

INTERVIEW ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/FORMAT/INTERVIEW/](https://bombmagazine.org/format/interview/))

## Blanka Amezkua by Louis Bury

Art for and by communities.

MAY 17, 2024



([https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/\\_hiresolution/Bronx-Blue-Bedroom-Project-Blanka-Amezku1.jpg](https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Bronx-Blue-Bedroom-Project-Blanka-Amezku1.jpg))

Installation view of Bronx Blue Bedroom Project, 2009. New York City. Photo by Leonidas Alexandropoulos. Courtesy of Blanka Amezkua.

Blanka Amezkua understands the importance of making people feel at home with art. In the past decade and a half, she's created several artist-run spaces, with imaginative conceits, that bring together people in fine-arts communities and beyond. From 2008 to 2010, she ran the Bronx Blue Bedroom Project (BBBP), in which artists were invited to create installations in the bedroom of her South Bronx apartment. From 2016 to 2024, she ran another home gallery, AAA3A (short for her address: Alexander Avenue, Apartment 3A), this time out of her living room. In between, she spent time in Greece and in 2014 founded Athens's FokiaNou Art Space, which continues to operate.

The welcoming atmosphere that Amezkua cultivates in artist-run spaces has its corollary in her own artworks' inviting use of color. For example, her 2023 installation, *Hierbitas de Saberes / Tiny Herbs of Knowledge*, curated by Lucas Cowan and done in collaboration with papel picado maestro Rene Mendoza, transformed the storefront windows of the Famous Hardware Store in Springdale, Arkansas, into a festive cornucopia of medicinal flowers. All of Amezkua's artistic undertakings exude a similar sense of openness and joy.

### **Louis Bury**

Where did the idea for Bronx Blue Bedroom Project come from?

### **Blanka Amezkua**

It originated in 2008. I was participating in the Bronx Museum's Artist in the Marketplace (AIM) program under the guidance of artist Jackie Battenfield, who served as the program's facilitator. She encouraged us to find ways to get our work out into the world without waiting to be discovered. That idea resonates with me to this day, which is why I titled my current Bronx River Art Center (BRAC) exhibition, *Never Wait! / ¡Nunca Esperes!* (<https://www.bronxriverart.org/gallery>)

### **LB**

What was it like turning your bedroom into an exhibition space?

### **BA**

It was one of those things whose impact remains hard to understand until you experience it. I would empty my bedroom entirely, save for my mattress, and invite an installation or mixed-media artist to make work there. They were granted free reign over the room, including the walls and ceiling. The installations exerted a profound influence on my nightly dreams. Opening my personal space in this way helped to forge connections with visitors, as well as with organizations such as Bronx Council on the Arts, Bronx Art Space, Materials for the Arts, Fractured Atlas, and the local library and schools.

**“Creating alliances with neighborhood organizations strengthens everyone.”**

— Blanka Amezkua

### **LB**

Those sorts of community connections can make a big difference.



**BA**

Creating alliances with neighborhood organizations strengthens everyone. At first, it was difficult to find artists willing to exhibit inside a bedroom. I emailed twenty artists from the White Columns registry, and only Alva G. Calymayor responded. Then I realized I could ask the artists in my AIM cohort. That's when things opened up. I recognized the importance of showing primarily Bronx-based artists, and the connections happened organically.



([https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/\\_hiresolution/AAA3A-Blanka-Amezkoa2.jpg](https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/AAA3A-Blanka-Amezkoa2.jpg))

AAA3A, 2024. New York City. Photo by Argenis Apolinario. Courtesy of Blanka Amezkua.

**LB**

Can you talk about your current BRAC exhibition, which looks back at the home galleries you've operated in the Bronx, BBBP and AAA3A?

**BA**

It's important to make people feel welcome, which is why I insisted there be a lot of food at the opening from La Morada restaurant! Sharing a meal and having a drink helps you relax and get to know people. It also felt important to recreate the experience of visiting my apartment. I bought the exact same IKEA curtains that are in my home. The blue lines on the floor correspond to the dimensions of my bedroom and living room. I invited my friend John Ahearn to create a cast of me to hang in the entryway as a way to welcome visitors to the exhibition. The amazing zine for the show was designed by my good friend and artist, Tattfoo Tan!

**LB**

What prompted your move to Greece in 2010?

**BA**

I underwent a string of devastating family tragedies, commencing in 2007 with the tragic passing of my beloved nephew Sebastian at the age of nine due to a teenager's DUI. Subsequent losses in 2009 and 2010 compounded my grief. I went to Greece to seek solace in unfamiliar surroundings, but I was still visiting the Bronx every year. In hindsight, starting BBBP in 2008 was an important part of my healing process. It was a way to make myself vulnerable by opening up my home and filling it with community.

**LB**

Thanks for sharing that. Across many of your projects, the interplay of private and public, inside and outside, is striking.

**BA**

My experience with BBBP made me feel comfortable pursuing other kinds of project spaces. When I moved to Athens, I built transportable walls that I could carry on my back. I had artists send me work, and I would go to different public places, set up the walls, and sit with the work. It was a way to familiarize myself with the city when I was new there. I also initiated the FoKiaNou Art Space in Athens's city center; today, my artist friends Mary Cox and Panagiotis Voulgaris continue to operate the space.

**LB**

When did you move back to New York City?

**BA**

I returned permanently in August 2016, and in October I initiated a gallery in my living room, AAA3A, which is an acronym for my home address. It was a way to announce to my friends that I was back. There were parts of my life in New York that needed to be retraced. A superficial look at my life history might seem very privileged: here's Blanka from Mexico, and she's off to San Francisco, New York, and now Greece. But the places I've lived have reinforced the awareness I've always had, as an immigrant to the US, of social, economic, and urban disparities. I grew up in South Central LA from ages five to ten, and now I live in the South Bronx. It's important for people to imagine and experience other places. It can change how you think about yourself and your circumstances.



([https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/\\_hiresolution/Never-Wait-Blanka-Amezku3.jpg](https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Never-Wait-Blanka-Amezku3.jpg))

*Never Wait! / ¡Nunca Esperes!*, 2024. Bronx River Art Center, New York City. Photo by Argenis Apolinario. Courtesy of Blanka Amezkua.

**LB**

How have your experiences creating artist-run spaces influenced your own art-making practice?

**BA**

I don't see a separation between my artist-run spaces and my personal art practice. Obviously, each kind of project takes different forms, but they're both woven into my daily experience. Things constantly overlap and need to get done. The BRAC exhibition I organized has been a priority, but I'm currently also a Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Workspace Program resident. I'm working on a series of handheld acrylic paintings reinterpreting the illustrations found in the 1552 Codex de la Cruz-Badiano.

**LB**

What is the codex, and how did you start working with it?

**BA**

It was the first medical book in the Americas and was made by the Indigenous physician Martín de la Cruz and translated into Latin by Juan Badiano. The original Nahuatl version is believed not to be extant. The codex describes the medicinal properties of many plants and is divided into thirteen

chapters, organized by human body parts from head to toe. I learned about the codex as an artist research fellow at the Hispanic Society of America thanks to a Vilcek Foundation grant.

**LB**

Where is the original kept today?

**BA**

It had been stored for centuries in the Vatican before Professor Charles Upson Clark rediscovered it in 1929. In 1990, Pope John Paul II returned it to Mexico, where it is now in the collection of the Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia. I was fortunate to see the original codex there this past November.

**LB**

That must have been incredible.

**BA**

Yes! I cried after I saw it. It would be hard to see this beautiful book of ancestral knowledge and not be affected. It's stored in a vault, and I was given a list of things I could and couldn't do while someone turned each page. It contains over 185 illustrations of medicinal plants, whose colors are still vibrant because the book didn't see the light of day for centuries. The illustrations were done by an anonymous Tlacuilo artist.

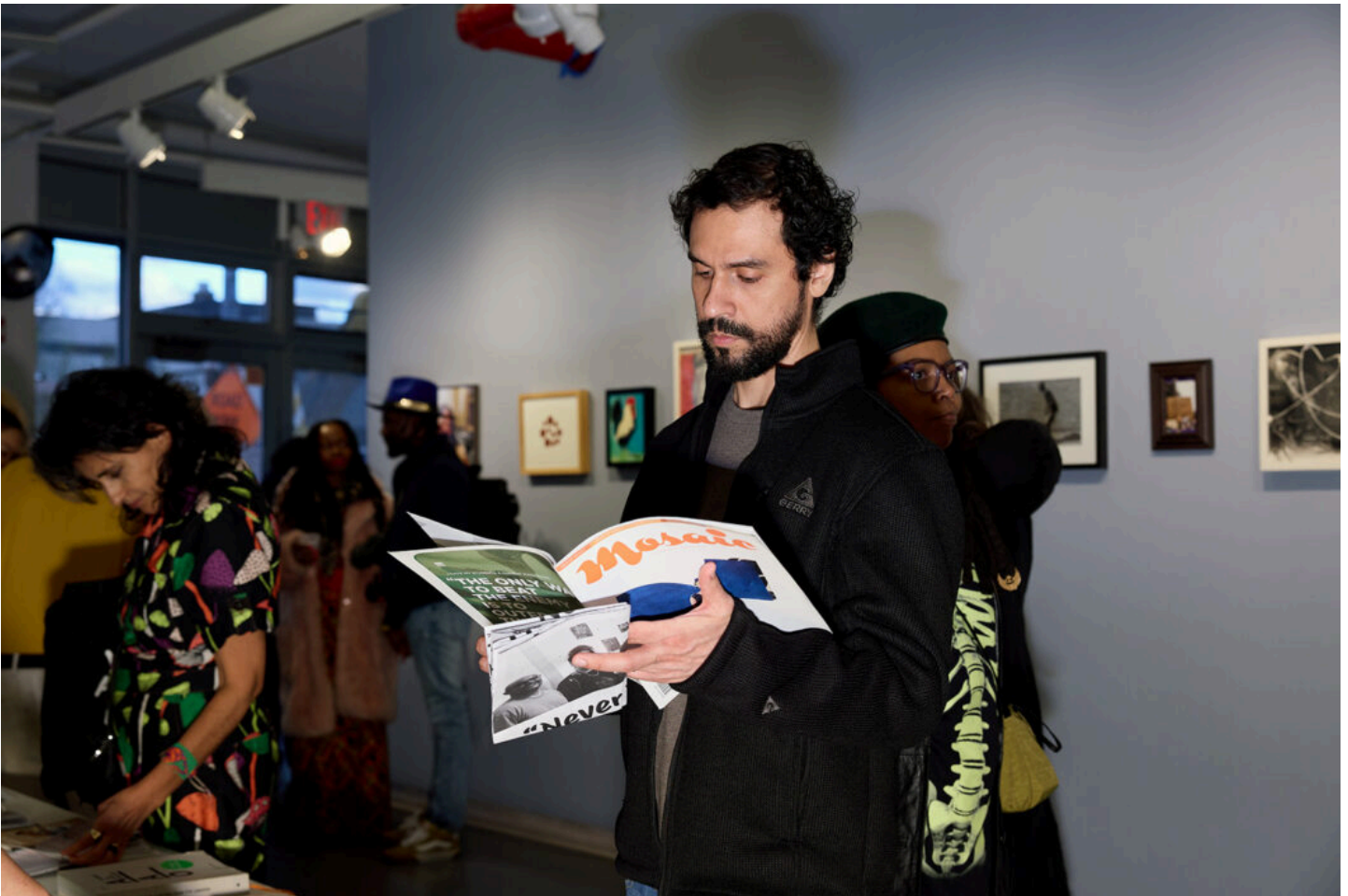
**LB**

What other artwork have you made in response to it?

**BA**

I recently collaborated with my brother, Hector Amezcua, who is a photojournalist at the *Sacramento Bee*, on a photo series in which I wore garments printed with the plants while I held the actual plants in my hands. For a 2023 exhibition, *Hierbitas de Saberes / Tiny Herbs of Knowledge*, inside the Famous Hardware Store in Springdale, Arkansas, Rene Mendoza and I crafted plants from the codex in papel picado form. Thanks to my research, I've been in contact with others who've researched the book, including artists, scientists, anthropologists, writers, librarians, and practitioners of alternative medicine. I hope to find the resources to invite others to collaborate with me going forward.





([https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/\\_hiresolution/Never-Wait-Blanka-Amezku4.jpg](https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Never-Wait-Blanka-Amezku4.jpg))

*Never Wait! / ¡Nunca Esperes!*, 2024. Bronx River Art Center, New York City. Photo by Argenis Apolinario. Courtesy of Blanka Amezkua.

**LB**

Anything else you'd like to add?

**BA**

Sadly, AAA3A just ended in May. It was important to me that *Never Wait! / ¡Nunca Esperes!* be exhibited at BRAC because I have such a wonderful memory from when artist Ronny Quevedo and I curated a 2010 show there called *Rompe Puesto*, or "Breaking Ground." We invited twenty-two artists to create piñatas, and they and their guests spent the evening breaking them open. I've never experienced such an explosion of joy. People still talk about it.

**LB**

You've brought a lot of joy across a lot of projects to a lot of communities.

**BA**

I think I'm trying to break a piñata with everything I do!

*Never Wait! / ¡Nunca Esperes!* (<https://www.bronxriverart.org/gallery>) is on view at the Bronx River Art Center in New York City until June 8.

Support BOMB's mission to deliver the artist's voice.

DONATE (/DONATE)

SUBSCRIBE (/SUBSCRIBE)

Louis Bury is an art writer, author of *The Way Things Go* (punctum books, 2023) and *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015), and Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY.

---

**MORE**    Community (<https://bombmagazine.org/topics/community/>)  
            Galleries (<https://bombmagazine.org/topics/galleries/>)  
            Politics (<https://bombmagazine.org/topics/politics/>)  
            Exhibitions (<https://bombmagazine.org/topics/exhibitions/>)

---

Sign up for our newsletter and get an email every week.

EMAIL ADDRESS

SUBMIT

*By signing up, you agree to our [User Agreement \(/user-agreement\)](/user-agreement) and [Privacy Policy \(/privacy\)](/privacy) & [Cookie Statement \(\)](#).*