

Making Space: Ronny Quevedo Interviewed by Louis Bury

Work that illustrates how margins and centers interact.



Ronny Quevedo, *no hay medio tiempo / there is no halftime*, 2017. Queens Museum. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Hai Zhang.

Ronny Quevedo's work uses abstraction to address personal and political themes with suggestive intricacy. His drawings, prints, and installations scramble the visual architecture of diagrams and maps into zigzagging networks of line and color. In *ULAMA-ULE-ALLEY OOP* (2017), for example, an enamel basketball court diagram has been chopped up and overlaid upon the faint graphite blueprint of a Mesoamerican ball field. In *every measure of zero (tropic of cancer)* (2018) an atlas's spherical longitude lines and thin streaks of white rectangle are embedded in moody-blue washes of dressmaker wax paper. Palimpsests of demarcation, the works read as pleasing abstract compositions while also containing poetic hints and traces of the objects—athletic fields, geographical maps, Incan quipus, dressmakers' pattern sheets, milk crates—that cultures use to organize and measure themselves. Quevedo's ingenious blend of figuration and abstraction belongs to a vital, if undercredited, tradition of abstraction by nonwhite artists that includes figures such as Jack Whitten, Alma Thomas, Carmen Herrera, Byron Kim, and Cecilia Vicuña. In a genre often thought to be transcendently universal, Quevedo's abstractions express in acute and evocative ways the particulars of his experiences as an Ecuadorian immigrant to the United States.

—Louis Bury

L Bury

Your father, Carlos Quevedo, was a professional soccer player, and you're perhaps best known for work that depicts altered and abstracted athletic-field diagrams. What's the personal, political, and aesthetic import of sport for you?

R Quevedo

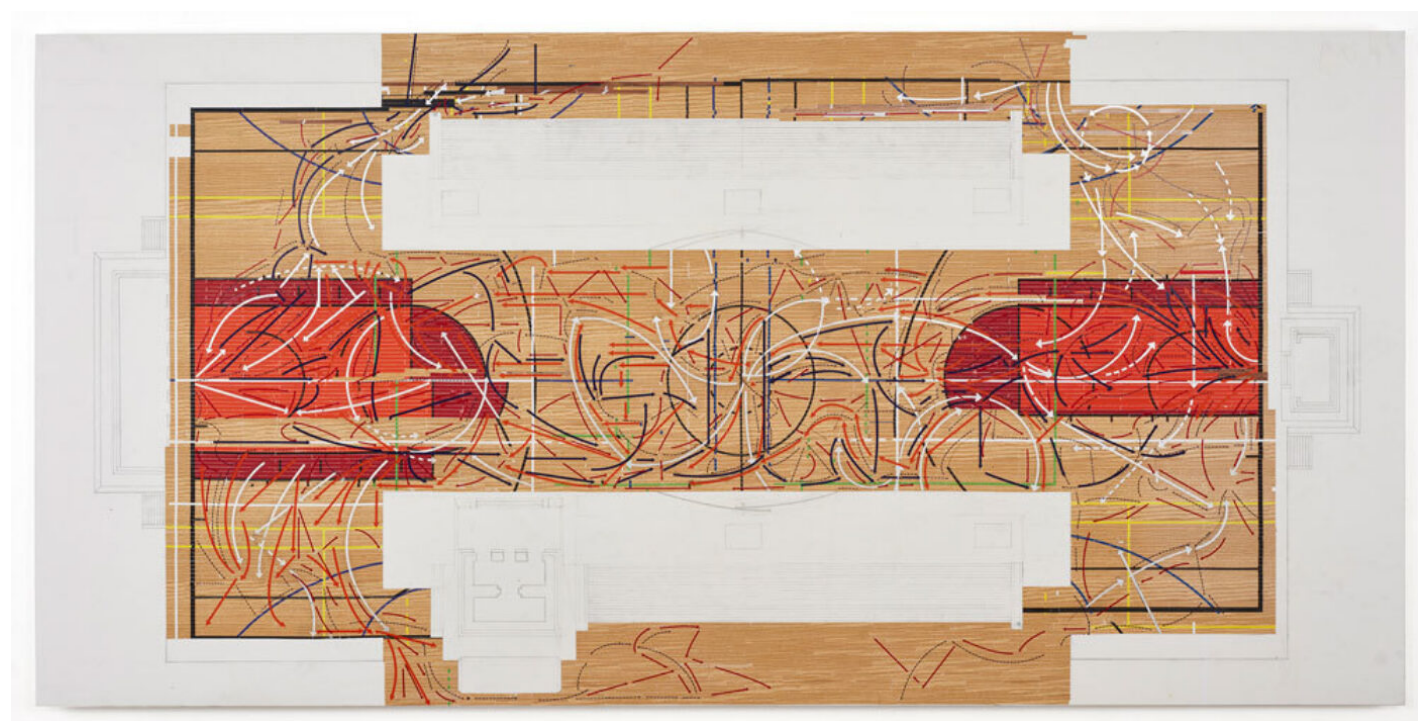
My dad played professional soccer in Ecuador from the late 1950s to late 1960s for division one teams such as Macara and Independiente. After we moved to New York City in the early 1980s, he served for over twenty years as a referee for various organized leagues, especially ones that played in Queens's Flushing Meadows Corona Park. Refereeing was not his full-time job, but he did it every weekend, year-round, and was renowned within these circles. My brother and I would accompany him most weekends, playing with other kids on the sidelines and running the halls of an empty school building.

LB

What impression did those experiences make on you?

RQ

The games were part of a well-organized enclave of South American and Central American amateur soccer leagues. The leagues had rules about uniforms and playoff systems; spectators paid entry fees to watch the games and could buy Ecuadorian dishes like muchines, empanadas, and fritada. Noticias del Mundo, a local newspaper, reported on the games. The entire enterprise existed on the margins of mainstream culture. Soccer, in particular, was nowhere to be seen in US pop culture at that time. This environment provided my initial perspective on sport and play as forms of cultural expression. From it, I came to understand the political implications of making space for oneself and that economics was a matter of resourcefulness. It also drove home the elasticity under which people of color operate, particularly in the way we move between multiple languages and code-switch within the dominant language.



Ronny Quevedo, ULAMA-ULE-ALLEY OOP, 2017. Enamel, silver leaf, vinyl and pencil on mylar. 84 x 42 inches. Collection of Jonathan Goldberg, New York. Photo by Argenis Apolinario.

LB

How have these insights carried over into your art practice?

RQ

Sports and games depend on fixed sets of rules within which participants can find a degree of movement and expressive freedom. In my work, I'm interested in playing with the flexibility of these supposedly inflexible rules and boundaries. Jack Whitten's notion of "compound perspective" — wherein all visual iterations and representations of space and time exist within one plane or action—has been important to me. The artwork provides a space where I can symbolically represent the complex geopolitical movements of immigrant communities and communities of color. This emphasis on shifting boundaries feels political in its acknowledgment that group and individual identities develop in multiple and nuanced ways, rather than simple linear narratives.

LB

Your most recent series of work, *every measure of zero* (2018), focuses less on sport than your previous series. What was its impetus and method?

RQ

From reading Édouard Glissant and June Jordan, as well as from researching precolonial textiles and architectures of the Americas, I've become interested in space not just as a physical entity but also as a concept of measurement and control. Glissant's work on relation, particularly the figure of the nomad, has been particularly important to me; *every measure of zero* began as artistic responses to his ideas, illustrations of how marginal and central cultures intersect. As I've gone further with the work, I've become interested in how origin points come to be considered fixed and neutral states of cultural history.



Ronny Quevedo, *every measure of zero (tropic of cancer)*, 2018. Wax on dressmaker paper. 13 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Upfor Gallery. Photo by Argenis Apolinario.

LB

Can you talk more about your distinctive and oddly specific choice of materials, such as gold leaf, paper removed from drywall, dressmaker wax paper, and oak-tag stencils?

RQ

The materials I incorporate represent, include, and offer entry points to the audience I have in mind. The majority of them derive from underrepresented forms of manual labor, such as dressmaking and construction. At the same time, I'm re purposing those materials in an almost cartographic way. To me there is no division of significance; these humble technical materials can be imaginatively and resourcefully transformed. My family history, which contained lots of adaptation, embodies this capacity for transformation. My brother tells me that I used to make my own toys as a child, and I like that anecdote.

LB

Beyond your biographical family connection to both Ecuador and the United States, your work registers a sense of pan-South American solidarity, particularly through Incan antiquity.

RQ

South American antiquity is associated with having been conquered and, thus, a sense that its culture exists in a past that is extinct. This is curious to me because when I reference Incan or Wari culture in my work, I'm looking to a cultural space and approach whose legacy continues to be influential. This is a conscious decision to resist contemporary notions of minimalism and abstraction as apolitical and asymbolic. Precolonial South American cultures developed their own visual language of abstraction, one that points to a lineage of thought that exists outside of the figurative and the textual, in ways not traditionally acknowledged in the Western art-historical canon.

LB

How do the vectors and traces of human movement in your work relate to aesthetic or political questions of absence and presence?

RQ

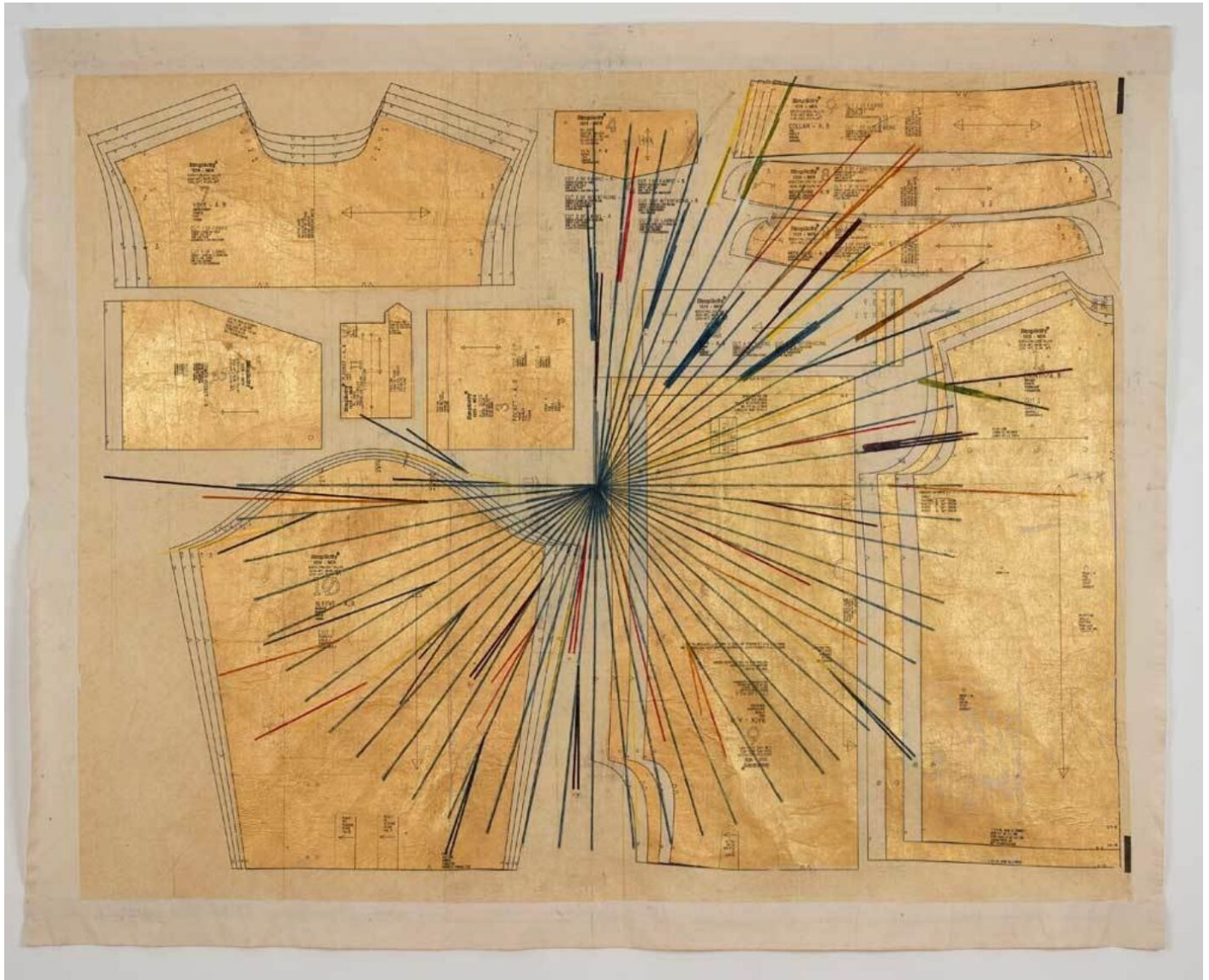
Your question about absence and presence is also one about erasure. The US metaphor of the melting pot, in its fantasy of pure assimilation, erases the multiplicity of identities that its individual citizens embody. My aesthetic approach acknowledges, even honors, that multiplicity through processes of searching and rerouting.

LB

The reroutings in your work—in which you scramble maps, diagrams, tiles, grids, and other literal and figurative boundary lines—suggest a capacity for agency within fixed structures.

RQ

I think about this tension when it comes to negotiating questions of identity. Identity categories can provide recognition and a sense of belonging; however, they can also limit how others perceive you. My work visually explores this bind; its rearranged lines and forms suggest the rhizomatic complexity of my roots so as to reclaim their various origin points.



Ronny Quevedo, *los desaparecidos (the arbiter of time)*, 2018. Gold leaf, pattern paper, and wax on muslin. 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Upfor Gallery. Photo by Argenis Apolinario.

LB

How do these dynamics play out when it comes to aesthetic categories? All of your work is concerned with aesthetic configurations of space, often in an almost architectural way, but some of it takes the form of flat picture planes while others are sculptural installations.

RQ

My approach to sculptural installations involves an investigation of space as ritual sites. Games and sport fit well within this framework because the spaces on which they take place are culturally familiar. My installations can function as an entry point to my drawings, which are about the visual language of space: globes, grids, maps, and other units of measure. In a playful, questioning way, the drawings chronicle our attempt to chart time and space while also proposing alternative modes to map our existence. This questioning is not a dismissal of mathematics, but an expansion of its poetic dimension.

Ronny Quevedo: Every Measure of Zero is on view at Upfor Gallery in Portland, OR, until April 27; Ronny Quevedo: Field of Play is on view at Open Source Gallery in New York City until May 11.