



Gisela Colón

Light Effects

BY DANEVA H. DANSBY



Installation view of "Pods," 2015.

It's a hot, California autumn day when I make the trek out to a Los Angeles valley to meet the second-generation Light and Space artist, Gisela Colón. Her studio, located in an industrial park, is a warehouse space, once home to a plastic manufacturer and a befitting locale for an artist whose preferred medium is poured acrylic. The drive through a never-ending maze of brown hillsides and gray concrete only magnifies the beauty of Colón's recent "Pods" series—nebulous, shimmering, and colorful "non-object" works that traverse the sensation between a solid and a liquid.

The doors to the warehouse are wide open, and the embalming warmth acts as a contrast to the aloofness of a single pod staged on a side wall. Amoeba-like, shiny, displaying a pleasing iridescent charade of color, Colón's "Pods" take on an amorphous quality. They feel primal and molecular, like the starting point of all life, at once singularly beautiful and yet indistinguishable in their form, even as their colors continually change depending on viewpoint and surrounding light. I almost expect this pod to slither off

outside, where it will simply evaporate under the heat of the afternoon sun.

Following the success of Colón's recent gallery exhibitions in Houston, San Diego, and Los Angeles, and half-a-dozen museum shows (including at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, earlier this year and several upcoming in the U.S. and Germany), it's clear that she has tapped into some sort of fundamental human interest. Aligned with the Finish Fetish and California Minimalist movements, her shape- and color-shifting body of work remains elusive to the core and finds reflection in the artist herself.

Born in Vancouver, Colón grew up in Puerto Rico and moved to Los Angeles in the early '90s and completed a law degree at USC. Though an artist from an early age, she did not begin making art full time until 2002 and, as noted in her biography, she "quickly develop[ed] a following for her abstract paintings." When asked to show examples of her early work, she skirts the question. The warehouse is barren of the traditional chaos associated with an artist's studio, and

the "Pods" themselves feel as much a product of Colón's stripped-down environment as her understated intentions.

Earlier incarnations of the "Pods" (2012) move color across the spectrum, while the most recent series finds a way to infuse color within the forms. The trajectory is that of an idea taking shape and moving from concept into fruition, as if the "Pods" have "come into themselves," though there is little to compare them to before 2011. Colón speaks of carving wood with knives in incredibly labor-intensive endeavors until an "aha" moment redirected her focus to working with plastics. Like other Light and Space artists (Turrell comes to mind), Colón is hesitant to speak directly about her process, and as I talk more about her work, the mystique that surrounds it extends to the artist as well.

For Colón, process is not nearly as important as the end product and her desire to create a nonspecific art object completely separate from herself, in which the viewer becomes the creator of the experience. In the studio, she points out a collection of



***Hyper Ellipsoid Glo-Pod (Iridescent Blue)*, 2014. Blow-molded acrylic, 90 x 42 x 13 in., 3 views under different lighting conditions.**

wood frames lining the shelves; they look a bit like architectural models or unsuccessful attempts at cribs (the bars spaced too widely apart) and not at all like the molds that Colón uses to shape the acrylic forms before they are baked in an oven, a shed-like construction planted in the middle of the warehouse.

Seeding thoughts for the “Pods”—their colors and forms—often come to Colón in dreams, after which she sketches the outer perimeters, then redraws them into the wood forms. The search for light effects can sometimes take months, with trial and error mixed in as part of the development. How exactly the iridescent shifting of colors comes to be, Colón will not explain—technical knowledge is not necessary for appreciation. She names Donald Judd as both an inspiration and a case-in-point, particularly his translation of the Fibonacci sequence into a sculptural equivalent in which enjoyment of aesthetic balance does not rely on an understanding of the mathematics.

Stripping the “Pods” of background promotes a magical aura, and some of their staying power comes from this minimalizing

of context. Still, as a viewer, I cannot help but try to connect the dots back to the artist herself. Colón’s mother, also an artist, fostered an ethos within her home in which one could always wake up in the morning and create. The spirit of Latin culture in Puerto Rico also influenced the young Colón, steeped in color and the “kaleidoscope spectrum of nature” in which she and her friends played. For an artist enamored of plastic, it is perhaps no surprise that her father was a chemist and her grandmother a pharmacist. From an early age, science overlaid Colón’s art; beakers, test tubes, and experimentation fueled her childhood games—extracting juice from a banana tree and injecting it with chemicals, melting wax in fires, mixing the oils of her mother’s paints. It is also fitting that Colón once worked as a lawyer. There is a certain pragmatism that infuses her process, a methodology to analyzing the materials, and a commitment to work that has “all the effects of light.” For Colón, the piece itself is the truth.

But there is also poetry to this pursuit of capturing light, something that Colón explores in her writing—a recent catalogue

statement is revelatory, weighty, and lyrical, all at once. A voracious reader as a child, Colón read “everything she could get her hands on,” and she uses writing as a method of self-discovery, as well as a tool to further her visual ideas.

Colón’s ties to Minimalism and the Light and Space movement are more than just loose links. She counts DeWain Valentine, Mary Corse, and Helen Pashgian as friends as well as influences and notes Judd’s “stripping away the work” as a primary inspiration. Though such academic associations have the potential for formalism, Colón’s work feels fresh, fluid, and organic. Yet one can’t help but notice the intrinsic paradox in her choice of materials. Plastic is the antithesis of the organic, but in the context of Colón herself, her past, and her inspirations, it somehow makes sense. In fact, when asked about this, her reply is sensible—that all matter comes from the earth, that a wooden tool shaped the sculptures, and that the dark side of plastics (the pollution in our oceans, waste) is all man’s doing. Plastic has enhanced modern life (from hospitals to the household table); and she has



turned it into something exquisite in direct contradiction to another contemporary art form, trash art.

While Colón distances herself from the term “feminist,” the “Pods” take on a female sensibility, with their sensual shapes and seductive mix of colors (moving without hesitation through pink, lilac, pastel, and fluorescent hues). Their mutable shapes are more reminiscent of Judy Chicago’s late ’60s “Domes” and what has been described as her liminal use of color (the “Domes” recall peacock-colored breast implants) than the monolithic forms of Judd or Andre. But as in *Light and Space* works, perception plays a central role in the “Pods” in terms of the interaction between color and light (refracting, saturating, reflecting) and the materiality of the works (space emptied into voids, irregularity, and distortion). The “Pods” possess an energy all their own.

As Colón’s work has matured, so has the complexity of design, with shapes embedded inside of shapes. She suggests that her next projects will completely free the “Pods” from the wall. In her words, “there is a lot of clutter out there,” and the measure of credible art is its ability to stimulate people’s minds. In this respect, the “Pods” are successful, but Colón’s backstory is another discussion. As a tree grows, often the roots start to emerge from the ground and I, for one, am always interested in understanding how something of such standing came to be.

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Above: *Hyper Ellipsoid Glo-Pod (Iridescent Black Indigo)*, 2016. Blow-molded acrylic, 90 x 42 x 13 in.
Below: *Mega Rectanglopoid Glo-Pod (Iridescent Black)*, 2014. Blow-molded acrylic, 42 x 90 x 13 in., 2 views under different lighting conditions.

