

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

February 10 - May 8, 2022

A Community Project and Installation in conjunction with *Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance*

Mercédes Loving-Manley (she/her)

Transcript of 7.5-minute Audio Story

KEY:

MLM: Mercédes Loving-Manley

AG: Arielle Gray

HM: Henny Mulan

LM: Lexxi Mulan

AG: Mercédes Loving-Manley goes by many different names. If you've met her in one of her community roles, you may know her as Mercédes. If you followed her rap career over the years, then you may know her instead as Merci D.

Merci D rapping: *Niggas hatin' with their meat rock. See a girl building her own world and they try to meet her with a cheap clock, like a firecracker...*

AG: And recently, Mercédes added another name to her list.

MLM: I'm now a mother of the Boston chapter, the House of Mulan.

AG: If you're not familiar with balls or ballroom culture, you may not know what a "house" is. And you probably didn't know that Boston is home to a vibrant and thriving ballroom scene.

MLM: Boston balls are always like smaller in scale compared to New York balls. Um, just because obviously New York is the Mecca. Um, and Boston definitely has our own scene. That's undeniable.

AG: Houses are groups, or chosen families, who compete in a variety of categories at balls. It's a long legacy that goes beyond the glitz and the glamour of the runway. Being a housemother also means being a support system to younger or new house members.

MLM: They shouldn't have to be just, you know, spaces that are exclusively queer or trans in order to succeed. So, like equipping them with the tools to do that. Like how, you know, when you walk out of that ball, like, what does your life look like and how can I help you, to like, make that look as peaceful as possible for you?

AG: My name is Arielle Gray and you are listening to the *Future Archives*, a project and installation at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. As an artist and reporter I'm constantly thinking about

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documentation. And, as a black queer woman I know oftentimes those most marginalized have no say in how we're represented in our archives, and if we're represented at all. *Future Archives* highlights the stories of five Black queer and trans people here in Boston in their own words.

It's the beginning of Black History Month and Mercédes is getting ready to be a judge at an upcoming kiki ball.

MLM: I have to get my children together. Um, so I had to get my daughter together for realness, you know, get her look together. They were doing, um, a feline look.

AG: Her children, Lexxi and Henny Mulan are younger members of the house. They'll be walking at this upcoming ball.

MLM: And then all the while practicing, just practicing, whatever our categories are, practicing, practicing, practicing.

AG: Both Henny and Lexxi utilize Vogue Hour at Boston GLASS, which is an LGBTQ+ youth resource center. GLASS is also hosting this upcoming ball.

HM: I dunno, I feel like I'm a new person. Like I'm a different person. I feel like it's a new, like, um, what's that word? A new like version of myself. I don't know how to explain it. Um, when I'm voguing, I feel like I get in some of my, my, my femininity and my like, you know, my, my oohs and my aaahs. So yeah, ha-ha, I get real in my bag. I get real of my bag.

AG: That was Henny Mulan on the grandson of the house. He's been walking in balls since he was 14. Here's Lexxi. Mulan, the house princess, on what it means to her.

LM: So, voguing for me - if I have a bad day, then I hear a beat and the beat is like loud. It's like ma'am and I feel it it's gonna make me want to unleash that, that anger, whatever that sadness or that pain or anything like that. And the more, you know, the more I do it, the more I feel it, is the more emotional it becomes.

AG: For all the members of the House of Mulan celebrating themselves and their community during Black History Month is incredibly important. Here's Henny again.

HM: I feel like it's really important that everybody gets to, you know, somewhat share their story 'cuz, you know everywhere everybody's coming from a different place. Everybody in ballrooms coming from a different place, everybody in ballrooms coming from a different upbringing.

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AG: The House of Mulan and the other houses and ball culture are preserving a century old tradition. The scene originally began in response to homophobic laws about clothing, gender, and sexuality. It became a space of freedom for queer and trans people of color.

MLM: There is a culture of hiding. There's a culture of shame that comes with being Black. Specifically, regarding like trans identity and experiences.

AG: Shows like "Pose" and "Legendary" have introduced the culture to a larger population, but that doesn't mean that things have changed in the real world.

MLM: And it's not just like "Pose", and then now like we're all Kumbaya. Like, people are still experiencing these things.

AG: The things Mercédes is referencing are things like harassment, violence, and discrimination. LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to have these experiences.

MLM: If, you know, my daughter is going through something, I'm able to support her based on the things that I had to teach myself or learn for myself online from someone else.

AG: It's finally the night of the ball. From the outside Boston GLASS looks like it normally does, a typical office building. But the pulse of the music hints at what's inside. It's a Valentine's themed wonderland. The room is draped and red cellophane streamers, and underneath pink balloons, glittering lights outline a runway. This is the battle ground for tonight.

BALL EMCEE: We can get some energy up in here, everybody down with that? You think you can do that? All right, I like that! Well let's go!

AG: Some competitors pirouette and slide to the beat while other strut the runway arms gracefully extended. [clapping to the beat] Then Henny Mulan takes the stage. He's in a black body suit that hugs him like a second skin. The wooden beads in his hair sing when he moves. He spins down the runway, confident and fluid.

A century ago, Black and brown ballroom pioneers fought to build spaces like this one. Decades later, ballroom culture is still providing an outlet, not just for expression, but also for community. When I asked Mercédes what she gets out of ballroom, she had one answer.

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MLM: Ballroom makes the child in me feel so seen even when the judges are fierce or even when it's a chop. Like I feel seen because I'm honoring that child in me that never really could like be fully herself. I'm doing this for like a much greater purpose. I'm doing this for like a legacy. You know, this is like beyond me at this point. Um, and that feels fab. I love, I love that as a feeling.

AG: Thank you so much for listening to this installment of the *Future Archives* project. This is actually the final installment, and we want to thank everybody for listening to these stories.

As usual, there is so much we couldn't fit in from how Mercédes first got into ballroom to her documentary that she's been working on. Head to the website to hear the full interview. Lead artist and host is Arielle Gray. Sound is by Palace Shaw. The *Future Archives* project is a community-based exhibition at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.