

# Challenging Classical Norms of Power with Marcel Pardo Ariza's work in 'Dismantling Monoliths'



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Marcel Pardo Ariza's work in the exhibition *Dismantling Monoliths* showcased at SF Camerawork through March 25th, offers a compelling exploration of representation, the balance of control, influence, and resources among individuals or groups in a given system, visibility, and inclusion. As a trans visual artist and educator, Ariza's work transcends the conventional by embracing diverse sexual identities, defying norms, and subverting traditional paradigms through constructed images that evoke intimacy, community, and kinship, ultimately re-contextualizing the canon of Western history and offering new perspectives on identity representation.

Ariza's work creates a dialogue around the evolution of queer, trans, and non-binary visibility, and pushes possibilities and boundaries of recognition and representation through the medium of photography. Ariza's work features bold use of color and light to create intimate scenes and collective messages, offering a vivid and captivating portrait of queer life. Their works also question the established norms of power and knowledge production by posing alternate possibilities of existence and cohabitation in the world. Consequently, Ariza's work paves the way for discussions on queer life and non-binary experiences. Furthermore, by celebrating visibility for marginalized communities, Ariza's work dismantles monoliths of exclusion and prejudice.

Through site-specific installations and what they call "constructed photographs," which involve strategically arranging subjects, objects, and lighting within the frame to craft a precise image, Ariza subverts the othering gaze and challenges arbitrary paradigms. By deliberately disrupting the stability of the frame through the manipulation of these elements, Ariza collapses distinctions between the subject and viewer, their purpose in making the photographs, and their role in relation to the image. This process has the potential to create a new way of seeing and being seen, one that is based on mutual understanding and dialogue. Ariza honors the beauty of transgender identities and queer lifestyles, laying the groundwork for greater acceptance and diversity. Ariza's work in the exhibition is a reflection of the creative and dynamic cultural state we are in, and their practice is deeply rooted in collaboration. Every exhibition or project becomes an opportunity to slightly reshape the barriers that limit the potential of diverse lives. The meaning and methods of touch have irrevocably shifted during the pandemic and by using intimate posed and candid imagery to capture moments of togetherness, connection, and kinship, Ariza reifies this moment within the discourse of queerness, trans identity, and BDSM culture.

In their current exhibition, Ariza presents a series of installations: the vibrant orange background wall features three partially nude figures embracing, along with a half-naked figure wielding a whip. Large knot stickers are positioned behind these images, creating the impression of a long rope connecting the two photos, with the connecting part hidden beyond the orange wall, out of our sight. Additionally, a wooden board hangs on the right-hand side, secured by metal chains, and showcases a nude portrait of an individual with a concealed face. This installation reflects upon that shift in our understanding of physical touch—communicating how we might explore affective and collective approaches to social interaction in spite of the physical distances that we now inhabit. Through intimate photographs, Ariza creates captivating scenes that prioritize agency and consent through careful collaboration, showcasing BDSM equipment to explore new conceptions of holding, understanding, and responding within our bodies. Ariza's work in the exhibition *Dismantling Monoliths* offers audiences an opportunity to reimagine and investigate power and representation, ultimately reflecting upon a society that, despite its limiting boundaries, still holds enough space for transformation, reclamation, and joy.

Overall, Ariza's work is a bold and necessary contribution to the ongoing conversations around representation, power dynamics, and inclusion in the art world and beyond. Their commitment to collaboration and centering the experiences of marginalized communities is evident in every aspect of their practice. Their work serves as a powerful reminder of the potential for art to challenge, inspire, and transform.

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