, when I started to transition, it meant something different to hide. What I saw in museums was that you can guess who the artist was behind different artworks. It’s a form of branding in a way. But I want to go against that and make it so that every time it feels like a different artist made something. Now I have some consistencies, it’s too hard after so many years to not have things that are similar to each other. But, starting to transition, I didn’t know how to make art. I had made art as somebody that was pre-transition. I decided to take a break and work at *Trans Latina*, a nonprofit in Los Angeles, which opened up my understanding of what art can do. I thought, if I leave the nonprofit world, I won’t be helping people anymore, and that’s what I wanted to dedicate myself to. I wanted to figure out a way to do that through art and through the system. I’m around a ton of wealthy people even though I’m in a totally different tax bracket. How can you utilize that to help community? I still want to have a voice and to be heard. I think that little kid in me still wants that. But there’s a way that you can utilize that to better the people around you. Exposure is a part of this. I’m trying to get people’s names out there over and over again. I can see the artist in a lot of the people I’m close to, and they may not always have a college degree or a master’s degree.

I'M SORRY MY IDENTITY IS A PART OF MY WORK
 I THINK BECAUSE SOCIETY NEVER LETS ME
 FORGET
 FULLY
 THAT I'M A TRANS WOMAN
 DAY IN AND DAY OUT

Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), TRANNY, 2022. Exhibition view: Trautwein Herleth, Berlin.

PP: Working in community and bringing other artists into shows requires love but also trust. Have love and trust always been key to your practice?

PP (JGKO): Yes, but when it was under the name Puppies Puppies solely, I was expressing love through the work in a Félix González-Torres kind of way. I was married when I moved to Los Angeles, and my ex-husband was in the art field. I felt close to how Felix talks about Ross being his audience, in that I was making work in this way that I was like, "look." But, as I started to transition, a whole world opened up to me. I was realizing I could find family in all these different places and people I love and who understand my experience. If I didn't allow myself to feel all this and transition, I wouldn't be here today. So, the love just transformed. Now it's directed towards all these people.

And it does come with trust because I have to tell some of the artists, "Hey, I know that these places aren't going to maybe treat us the best." And I don't want to be an extension of the institution's harm or the disregard they have. But, at the same time, this is my livelihood. It sucks, but this is the way I survive. So, we have to figure out ways to compromise.

PP: The concerns of daily life often inform the materials you choose. However, I'm interested whether it's ever the other way around, if the object ever precedes the concept?

PP (JGKO): The piece that comes to mind is my dad's ashes [Dad's Ashes (Carlos Andres Olivo), 2020]. I remember receiving them. They were split up into portions. I couldn't fathom that the dust was still a human form. I had worked with real skeletons that were used for anatomical study, fake skeletons that I would paint my skin color, and now, the bronze statue of my body naked. I was constantly working with different forms of the body. But when I got my father's ashes, I was like, wow, this is another form of a person. It's just so abstract that I can't really fathom it. I couldn't imagine that it wouldn't become an artwork. I felt that was the end-all-be-all for figurative sculpture. So, the idea really came out of the—it's weird to say the object because it came out of the being.

PP: I'm also thinking of the chroma key green that's featured heavily in this show because the press release describes it as a "reconfigured" readymade.

PP (JGKO): I was thinking about this the other day when I was talking to this person inside the installation. They were talking about how when they were a kid, they painted their room really vibrant green. And I did too. It was a Toy Story alien green. I wanted to change my environment radically, maybe to mirror myself in some way. This green was something that expressed the uniqueness that I felt in the world. And that's putting a positive spin on it. I really felt like a freak or some person who wasn't meant to be in this world because I felt so different growing up in Texas. It was interesting to have this realization when somebody was saying that they also painted their room lime green—because I did start to think, later on, of that as a wall painting. I guess that was the original green work, and I was around 15. I didn't consider myself an artist, I was just doing it out of intuition.



Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), A sculpture for Trans Women A sculpture for the Non-Binary Femmes A sculpture for Two-Spirit People • I am a woman. I don't care what you think • (Transphobia is everywhere and everyone is susceptible to enacting it at any moment) (Unlearn the transphobia brewing within) I am a Trans Women. I am a Two-Spirit Person. I am a Woman. This is for my sisters and siblings everywhere. History erased many of us but we are still here. I will fight for our rights until the day I die. Exile me and I'll keep fighting, 2022. Art Basel Parcours 2022, Basel. Courtesy of Art Basel.

PP: With the green, I got the sense that it's ironic—but not necessarily in a comedic way—in that it's supposed to signal this feeling of naturalness or comfort despite its contemporary associations with artificiality, such as green screens. It seems that irony was part of your work previously. Do you still see it as being relevant in your work?

PP (JGKO): I want to read the actual definition because it's gone so far from the definition in my head. "The expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite." Okay, this was hard for me. Irony and sarcasm were so hard for me to understand. I had a brain tumor, and then I had it removed. One of the things I noticed after I had it removed was that I didn't understand people not meaning what they said. It was a thing I had to relearn. But now that I've gotten used to it again, I really enjoy using it in daily life at least, which sounds so silly to say. It's weird, I try to come at things so sincere or honest—because I felt that, especially once I transitioned and once I survived the tumor, I should just be that way. But then in the work, my friends have told me that I'm funny.

PP: In this installation, you've included objects, such as the rock garden or cannabis plants, that have a spiritual or religious meaning for you. Are there also any objects that have unexpectedly taken on a spiritual meaning for you in the process of research or exhibition?

PP (JGKO): My dad was Taíno, and I realized how much that meant to me after he passed away. I think when I was growing up, I was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever." And now that I'm older, I wish I had talked to him more, had learned more from him. So, I found a Taíno shaman, from a different tribe from the Dominican Republic, who I was talking to. It was a way of reconnecting with my father. We did a retrieval to understand what animal I could look toward to gain assistance. And that was the dove. There's a dove that exists in the Caribbean, mostly in Cuba, that's called "guanaro," so I chose that as my middle name.

I think that was when I understood that art could have an aura. I was like, let me incorporate this—that's a part of my ancestry that runs through my blood. And that maybe that could be conveyed to other people through the object. I think that happened at the show at Hannah Hoffman in Los Angeles because I had all the stones in the space digitally etched with "Atabey," who's the goddess of water in Puerto Rico. With that environment, specifically, I wanted to create a space that felt as close to the island as possible and that carried spirituality and elements of shamanism.

PP: Something that arises with performance projects of Nothing New's magnitude or length is the impact on the body, not always in a physical way. Has your body felt any different over the course of the past few months?

PP (JGKO): Yeah. I think I got sick from the museum. I guess I'm not Marina Abramović. I'm not one of these people who do these performances and really stick to it. I wish I could be that person but I'm not. I talked to a curator, Christopher Y. Lew, and said, "I'm not doing it as well as I should. I'm not doing it like these people." And he said, "Well, you aren't those people." That's really a simple thing to say but it's profound at the same time. It changed my whole frame of mind. And I think, in a way, if you're going to mirror life as I want to, sometimes you have to give up at some point, or things get in your way, or there are obstacles—I think that's how life goes.

I definitely think my depression came back. I think it has taken a toll in a way that I never would have imagined. Being the art makes you available to people's reactions to it. Even when I'm back home, the camera is on that goes to the museum, so they can see me on video. Me and my partner will have moments where we're like, "Oh, wait, we're being filmed right now."



Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), Liberté (Liberty), 2017.



Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), Plague, 2019. Exhibition view: Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg. Photo: Hans-Christian Dany.

PP: Is the camera in the bedroom?

PP (JGKO): Yeah, in the bedroom. We've had moments where we didn't know that there was a special event that night at the museum—and me and my partner had sex—and the lady who works in the store has told the curator [Vivian Crockett], "Does Jade know the camera is on?" And then Vivian told me the next day. I didn't fully understand what it meant to have yourself surveilled in this way 24/7. I know it's happening to all of us, and maybe sometimes more to certain people than others. But to have it be really apparent or come to fruition in this way was not something I could have ever imagined.

PP: So, has the meaning of visibility also changed for you over the course of the show?

PP (JGKO): Yes, definitely. I was so about the idea of being more visible. Say my little kid self comes to the museum, sees an installation with a trans woman living in a space, just living her life as an artwork—I would have been so blown away by that. But actually getting into it, I was like, okay, I'm starting to turn into a worker of the museum. I was available to them, so they would be sending me requests every day. If you just set up your work and leave, maybe you're not treated as a worker.

And the audience didn't seem to be the people that I was trying to reach out to through the work if that makes sense. I wanted my community to see it, but these institutions are not places that feel very welcoming to people I know, or that accommodate them financially. So, visibility changed in that I was like, maybe I don't always need to be visible. Sometimes it's the point to not be visible. There can be power in not showing yourself. And I think that's not something I realized at the beginning. Before, I was like, 11 to six, or 11 to nine on Thursday, be there and be visible, every day.



Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), Nothing New, 2023. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

PP: Has the work itself undergone a transformation, too?

PP (JGKO): I'm so happy you bring this up because lately I've been thinking about how I have to transition work. Sometimes, I would find myself remaking all the works that other people did or referencing heavily from the past. There'd be artists such as [Elaine] Sturtevant or Félix González-Torres, or other works that I felt very related to, but then at some point my relation to it stops—because it isn't done from this trans perspective. You can have five of the same objects presented by different artists, and each has a different meaning because of who's presenting it. I think it's something that I didn't realize was happening, but that's being done in every installation and artwork that I produce. There's a transitioning that feels very necessary because I'm trying to go against the status quo. I'm always butting up against it and being like, there's room for change, there's room for this to turn into something else.

There are definitely moments in this exhibition like that. At one point, I switched all the furniture away from the glass screen, even though you can still see it on the monitor. That was a way of transitioning the space to realize that I don't want to be this kind of animal on display. Maybe I want to face away from the audience and live my life and not think about everyone looking at me.

I was just thinking about this: I used to just sit down before I transitioned and people-watch and just exist in the world with no purpose. And I think as a trans woman, if that space or time is available, I'll sit in my bedroom because I don't feel comfortable enough in the world to just sit there and look at people like I used to. And this gave me the opportunity to do that again. I'm just sitting in this museum watching this screen of people coming in and out, viewing me and the work.



Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), Nothing New, 2023. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni.