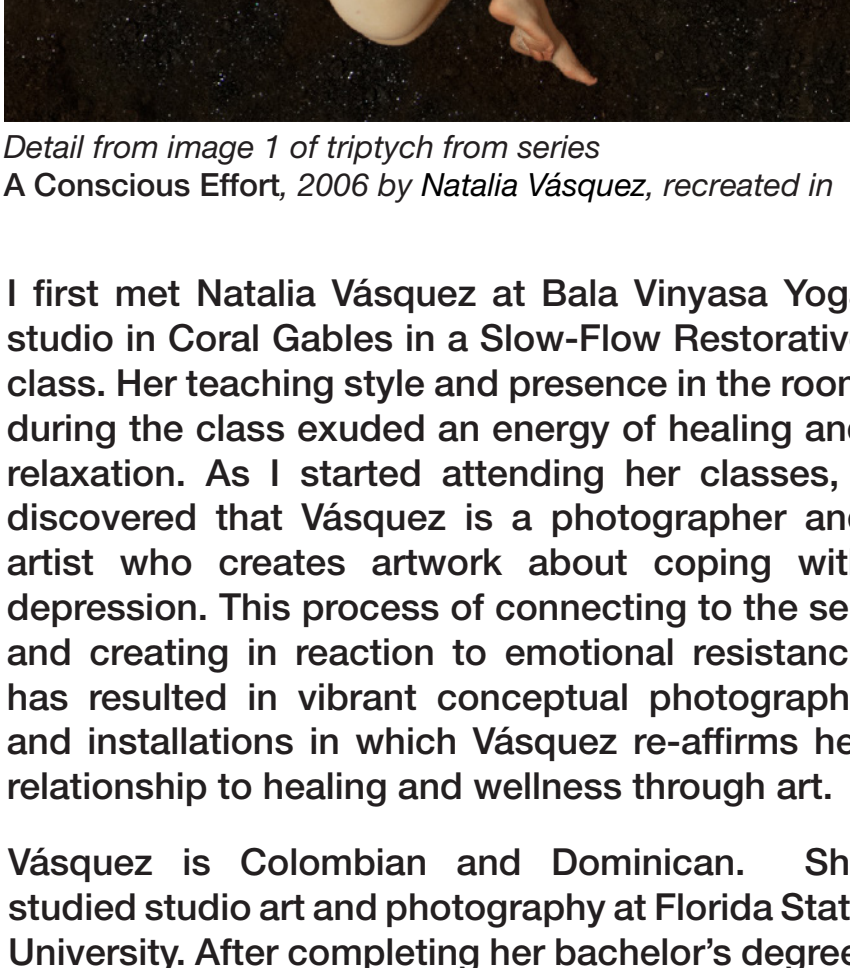


# The Art of Healing: A Discussion with Natalia Vásquez

By Brittni Winkler



*Detail from image 1 of triptych from series A Conscious Effort, 2006 by Natalia Vásquez, recreated in*

I first met Natalia Vásquez at Bala Vinyasa Yoga studio in Coral Gables in a Slow-Flow Restorative class. Her teaching style and presence in the room during the class exuded an energy of healing and relaxation. As I started attending her classes, I discovered that Vásquez is a photographer and artist who creates artwork about coping with depression. This process of connecting to the self and creating in reaction to emotional resistance has resulted in vibrant conceptual photographs and installations in which Vásquez re-affirms her relationship to healing and wellness through art.

Vásquez is Colombian and Dominican. She studied studio art and photography at Florida State University. After completing her bachelor's degree, she left the academic system because she felt that creating work independently would be better than being misguided by a conservative system of training that forces students to constantly produce, almost without meaning. Since her artworks deal with very personal and emotional states of being, Vásquez's decision to create artworks through her own initiative, rather than as a response to attaining a degree or qualification, has enabled her work to blossom over the years in an organic manner that has been true to her personal process.

**Brittni Winkler:** Explain how your work relates to the theme "art as healing and wellness."

**Natalia Vásquez:** Photography saved my life. Since childhood, my camera has bridged my internal and external worlds. It has guided me through my surroundings and assisted me in social situations. It has shown me different ways of existing in the world and has helped me understand and accept my emotions. In my hardest days, it gave me a reason to leave the house when nothing else would.

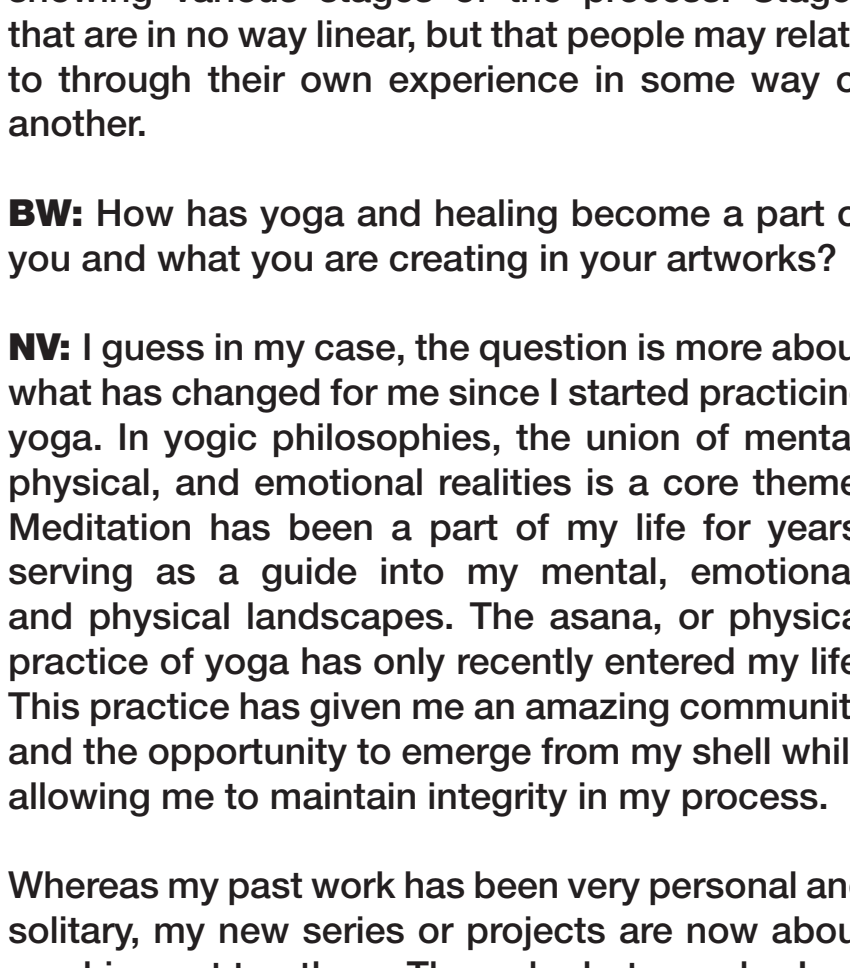
Studying and eventually teaching the work of other photographers has been a way for me to connect with their experiences as well as those of their subjects, and has inspired me to process and share my own.

Over the years, I've attempted to show stages of healing in my photography and installation practice. Having survived trauma and deep depression during which I turned my gaze inward by necessity, I realized that looking at my own emotions, dreams, nightmares, anxieties, and fears, would lead me to my authentic self. That it would lead me to internal peace. And as an artist, that process and that voice are what I aim to express.

Turning inward forced me to perceive the realities behind social masks. And it made me realize that when it comes to matters of the heart, we are all the same.

In my photographs, I explore themes of psycho-spiritual transformation manifested in objects and spaces. I am interested in the poetry of everyday things and their ability to embody complex concepts and emotions. I am particularly intrigued by trans-cultural spaces and objects related to childhood and suppressed narratives around trauma and abuse.

In my artwork, I've also used mantras that were an important part of my personal healing process. Phrases such as "let go" and "everything is ok," which I scribbled on mirrors and walls were later photographed or used in installations.



*Let Go, 2008 by Natalia Vásquez - a mantra written on a mirror found on the streets of Prague*

The most important thing for me throughout the years has been finding a platform for this work within the contemporary art world. It is easy for work that focuses on themes of healing to be mislabeled and dismissed. Carelessly thrown into categories of art therapy, naive or outsider art, or basically art that is unsuccessful or uncritical, it often functions on the periphery of the professional contemporary art world. Art therapy and outsider art have their important places, roles and immense value, but I am interested in having conversations about mental health and healing in the contemporary art world context. The suppression in contemporary art of these "shameful" perspectives directly mirrors their suppression in mainstream society.

**BW:** Which of your artworks resonates most with you and why?

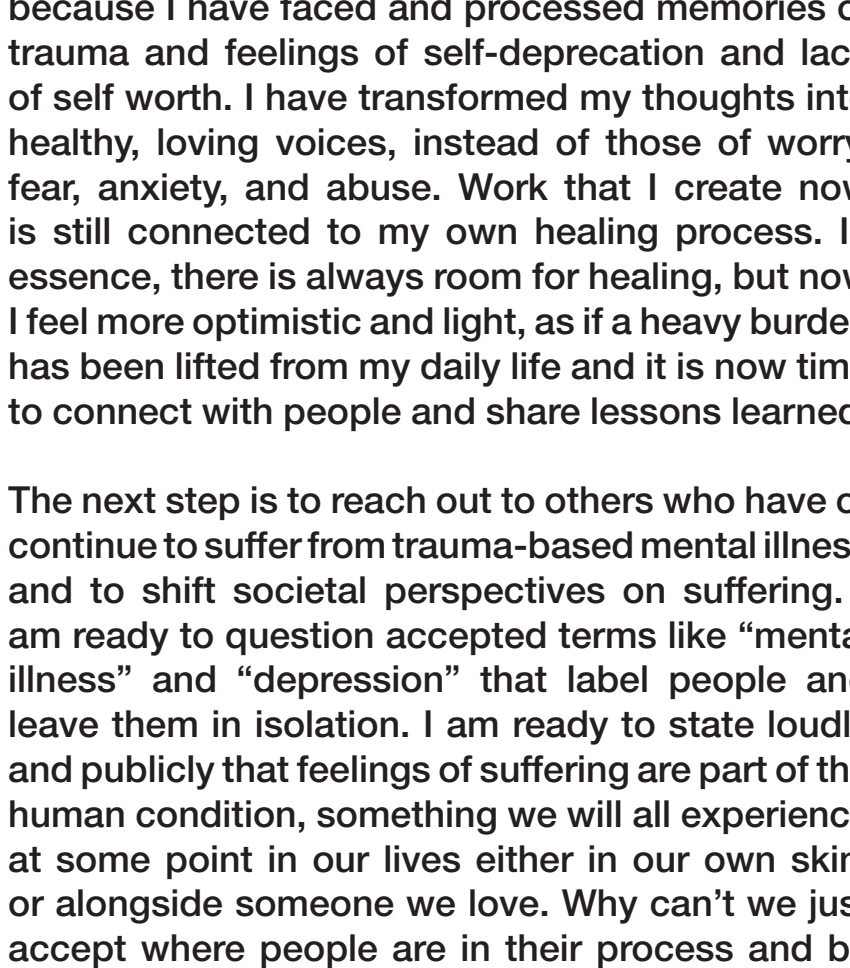
**NV:** The triptych "A Conscious Effort" shows three very important stages of the healing process. The first stage is that of being bound and that can refer to anything from a feeling, thought or idea about ourselves or something more concrete like being in an abusive relationship or addicted to a substance of any kind. The second is that of the struggle towards liberation. The "waking up" part when we realize that we have been bound, but are unsure of how to attain freedom. All we know is we need to move. The third stage shown in this series is that of sleep and rest. Often overlooked, this is a crucial element for a complete recovery.

This is only the beginning of more work to come showing various stages of the process. Stages that are in no way linear, but that people may relate to through their own experience in some way or another.

**BW:** How has yoga and healing become a part of you and what you are creating in your artworks?

**NV:** I guess in my case, the question is more about what has changed for me since I started practicing yoga. In yogic philosophies, the union of mental, physical, and emotional realities is a core theme. Meditation has been a part of my life for years, serving as a guide into my mental, emotional, and physical landscapes. The asana, or physical practice of yoga has only recently entered my life. This practice has given me an amazing community and the opportunity to emerge from my shell while allowing me to maintain integrity in my process.

Whereas my past work has been very personal and solitary, my new series or projects are now about reaching out to others. Through photography, I am ready to interact with individuals and organizations also focusing on healing. Yoga has helped me see that the time to connect is now.



*Installation view of Natalia Vásquez's solo exhibition that focused on the light at the [art]SPACE in Prague, 2012*

**BW:** Discuss the light-boxes, their exhibition history and why you created them. The emphasis on bringing light to objects that would normally go under-appreciated, etc.

**NV:** The light-boxes were made during my time living in Prague. The series *The Impermanence of Beauty* (As a Feeling) became an installation where I made photographic objects from found drawers. The images were selected from hundreds [of photographs] collected over several years. In this series, a compilation of photographs taken during depressive wanderings, I bring attention to glimpses of light in the external environment. A focus on the "light at the end of the tunnel" of sorts. Each photograph holds a memory of a specific time and place that I desperately tried to hold on to, a fearful reaction to what, at the time, felt like my life slipping through my hands.

Drawers are spaces where things become lost and forgotten, put away for safekeeping and unintentionally thrown into the wasteland of material excess. Most of the drawers I used were found on the street and in an abandoned warehouse space. I brought them back to life by framing fragile photographic memories in them and adding light. They were exhibited in Prague at the [art]SPACE in Anglo-American University. The solo show was called *Focus on the Light*, curated by Christina Gigliotti. Another "light-object," this time created from an abandoned kitchen sink, was exhibited at Galerie Califfa in Horážd'ovice, also in the Czech Republic. The image is a "ribcage" in the snow and the faucet falls over it, as if to defrost, cleanse, and flush it through. It was part of a group exhibition curated by Tony Ozuna called *Rituals and Sacred Spaces*. Ribcages, along with hearts, spines, and brains are recurring symbols in my work and I am constantly in search of these images in the environment.

Bringing symbolism and aesthetic function back into discarded domestic objects ties in to the idea of new beginnings, a theme important in the conversation about healing.



*Ribcage, 2012 by Natalia Vásquez*

**BW:** Do you believe that form is always disembodied before it becomes concrete? Do people create their own realities for themselves?

**NV:** In my experience, form begins with an idea, an inner vision, a desire. Often, images inside my mind begin to solidify before materials come into play. Thinking and visualizing based on a concept eventually leads to a stage of creation, a manifestation, an embodiment of sorts. Other times, the objects already exist, carrying a certain energy or feeling, which resonates with my flow of ideas and concepts.

Thoughts lead to the outcome of a situation. Whether it's having an idea and later, seemingly at random on the street, finding the perfect object to match that idea — or something bigger like the way we live our lives. Yes, I believe that we create our own realities.

**BW:** Discuss how your work and its subject matter have evolved.

**NV:** In the past decade, my work has been closely tied to my subjective experience. A step-by-step documentation of an internal process so profound, that the work actually served as a lifeline. I was creating to make sense of what I was experiencing.

In the series *Drowning Is*, I explored themes of being submerged, unable to breathe. It was in reaction to my dear friends' death by drowning and also feelings that affected my day-to-day reality at the time and for years that followed.

The person I am now is different from who I was then because I have faced and processed memories of trauma and feelings of self-deprecation and lack of self worth. I have transformed my thoughts into healthy, loving voices, instead of those of worry, fear, anxiety, and abuse. Work that I create now is still connected to my own healing process. In essence, there is always room for healing, but now I feel more optimistic and light, as if a heavy burden has been lifted from my daily life and it is now time to connect with people and share lessons learned.

The next step is to reach out to others who have or continue to suffer from trauma-based mental illness and to shift societal perspectives on suffering. I am ready to question accepted terms like "mental illness" and "depression" that label people and leave them in isolation. I am ready to state loudly and publicly that feelings of suffering are part of the human condition, something we will all experience at some point in our lives either in our own skin, or alongside someone we love. Why can't we just accept where people are in their process and be more empathetic and understanding instead of stuffing them in a box and labeling them?

I'd like to create space for people to share their stories and experiences via a creative outlet. Through portraiture and storytelling, I want to show the faces of those who have survived trauma and abuse and reveal how they arrived to where they are today.

Now that I have found a sense of clarity in some of the various stages of healing, I will continue to create work that highlights and poetically brings them to light. I'd like to make photographs, objects, and installations that highlight the beauty in the dark and light sides of our mental, emotional, and physical landscapes.

Yoga offers a sense of universality to our human experience. It helps us bridge the deeply personal with the experiences of members of our global community.

My aim is to incorporate these concepts into the contemporary art world.

**BW:** What community/audience do you hope to reach with your work? Or is this purely for your own self-reflection?

**NV:** My dream is to reach at least one person in a state of suffering who can see the photographs or installations and find hope within themselves to carry on, to keep on living, to realize that they are not alone.

Through my work, I'd like to engage in dialogue that brings more awareness to mental illness and converts the stigma around it into social mindfulness and support. Suffering teaches us many valuable lessons when we are ready to listen, but it is not a permanent state and by no means, a defect, in any individual. I believe that the answers lie within each person and this is what I want to promote via my artistic and yoga practices, along with my teachings.

It would be wonderful to connect with the photographic and artistic community at large and collaborate with other creators interested in themes of mental health and well-being. As artists we have the power to shine light on deeply ingrained beliefs that no longer serve members of our society. We can potentially shift an entire system by creating a safe space for people to reveal and heal their wounds, instead of remaining in shame and darkness.

Together we can eliminate stigma and raise awareness. We can come out of our own shadow and create understanding and connection. ■



*Everything Is OK, 2012 by Natalia Vásquez detail from installation at Galerie Califfa in Horážd'ovice, Czech Republic*