



Interview with Artist Dahlia Dreszer: On Relishing Color and Layered Belonging by Amaris Cruz-Guerrero

*In partnership with Green Space Miami, the Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) proudly highlights the work of Miami-based artist **Dahlia Dreszer**, whose exhibition *Bringing the Outside In* explores themes of migration, memory, identity, and cultural hybridity. Born in Colombia and raised in Panama, Dreszer draws from her own diasporic experience to create immersive, research-based installations that are not simply depictions of natural scenery. This landscape serves as the perfect metaphor for real and imagined worlds. Through alluring, layered compositions that integrate rescued flowers, family heirlooms, textiles, and the innovative integration of AI into the exhibition, timely conversations on technology, adaptation, and identity are also opened.*

To learn more about Dreszer's work, the thinking behind this body of work, her distinctive use of color, as well as how she is working with AI, Amaris Cruz-Guerrero spoke with the artist.

A.C: Can you tell us a little about your background and how you became an artist?

My family's history is rooted in migration, with a heritage of mixed migratory paths, seeking refuge from forced displacement, some migrated from Aleppo, Syria to Panama and others from Eastern Europe to Colombia. These interwoven narratives of displacement, resilience, and belonging shape my identity and the questions I ask through my practice. My grandmother, a

photographer, was my mentor and played a key role in guiding me toward photography. Our shared love for photography connected us early on, and I began taking photographs at a young age. I later pursued photography and media studies at Emory University, where I began to deepen and refine my practice through research, experimentation, and personal narrative.

I am a multidisciplinary artist, born in Colombia and raised in Panamá, working primarily in photography and installation. My work explores cultural identity, memory, and the evolving meaning of home within the diasporic experience, how we carry, adapt, and reconstruct our sense of place across generations. Through my practice, I aim to challenge traditional still life arrangements by creating a multi-dimensional environment that invites viewers to reflect on the evolving nature of cultural identity. My personal connection to these themes arises from my family heritage rooted in migration and displacement, the migratory experience of making home in between homes, and the overwhelmingness of adaptation. My process is community-driven, research-based, and experimental. I am interested in the concept of layering, physically through my compositions, but also reflecting the deep layers within ourselves. I juxtapose elements that are traditionally not seen together to tell stories about heritage and belonging. I create elaborate installations in domestic spaces incorporating rescued flowers, family heirlooms, textiles, and folk art with colors and patterns that blur reality and artifice, transporting the viewer between the familiar and other worlds. I am especially drawn to creating compositions that are rich with information, color, and detail that bleed to the edges of the frame. Through my work, I aim to reflect the transience of culture and suggest that “home” is not a fixed place, but a convergence of memories within the spaces we inhabit.

A.C: The idea of home plays a significant role in your exhibition, *Bringing the Outside In*. How do you define "home" in your practice, and how does that definition unfold throughout the installation?

For me, home isn't a fixed place, it's a layered, emotional construct shaped by memory, migration, and cultural continuity. Growing up between places and raised by immigrant parents, I experienced home as a confluence of cultures. I've never belonged fully to one place, and that in-betweenness has shaped the emotional core of my work. The sense of not fitting in entirely into one single culture but partially into many, has made me hyper-aware of the ways we carry home with us through objects, rituals, and memory. I'm drawn to what lingers in domestic space, the residue of rituals, the intimacy of objects, and the tension between comfort and confinement.

In *Bringing the Outside In*, I wanted to explore how these ideas of home, identity, and cultural memory can be made visible and immersive. The exhibition contains large-scale photographs taken in my own home or my family home; intimate, elaborate still life that use rescued flowers, textiles belonging to my family, and cultural objects to speak to themes of femininity, displacement, adaptation, heritage and migration. I didn't want the work to stay confined to the frame. A major goal was to bring the art out of the image, out of the lens, and into the viewer's

physical space. As you walk through the exhibition, you encounter botanical arrangements and tactile installations that echo the elements seen in the photographs. There's a deliberate repetition between what's pictured and what's physically present. The viewer walks among the objects, sees them both in and out of context, and is invited into a layered space where the line between reality and artifice begins to blur.

This tension, between what's real and what's not, and the subversion of expectations is central to the work. My intention, with this visual language, is to mirror the immigrant experience of facing the dualities of what belongs and what does not belong. The constant decisioning of what to keep and what to leave behind, and what becomes of us through that process. The images are highly stylized and intentionally dream-like at first glance, yet everything in them is captured directly through the lens without post-production. That choice felt important for this body of work.

A.C: How do you navigate the blending of your Panamanian roots and Jewish heritage, and how do they inform the visual language of your pieces? How do these contrasts speak to your sense of cultural identity?

In Judaism, the home is filled with meaning through objects; Shabbat candles lit every Friday, a Mezuzah on every doorpost, the Shabbat table set with intention. These aren't just decorative, they're vessels that represent a connection to community, family, memory, tradition, and identity. I grew up surrounded by these markers, and they informed my exploration of how physical objects carry spiritual and emotional weight.

At the same time, growing up in Panama exposed me to a rich visual and cultural landscape deeply tied to color, nature, and indigenous heritage. From a young age, I was exposed to the "Mola", a hand-made vibrant textile woven by Kuna Yala indigenous women of Panama, crafted by layering multiple pieces of fabric. Each mola is filled edge to edge with color and design. Their visual density mirrors the way I compose my photographs, layered, detailed, and rich with information border to border. Incorporating molas into my work is a way of creating a direct dialogue with my Panamanian identity and surfacing underrepresented cultural traditions. Rather than choose one identity over another, my work embraces this hybridity of dual resonance. My visual language is intentionally layered, maximalist, and filled with tension

The layering of culturally significant items from different traditions mirrors my own experience of navigating multiple identities simultaneously. I aim to embrace the contradictions and lean into the juxtaposition. My installations create a visual dialogue between these traditions, suggesting that identity is not singular or static, but a composite of memory, adaptation, and lived experience.

A.C: Your collaboration with AI is an interesting aspect of your work. How does AI help you explore themes of preservation and evolution in your art?

I am very interested in engaging in conversations around the convergence of technology, art, and nature. I have developed an AI generated version of myself, or Clone Dahlia. This AI clone is a way for me to explore the idea of simulated presence. What does it mean to interact with someone who isn't physically there, but who feels emotionally and intellectually present? The clone was trained on the ideas and materials from the show and project, 'Bringing the Outside In'. It was formally introduced during a panel I hosted and moderated called Gen- AI in the Arts at Green Space. Which was part of the curated programming and series of events throughout the course of the exhibition.

My clone is not always on display; it's more of a special experience I bring out when the context invites deeper dialogue. It's part of my broader interest in adaptation, how we as individuals, and as a society, are constantly adjusting to displacement, transformation, and now, emerging technologies. This ties closely to my personal story of migration and cultural shifts, and how my family and I have always had to adapt to new environments. By introducing disruptive and novel technologies in unique ways leveraging Gen-AI in certain parts of the exhibition experience, my intention is not just to showcase a tool, rather open a conversation about how we connect and how we preserve identity.

A common thread in my work is the act of decontextualizing and recontextualizing, taking familiar materials, symbols, or images and placing them in new frameworks to shift perception. I see Generative AI as another medium through which I can continue this practice. It allows me to disrupt expectations, repurpose meaning, and build new narratives that push the boundaries of how we understand both art and identity.

A.C: How does the tension between the real and the artifice engage with your work?

Growing up in Panama, the idea of what was considered *normal* felt rigid and clearly defined. But as I migrated and moved through different environments, those definitions kept shifting. What felt certain in one place became unfamiliar in another. That sense of instability, of being in constant flux, has stayed with me, and it shows up in the way I think about perception, reality, and the assumptions we carry.

My identity was always being reinterpreted depending on where I was. That experience of being questioned, of not fitting neatly into categories, led me to create work that does the same, it invites doubt, double takes, and re-evaluation. I'm drawn to images that ask the viewer to look again. At first glance, what you see might feel too composed to be real. But nothing is digitally manipulated, everything is captured directly through the lens using physical objects, textiles,

botanical elements, and natural light. That becomes part of the tension: what's imagined, what's lived, and where those lines blur.

I use recurring materials, flowers, textiles, symbolic objects, not as decoration, but as intentional references. They appear both in the photographs and in the exhibition space itself. The same chair I sit on in the self-portrait piece is placed in the exhibition space, surrounded by the same textiles and objects found in the framed pieces. By bringing these elements into the physical space, the viewer is invited to step inside the frame, to move through the work rather than just observe it.

The entire exhibition becomes an immersive experience, filled with clues, visual, emotional, symbolic, for the viewer to uncover. It's both a window into my process and a breakdown of the illusion. The tension between the real and the artifice isn't just conceptual, it's literal. You're seeing the exact materials used to construct the image, now removed from the frame and placed in front of you. It's about letting the viewer become part of the work, but also putting the process itself on display, reminding us that what may appear surreal is often grounded in something deeply real. That's where my work lives: in that layered space where meaning isn't handed to you but found through exploration.

A.C: You mentioned that flowers are a significant part of your identity. Are there any particular plants that are tethered to your narratives? What qualities attract you to a particular flower or plant?

Yes, Dahlias and red roses are deeply woven into my personal story. My name is Dahlia, and it was my grandmother, Lily R. Rose, who influenced the name. When my mother was pregnant with me, my grandmother would send her Dahlia seeds. My grandmother was obsessed with flowers. Her name, Lily R. Rose, was something she chose later in life, and she lived fully into it. She would grow roses in her garden, and after I was born, she started growing Dahlias too. She surrounded herself with them. And now, after her passing, I find myself dressing in florals, surrounding myself with them in my own way, as a quiet homage to her. When she was alive, photography was a way to connect with her. And now, it still is. Red roses are especially meaningful. She always wore red, red lipstick, red scarves, and floral prints. So when I work with flowers today, I'm also working with memory.

I am also drawn to the process of working with flowers as a material. I collect discarded flowers after weddings, at midnight, just before they're thrown away. I bring them back into my studio, and photograph them while they're still fresh. Then I dry them and preserve them. That act of preserving the flowers speaks to memory, care, ecology, and honoring what's often overlooked. My grandmother was someone who deeply valued preservation, she hated waste. For me, rescuing and preserving flowers is an extension of what she taught me. I'm giving them a second life, holding onto them the way I hold onto her memory.

In *Bringing the Outside In*, the same flowers from the photographs are physically present in the installation. They continue aging in front of the viewer. That's intentional. I want people to witness beauty as it fades, to sit with that discomfort, to see aging not as loss, but as transformation. Flowers carry the stories of the women in my family. They're my material, my memory, and my medium. They hold joy and grief at once.

A.C: You work with a very striking palette – how do you approach using color?

I see the world through color. Even though my work deals with heavy themes; migration, loss, identity, displacement, I don't approach those subjects through darkness. I see life through brightness and color. That perspective comes from my grandmother, Lily R. Rose, who's outlook was positive and bright, one of her sayings was "Think Red" to think positive. In my life, bright colors were associated with positivity and gratitude.

From the Latin American perspective, growing up in Panama, I was constantly surrounded by color. The land itself is vibrant, plants, the sea, the light. There's a certain brightness to life in the tropics. Our culture is also very expressive; in the way we dress with bright adornments and vivid colors. I was also exposed to the Guna people and their unique colorfulness, their dress is so vibrant, so layered with color. That stayed with me.

My earlier project, *Invisible Cities*, was actually built around color. I would travel to colorful cities and study their architecture, but also the cultural sense of color, how color shaped a place's personality and rhythm. That idea of color being more than just visual, being cultural, emotional, symbolic has always been part of how I work. Color theory plays a huge role in all my work. Color, for me, isn't just aesthetic, it's conceptual. It's inherited, observed, remembered. It's tied to land, heritage, and emotion. It's how I process the world, and how I invite others into it.

(D. Dreszer, personal interview, April 21, 2025)