



STORIED BODIES

Gabriela Hirt



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Gabriela Ven explores how unconscious memory is lodged in our bodies, and what it does to our relationships.

Drawing from personal inquiry, the artist unpacks her own biases and ignorance as a white writer living on Turtle Island. At a time when many are beginning to acknowledge how deeply we are steeped in the notion of white body supremacy, Gabriela is interested in the way trauma and collective guilt can keep us mired in constructed concepts of hierarchy, perpetuating colonial injustice.

As an immigrant who grew up in post-Holocaust Germany, Gabriela believes history comes in our bodies throughout generations and is enduring.

Her new paintings and sculptures are a continuation of the previous series, "The Indelible Mark", where she reflected on her own troubling ancestry and its legacy of guilt. She asks herself — and the viewer: How do stereotypes rooted in the cultural programming we grow up with inform our ability to connect?

Storied Bodies draws on the work of American author Resmaa Menakem, who says about racism: "There is a way out of this mess, and it requires each of us to begin with our own body. Your body — all of our bodies — and the changing the status quo must begin."

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You Me Them Us
2021
Acrylic, wax crayon on canvas
122x152 cm / 48x60 inches





I strive for my work to be emotionally stirring, at times unsettling as well as mysterious and open to interpretation.

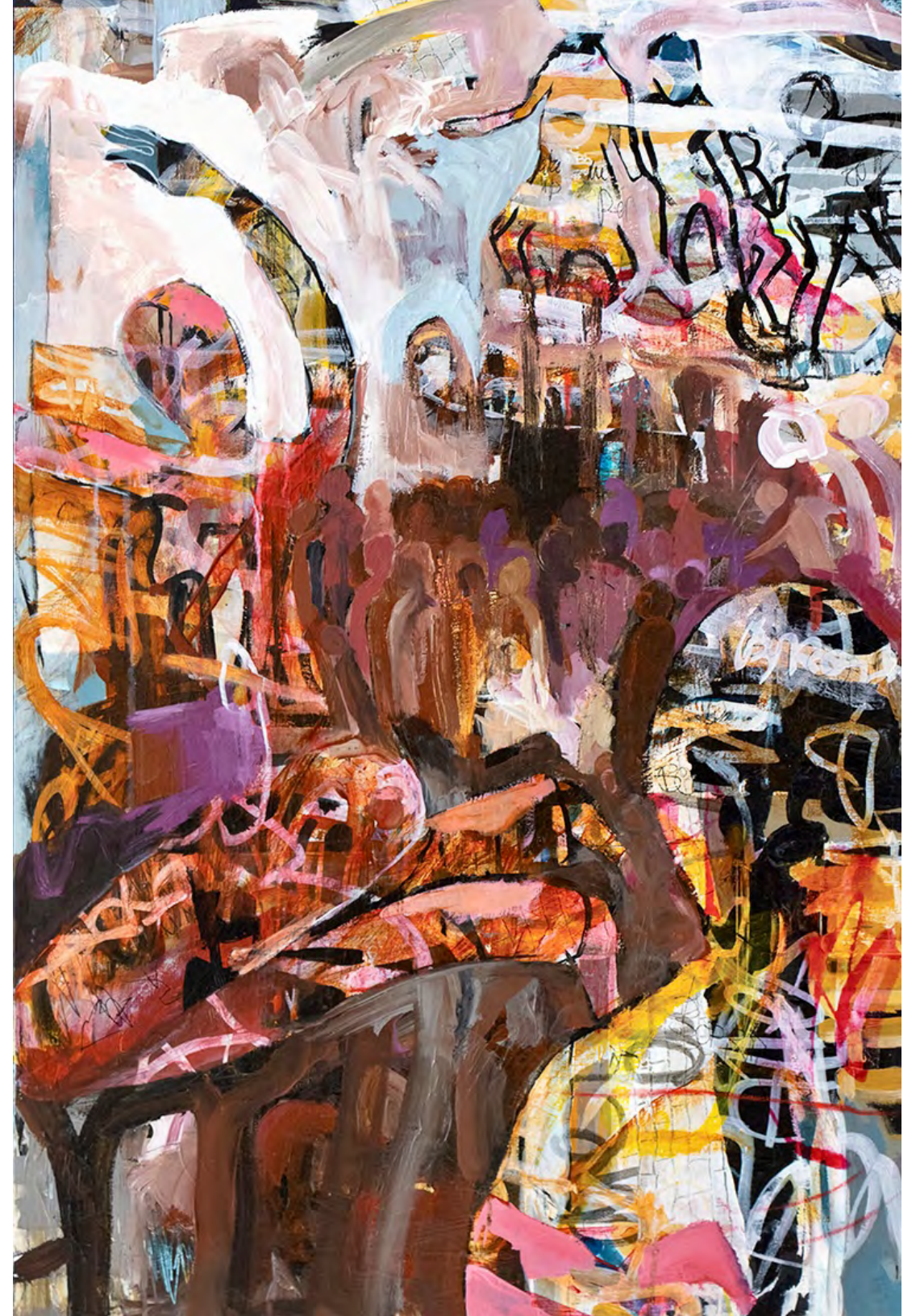
It is important to me to express myself authentically and not to shy away from difficult conversations.

- G.H.

DETAIL

You Me Them Us

A Chorus of Thoughts
2021
Acrylic, wax crayon on canvas
91x61 cm / 36x24 inches



The Event
2022
Acrylic, wax crayon on canvas
91x121 cm / 36x48 inches





My stylized people might be antagonizing, yet they always have more in common than not. This is conveyed by the similar fabric, colour, marks and linework they are made of. You might say, it is a lack of skin laying bare the vulnerability, woundedness as well as the resilience of victim, perpetrator and joyful dancer alike. Questions of power imbalance are relayed by sizing, positioning and movement of the figures on the canvas and in 3-D.

- G.H.

DETAIL
The Event

Conjunction
2021
Diptych, mixed media on wood
152x203 cm / 60x80 inches



The Gap
2022
Paper-mache & painting scraps
33x20x13 cm / 13x8x5 inches



End of a Childhood
2022
Paper-mache, painting scraps
30x53x36 cm / 12x21x14 inches



Storied Red

2021

Acrylic, wax crayon on canvas

91x91 cm / 36x36 inches



Storied Purple

2022

Acrylic, wax crayon on canvas

91x91 cm / 36x36 inches



Storied Yellow

2022

Acrylic, wax crayon on canvas

91x91 cm / 36x36 inches



Storied Blue

2021

Acrylic, wax crayon on canvas

91x91 cm / 36x36 inches



*Trauma in a person, decontextualized
over time, looks like personality.*

*Trauma in a family, decontextualized
over time, looks like family traits.*

*Trauma in a people, decontextualized
over time, looks like culture*

- Resmaa Menakem

DETAIL
Installation view



>
Urban Movement No. 1
2021
Acrylic and charcoal on wood
25x25 cm / 10x10 inches

>>
Urban Movement No. 2
2021
Acrylic and charcoal on wood
25x25 cm / 10x10 inches

>>>
Urban Movement No. 4
2021
Acrylic and charcoal on wood
25x25 cm / 10x10 inches

>>>>
Urban Movement No. 5
2021
Acrylic and charcoal on wood
25x25 cm / 10x10 inches





STORIED SELVES

by Rachel Hope Cleves

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

a. Killing members of the group;

b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part

d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

-- U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948

Raphael Lemkin coined the word genocide in 1944 from the base components genos (race or tribe) and cide (killing), to communicate the enormity of violence against an entire group of people. Genocide is a violence of scale. Lemkin, a Polish Jew, lost forty-nine members of his own family in the Holocaust. His immediate family's deaths represented .0008% of the six million Jews murdered, a teaspoon of soil spread at the bottom of a deep grave.

Numerical precision is not possible when trying to fathom the scale of the genocide of Indigenous people in the Americas following colonization. Estimates of the total population of the Americas prior to 1492 vary from lows of ten million to highs of 145 million. Over the following centuries, more than one hundred million Indigenous people likely died from the violence of colonization including war, repression, and disease. What is the metaphor that can capture a genocide so vast and simultaneously uncountable?

As every scholar who has grappled with this question comes to understand, dealing in such vast numbers can have an anaesthetizing effect. Numbers beyond human scale lose their humanity. The U.S. Holocaust Museum addresses this challenge by sharing the photographs, names, and most importantly, the stories of individuals, over social media. Six million murdered and each one a person with a story.

Gabriela Hirt faces the same dilemma with figurative brilliance in her series "Storied Bodies." Her bodies appear in groups, large and small, placed in relation to others, while also individually bearing the weight of trauma and the collective history and connected to the genocides in her birthplace, Germany, and in her

adopted home, Canada. Her storied bodies are contorted, crushed by the past. But they also hold each other up, sharing the burden, illustrating the possibility for inclusive, rather than exclusionary, collectivities. The group becomes a source of strength. There is possibility for the recognition of shared humanity. Storied Bodies is not a fairy tale about hope triumphing over despair. Hirt's canvasses are littered with fallen bodies who will not stand again. Figures plummet through her paintings, from a violence that has taken place out of frame, like the political prisoners taken far out to sea and thrown alive from helicopters in Argentina's Dirty War. Figures explode outwards from buildings or structures partially erased from the landscape by swathes of white paint. Other figures drown in a sea of grey paint that sucks them down beneath the bottom of the frame.

Stories are not by definition redemptive. Traces of letters and fragments of words scar Hirt's figures, and are painted over by the accretion of time. The words remain stamped on the bodies even when they are no longer legible. Children wander through these landscapes of death, looking on with blank faces. The stories they witness will be imprinted on their memories, buried in their psyches as they grow into new adult selves – but only if they're lucky enough to survive the atrocities they witness. In Hirt's "End of a Childhood," a paired set of papier-mâché figures, one person lies stretched out in death, while another kneels next to them, brought to their knees by grief. It is unspecified which figure represents the child. Both are wrapped in newsprint, painted with streaks of black, and with more letters and word fragments painted in white on top. Stories do not have the power to rescue these figures.

Even new growth is tainted by what lies beneath. In the painting "Storied Red," a red flower emerges from a flower pot in the foreground, which borders a red hillside. A lone figure sits on the hill, looking off into the distance, which might be taken for the hopeful future. But embedded within the hillside are fallen bodies, heads pointed down. The leg of one buried figure emerges above the surface of the hill, echoing the flower rising from the pot. The buried body blooms into fresh traumas.

Trauma and collective history hang over even the most mundane of scenes. "Urban Movement # 5" captures a series of figures in recognizable actions. One walks through the scene carrying a tray of food in their right hand, and holding what appears to be a phone in their left. Two figures dance in a doorway. A child leads an adult away, as the adult looks back over their shoulder at the dancers. And at the top lies a figure, half curled in a foetal position, at the base of a featureless gray wall. These images may echo Hirt's own memories of her childhood spent in her parents' restaurant in Starnberg, but they resonate in the collective memory of a million lost childhoods; the qualities of intimacy, joy, and tragedy are nearly impossible to separate. The burden is on us, the viewer, to connect these faceless figures and featureless backgrounds with our own pain, our own love, our own guilt, our own pride, and our own humanity.

PROJECT STATEMENT

In *Storied Bodies* I explore how unconscious memory is lodged in the human body, and what it does to our relationships.

Drawing from personal inquiry, I am aiming to unpack my own biases and ignorance as a white settler living on Turtle Island. At a time when many are beginning to acknowledge how deeply we are steeped in the notion of white body supremacy, it interests me how trauma and collective guilt can keep us mired in constructed concepts of hierarchy, perpetuating colonial injustice.

As an immigrant who grew up in post-Holocaust Germany, I believe history carries in our bodies throughout generations and is enduring.

These new paintings and sculptures are a continuation of my previous series, *The Indelible Mark*, where I reflected on my own troubling ancestry and its legacy of guilt. I ask myself — and the viewer: How do stereotypes rooted in the cultural programming we grow up with inform our ability to connect?

The collection draws on the work of American author Resmaa Menakem, who says about racism: “There is a way out of this mess, and it requires each of us to begin with our own body. Your body — all of our bodies — are where changing the status quo must begin.”

DETAIL

Storied Red







ARTIST STATEMENT

Gabriela Hirt is an expressionist mixed media artist who tells stories of connection and separation through abstract human figures in relationship.

Dark drama and subliminal tension often reverberate in Gabriela's paintings and sculptures. Raised in post-war Germany in the wake of the Holocaust, her work is informed by family trauma as well as by the collective guilt she inherited. Juxtaposing themes of isolation and belonging is the artist's attempt to communicate the paradoxes she perceives in herself and in society.

More specifically, Gabriela is aiming to understand the legacy of colonialism in her adopted home in Canada by looking closely at the segregating concepts of hierarchy and superiority subconsciously living in herself and in other white bodies.

Gabriela uses contrast, simplified forms and bold energetic marks to articulate inner emotional states as well as to invite questions of social justice. She likes to work large.

Rooted in her original career as a writer, Gabriela depicts whole narratives in which her stylized people interact. Faces are deliberately treated ambiguously. The focus is on the language of the body which the artist deems not only more subtle, but also more genuine, particularly when it comes to social interactions.

Gabriela's desire to push the boundaries of awareness — her own and that of viewers — sparks a process of radical experimentation. Works start with stream-of-consciousness writing followed by several layers of paint applied in large gestural movement to access somatic wisdom. Out of the chaos top layers are carefully composed, reflecting her fascination with the intersection between analytical inquiry and the intuitive.

DETAIL
Conjunction

CURRICULUM VITAE

Lives and works in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Storied Bodies*, Gibsons Public Art Gallery, Gibsons BC
- 2023 *Tanztee*, Fee am See, Starnberg, Germany
- 2022 *Storied Bodies*, Gage Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2021 *The Indelible Mark*, Gage Gallery, Victoria BC

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *Immigration*, Two Rivers Gallery, Prince George BC
- 2022 *Three artists*, Art@ Bentall Gallery, Bentall Centre, Vancouver BC
- 2022 Sooke Fine Arts Show, Sooke, BC
- 2021 *Refuge*, Gage Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2021 Sooke Fine Arts Show, Sooke, BC
- 2021 *Summer Small Works*, Massey Sales Gallery, Art Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2021 *Memorial. Monument. Movement.* Artagainstracism.org, NJ
- 2021 *Somewhere in Time*, Federation of Canadian Artists, Victoria BC
- 2021 *Abstracted*, Federation Gallery, Vancouver BC
- 2021 *Dreamscape*, Gage Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2020 *Winter Small Works*, Massey Sales Gallery, Art Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2020 *Crisis*, Federation Gallery, Vancouver BC
- 2020 *Looking in-Looking Out*, Federation of Canadian Artists, Victoria BC
- 2020 *8 min & 46 sec* (window-installation), Gage Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2020 *Challenge Crisis with Creativity*, Gage Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2020 *Out of the Silence*, Gage Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2020 *Summer Small Works* (online), Art Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2020 *Inside Out* (3-person exhibition), Gage Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2020 *Summer Show & Sale*, Victoria Arts Council, Victoria BC

- 2020 *Social Distancing* (online), Federation of Canadian Artists, Vancouver BC
- 2020 *CLWAC 123rd Exhibition of Women’s Art*, The National Arts Club, New York NY
- 2020 *Abstracted*, Federation Gallery, Vancouver BC
- 2019 *Solstice Dreams - The Poetry of Winter*, Gage Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2019 *Winter Small Works*, Massey Sales Gallery, Art Gallery, Victoria BC
- 2019 *All Planet Earth Art Exhibition*, Contemporary Art Gallery, Online
- 2019 The Oak Bay Studio Tour, Victoria BC
- 2019 Sidney Fine Arts Show, Sidney, BC
- 2019 Sooke Fine Arts Show, Sooke, BC
- 2019 *TD Gallery Paint-In*, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria BC
- 2018 Sidney Fine Arts Show, Sidney, BC

COMMUNITY ART PROJECTS & CURATION

- 2022 *The Postcard Climate Project & Show*, international participation, show in Victoria BC
- 2020 *Challenge Crisis with Creativity*, project & show, Victoria BC



CONTACT

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DETAIL

Storied Yellow

Storied Bodies

New work by Gabriela Hirt

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Layout: David Ellingsen for Dazed & Confucius Consulting

Cover image: Anahita Ranjbar, 2022

ISBN: 978-1-7387725-0-6

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Essay: Storied Selves © Rachel Hope Cleves, historian and professor at the University of Victoria, British Columbia.

Quotes by Resmaa Menakem from his book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies*, 2017

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