

October 01, 2021 - November 29, 2021

JONATHAN MICHAEL CASTILLO: UNACCOMPANIED



DEPS ARTIST PROFILE

*C33 Gallery- Columbia College Chicago
33 E. Ida B. Wells Drive, 1st Floor, Chicago, IL 60605
Gallery Hours: Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.
Capacity of gallery is 10 visitors, and masks are required.*

UNACCOMPANIED

An exhibition by Jonathan Michael Castillo

Unaccompanied features new work by Jonathan Michael Castillo, created in Chicago and funded by the Diane Dammeyer Fellowship in Photographic Arts and Social Issues. This work was made across several youth shelters run by leading global human rights organization Heartland Alliance, that care for unaccompanied children after they have arrived in the United States without their parents. This photographic exhibition is the culmination of two years of involvement with Heartland programs that care for this uniquely vulnerable population.

JONATHAN MICHAEL CASTILLO

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Jonathan Michael Castillo is a visual artist, photographer and educator based in Chicago. He is the 2019-2021 recipient of the Diane Dammeyer Fellowship in Photographic Arts and Social Issues. Jonathan was included in the 2021 Hyde Park Art Center's Ground Floor Biennial in Chicago and was a finalist for the WMA Commission in Hong Kong. His work has been featured with The New Yorker, Wired, CBS: Los Angeles, and Brazil's G1 Globo. He has appeared on the radio to discuss his photography on the BBC's "World Update" and local Los Angeles public radio programs KPCC and KCRW. Jonathan was recently commissioned to create a large-scale permanent installation of his work at O'Hare International Airport as part of the new Terminal 5 expansion project. Exhibitions include those at Photo LA 2020, the Center for Creative Photography, Aperture Gallery, House of Lucie, Filter Photo Gallery, Ralph Arnold Gallery and the California Museum of Art Thousand Oaks. Jonathan is represented by Samuel Maenhoudt Gallery in Belgium. His education includes a BFA from California State University Long Beach and MFA from Columbia College Chicago.



Unaccompanied installation view



Unaccompanied installation view



Untitled from the series *Unaccompanied*, 2021
archival pigment print
23" x 34.5"



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INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN MICHAEL CASTILLO

CONDUCTED BY KAYLEE FOWLER

Kaylee Fowler: What started your interest in Photography?

Jonathan Michael Castillo: I took my first photo class in 2001 at Moorpark Community College on a whim just to fill an elective. I really enjoyed the class, but it took a while for it to become apparent to me that photographer and artist was a viable career path. At the time I was a business major who kept signing up for a full load of classes and dropping all of them except maybe 1 class a semester. I really wasn't invested in getting a degree in business, but it was what my family had somewhat pushed me to work towards. It took 8 years slowly slogging through my general education credits at community college with periodic returns to taking photo classes until I finally switched my major to photography. Overnight I went from being the kind of student who could barely manage 1-2 classes to taking 4-5 classes a semester. The interest in photography was there from the beginning of my first class but it took a while before I could imagine myself working in the arts.

KF: How did you get involved with Heartland Alliance?

JMC: I got involved with Heartland Alliance through the Diane Dammeyer

Fellowship in Photographic Arts and Social Issues when I became the 2019/2020 fellow. During my last semester of graduate school at Columbia College Chicago I applied for the fellowship, which I got, and that then kept me around Columbia College for another two years. The fellowship was generously extended for an additional year due to the Covid-19 pandemic which then made me the 2019/2021 fellow. The fellowship at the time I was awarded it, was partnered directly with Columbia College Chicago and Heartland Alliance. The idea is that the fellowship granted access to Heartland Alliance programs where the fellow then makes a socially engaged photo-based project. As I understand it the fellowship is currently going through some changes and is now opening up to include other organizations besides Heartland Alliance as potential partners for the fellowship period.

KF: What were some of the challenges unique to this project?

JMC: Initially the biggest challenge was exploring all of the many programs at Heartland Alliance and determining which ones might be of interest to propose working with. This included emailing and meeting with people from many different Heartland programs and

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learning to navigate this extremely large organization. It took a couple months just to do all this and make initial visits to all the programs that I wanted to visit and learn about. I was primarily interested in all of the programs Heartland had to help immigrants, refugees and unaccompanied children. Initially I cast a pretty wide net and was visiting many different programs all over the city and even started making photographs related to several of these other programs. The shelters for the children were the hardest to gain access to as they deal with a very vulnerable population. I had to have numerous meetings with people at Heartland who oversee the shelter programs and get them to understand what my work is about and why I thought working with these shelters would be worthwhile. Once the right people agreed to allow me in, I then had to go through a fair amount of training to become classified as a Heartland Alliance volunteer. This included learning about unaccompanied children, the basics of trauma informed care and what responsibilities I would be taking on such as becoming a mandated reporter for the state since I would be working with and around vulnerable children. After navigating all the layers of communications and procedure, I finally had my first appointments to make images in the shelters in early March of 2020. It was absolutely perfect timing to bring everything to a screeching halt with the pandemic.

The pandemic then threw everything into uncertainty and after several months of lockdown and not making much progress is when I found out I was being allowed to continue the fellowship for another year. It was this second year of my fellowship where I finally would get the access I had been working towards in sporadic bursts between the waves of the pandemic. The pandemic affected things in some completely unforeseeable ways. Taking advantage of the pandemic, the Trump administration used title 42 to keep all migrants out of the country including unaccompanied children citing a risk to public health. This then led to a period during the second half of 2020 where there were no kids in any of these shelters. So it was easier to gain access and photograph the facilities but I wasn't experiencing what these facilities were normally like and much of the staff were working remotely as well. After the Biden administration came into office and reversed some of the previous administration's policies it was the complete opposite. Suddenly all the shelters were full and with the large winter Covid surge I wasn't able to be back in the shelters. I'd basically have full access then suddenly no access depending on a number of factors completely out of everyone's control. Thankfully everyone at Heartland Alliance continued to correspond with me and get me access when it was safe and appropriate to be in these spaces.

INTERVIEW CONTINUED

This way of working was absolutely one of the most challenging things I've ever had to work through on any of my projects.

KF: For the installation of *Unaccompanied*, some of the children in the program came to the gallery site themselves and helped to create a mural as part of the exhibition; did getting to work with them in this way change how you viewed your own work, or how you envisioned the exhibition?

JMC: I had been interested in engaging with the kids in some way from the very beginning but with the pandemic it was almost impossible to arrange. Pre-pandemic I was planning to do some kind of photography workshop or activity with the kids but that was no longer possible once we went into lockdowns and stay at home orders. Getting to work with the kids and have a prominent component of the exhibition be something they made has absolutely changed how I see my work. In some ways my photographs seem both less important to me now and at the same time surrounded with more context, which makes them work better. I can't imagine this show without the mural and paintings that the kids have made anymore. I certainly didn't envision any paintings being part of this exhibition when I started the fellowship. The idea to include the previously made paintings and involve the kids to paint a new mural came about through discussions

with Gyan Samara who is the Associate Director of Alternative Therapies with these shelters. Gyan is always looking for ways to get the kids involved in art programs that can both teach them practical skills in the arts while also acting as art therapy. I think it's a really elegant multi-faceted approach to addressing the needs of these kids.

KF: For the sake of the privacy of those in the care of Heartland Alliance, no one was photographed directly in any way that might reveal their identities; how then did you shift the focus of the subject matter to protect their identities in this way while still emphasizing the individuality and unique narratives of those in the program?

JMC: I knew from the beginning that I wasn't going to be able to photograph the kids in ways that I've photographed other people for past projects. And while I've been interested in photographing interiors without people in them for a while now this is the first project I've made where there's no still photography portraiture. There is one component that has portraits but it's a series of videos of staff members who work at these shelters. I think of them as moving portraits paired with audio interviews. The exhibition really has four components to it. The first is the photographic interiors with no people in them. These images serve to give people a sense of what these shelters are like and the scale at which they

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operate. I wanted people to look at these images and get a sense of what it might be like to live in or work in one of these shelters. The second component is the multitude of objects and letters photographed to make the colorful and busy wallpaper that is the base for where the framed images of interiors sit. All of these items represent individual kids who have come through these shelters and made arts and crafts there, been part of an intramural sports team (the trophies), or handwritten letters to staff thanking them for their help. Many of these items have been gifted to staff from kids as they are leaving the shelters to be reunited with family. These items become a stand in for the children individually as well as collectively. You can look at one letter in Spanish, one in Hindi, another in Chinese and even not knowing how to read all the languages come away with an understanding that these kids come from all over the world. The third component is the mural and paintings in the windows that the kids have made both in the programs and in the gallery. These function in a similar way as all the objects pictured in the wallpaper, but they are more prominently placed in the space and in some ways the center pieces of the show. The paintings and mural also don't need me as a photographic intermediary. I think that including these paintings has taught me that there's times in my work where it's just better if I don't take any photographs but instead make room for

something else to occupy some space. The fourth and last component of the exhibition is the video portrait interviews of staff. This was the part of the project I've been waiting to come together the longest. The audio is the most important component to me as it's part of the exhibition where people can hear first-hand about what it's like to work in these shelters and what it's like for the kids there. The interviews also have a personal portion where staff were invited to share their own immigration related stories if they had them and were willing to share.

KF: With the absence of a figure in these works, what do you think viewers can learn about not only the people who interact with these settings and objects regularly, but also what can be gleaned about our own connection to our environments and lives from these works?

JMC: The absence of a figure requires the viewer to ask some questions and interrogate the spaces for clues about what these spaces are used for. I think interiors and photographs of objects can give a lot of information about their utility. It's not always immediately apparent but there's lots of little details that collectively give information about these shelters and the populations they serve. The same can be said about the objects in the spaces we occupy for work, pleasure or at home. The things we surround ourselves with are a

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representation of who we are individually, our labor and our priorities in life.

KF: What do you hope viewers will ultimately take from this exhibition?

JMC: I hope viewers come away with a sense that these kids who come to the US and are living in these shelters are just like their kids, their family or they see themselves in these kids. That's what I hope the objects photographed in the wallpaper do. Maybe it's seeing a trophy that looks just like one that you have at home from your childhood or one your child earned playing sports. Maybe a bracelet or small coloring book page feels a lot like something a child in your life made for you. I also hope that people listen to the interviews and come away with a better sense of what it's like to be these kids or to have to navigate the US immigration system and all of the uncertainty that comes along with that.

I want people to look at the photographs of the space and see a place designed to serve this vulnerable population with a high level of care but also understand that no one would want to live in these kinds of places. You wouldn't want to live in one of these shelters nor would you want your own children to live there, not because they aren't taken care of there, but because no matter how high the level of care there's no institutional substitute for being in a real home with your family. I hope viewers take away a more nuanced perspective on unaccompanied children after seeing this work and know that they aren't all Spanish speaking migrants from Central America but instead come from all over the world. Lastly, I want people to take away the underlying story that the majority of people doing work in these shelters are immigrants themselves. It's largely a story about immigrants taking care of other immigrants.

THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES



The DEPS Artist Profile Series, presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community.

The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by Fine Arts major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Kaylee Fowler. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at students.colum.edu/deps/c33-gallery/exhibitions/2021-22/jonathan-michael-castillo-unaccompanied

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