

In a Painterly Field: Tamara Gonzales's "Cosmic Recess" at Providence College Galleries

Review by Leah Triplett Harrington



"On the Wall: Tamara Gonzales," Providence College Galleries, 2021. Photo by Scott Alario. Courtesy of the artist and Providence College Galleries.

Tamara Gonzales's largest painting to date, *Cosmic Recess*, certainly takes up space. The Brooklyn-based painter is known for her intricate, patterned compositions, in which she uses white space as a form. Open patches of canvas are not "negative spaces," as understood in Western art history, but pivotal in-between passages in which all of her painterly elements converge. Gonzales does the same in *Cosmic Recess*, now on view at Providence College Galleries as part of its "On the Wall" series. While the painting is indeed on the wall, it is also on the floor and on the edging up towards the ceiling. Its scale welcomes viewers into the painting via its in-between spaces while reminding us of our place within the larger cosmos.

Room-size scaling amplifies rather than dilutes Gonzales's style and subjects. The PC-G's Reilly Gallery is the painting. Viewers are ushered in by a winding, fantastically green and pink snake without a head or tail; floating above are chunky legs and colorful, lacy circles, positioned as if the legs are kicking them as balls. The painting's inherent flatness is an asset here. Details (in the form of brushy lines, squiggles, and dots) are so magnified that they seem dimensional, and you really have to examine them to see they are, in fact, flat. This works to draw viewers into both the floor and wall, reorienting our perspectives so that we seem small in the shadows of giant lower limbs. This is purposeful, as *Cosmic Recess* curator Kate McNamara points out in the installation's text that many religious spaces (such as churches) are designed to draw the gaze upwards, towards the heavens. Gonzales uses this tactic to place us in the middle of a mythical soccer match, with unknown figures vying for the ball(s), represented via the circles. These painterly details—adroit use of shape, color, form, and, critically, perspective—coalesce to form an image that oscillates between painting and installation.

Gonzales's work embraces ambiguity as a concept in its particularly patterned blend of abstraction and figuration. Born in California and now based in New York (with lots of travel between), Gonzales has long rooted her art and life in the spiritual and the eclectic. America is the land that extends between the North and South poles, with all of the people, traditions, and cultural complexities such an expanse holds. Recent travels to Peru and relationships with the Shipibo people there inform her current paintings. Before she made art, she worked as a cake decorator and practiced yoga, and I can see tendrils of both in her work: she is able to achieve a profound balance even within her most buoyant, jostling compositions.

Much of Gonzales's work deals with the stuff of lived experience and how it's expressed intergenerationally, cross-culturally, and spiritually. Graffiti, lace, pattern: these are all artistic expressions and traditions that we live with every day, and for Gonzales, they become symbols of ritual and spirituality. The cosmic is especially significant for Gonzales, but in her treatment, it's not doctrinal. Her gestures and imagery are playful, with a vibrant color palette, block forms, and textured, almost tactile pattern. As McNamara writes, this aesthetic serves as "a form of translation, creating a hybridized visual language based upon personal reflections upon experience, experimentation, practice, and process." As familiar symbols and forms (say, a serpent or a foot) become metaphysical and mischievously indeterminate, they are dialogic instead of didactic.



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Two recurring motifs of Gonzales's, lace and snakes, are ubiquitous throughout art history. The lace here (on the balls) is created with a stencil made from a mass-produced tablecloth based on the Aztec Sun Stone. That an ancient cultural motif recreated for commercial consumption and decoration is prominently featured here seems like a commemoration of how we often engage with history and myth. The undulating snake, so potent in religions and cultures, is meant to represent water. Without a head or tail, it's like a horizon line, stabilizing within the dynamic composition. This recalibrating of established motifs into new forms is parallel to the "On the Wall" series itself, which remixes the traditional mural format into all-encompassing installations.

Given the importance of Mexican Muralism and the Chicano Mural Movement to today's mural painting, *Cosmic Recess* and its Mesoamerican and North American symbolism is a rich, historically layered installation in the series. Murals are meant to be experiential, despite their essential flatness. *Cosmic Recess* is anything but one-dimensional as it allows us to feel our place and interdependencies on pasts that continue to shape us today. It's a literal positive space: one we add to as we enter and experience Gonzales's creation.

Cosmic Recess is on view from March 17 to October 2 at [Providence College Galleries](#). A closing event will be held on Wednesday, September 29 and will include a guided tour and reception.

Leah Triplett Harrington serves as assistant curator for Now + There and editor-at-large for *Boston Art Review*. The founding editor of the publication and platform *The Rib*, Triplett Harrington also edited *Big Red & Shiny* from 2013 to 2018. Her writing has appeared in *Flash Art*, *Hyperallergic*, *WBUR's The ARtery*, *Big Red & Shiny*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*.