

Cheremoya

RTO

VANESSA GULLY SANTIAGO

MAY 17 - JUNE 28, 2025

Immersed in screenglow chiaroscuro and off-hours hues, Vanessa Gully Santiago's paintings reconnoiter the framework of labor and its psychosexual residue under the imperative of RTO: Return to Office. Against this renewed mandate, her works stage the entrapments of corporate life through a vespertine procession of devices and disarticulated limbs caught in loops of self-fashioning and submissive self-surveillance.

Her subjects, women entangled with air purifiers, collapsed in boardrooms, wrapped around inert peripherals, borrow from Alex Bag's passive-aggressive agency and Alina Szapocznikow's procedural eroticism, but with the added dystopian veneer of deep digital fatigue; you can nearly feel the blue light pooling under their eyelids. If Edward Hopper radiates as an anticipatory reference, so too do the twilit hermeticism of Honoré Desmond Sharrer, the surrealist nocturnes of Miriam Tindall Smith, and the institutional reverie of Bernard Perlin's hospital paintings. Gully Santiago locates her figures in a similarly heterotopic and suspended realm; dispersed across offices, bedrooms, and the continuous glow of graphics, they inhabit what might be labeled an eroticization of la perruque: a tactical, libidinal meandering through institutional constructs that perforate work and leisure.

Where Michel de Certeau once mapped the poetics of pedestrian errancy, Gully Santiago's figures navigate corridors where one's body is both asset and relic. As Laurent de Sutter theorizes, "in contemporary capitalism, the ideal citizen is no longer the obedient subject but the joyful accomplice."¹ Gully Santiago takes this a step farther. In *Overtime*, supine in a corral of desk space, a woman liaises with a printer. It's telling that here, as in *Dyson Purifier Humidity + Cool PH03* and *Dyson Purifier Cool Gen 1 TP10*, the machine becomes the site of embrace, preferred, understandably, to the men who occasionally surface in her compositions as stand-ins for the system itself.

While implicitly staged as a feminist rejoinder to the relocation of labor, the paintings complicate any easy parsing of libidinal displacement; blurring function and intimacy, they are equally ambiguous in their distinctions between a corporatized Stockholm syndrome and a wet opposition to the gutless connectivity of 'smart' objects shrouded in ergonomic plastics. Gully Santiago's paintings suggest a critique of technologization that retains a tenderness toward its failures. Rather than resist their entanglement with these interfaces, some of her women linger inside it (and, *vice versa*); whatever they're feeling, it's irreducible to an exhibition text.

In *5:10 am*, a woman sits at her desk beneath an aquarium of documents and open tabs, surrounded by screens that, definitively, watch her back.

¹ Laurent de Sutter, *After Law* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), p. 47.

Each velvety scene is a gloaming recursion of an ambient constant distributed across LinkedIn feeds, seated in the fiber of Herman Miller chairs as meshy as WiFi. The specific times in Gully Santiago's titles—12:45 am, 3:22 pm, 6:07 am—index the always-on world of urban anomie, where pause does not promise rest so much as the fugue state of embodied buffering. For all this techno-eldritch disassociation and cubicle hauntology, for anyone who has worked long hours and wondered why the copier's printing a novella of lorem ipsums, her images lie on the uncanny edge of familiarity.

Although these paintings arrive in the long shadow of the return-to-office mandate, they resist the didactic certitudes of social critique. One could parse that the works channel what Mark Alizart names “an aesthetics of submission,”² subsuming appearances into the slow, sensorial coercions of affective labor under the disciplinary glow of a screen's governing. Yet Daisy Lafarge would complicate this reading: “Desire...resides not in acquisition or climax but in ambient accumulation, in the careful reconstitution of attention after it has been spent.”³ Seemingly registering this auto-oppositionality, several images—*Efficiency*, *FaceTime*, and *Workplace Flexibility*—feature women in states of literal disassembly, echoing the psychically flattened and atomized figures of Dana Schutz, Ambera Wellmann, and Dorothea Tanning, as if riven by the phantom vibration of their work phones.

There may be no outside to the corporate imaginary, but there are still sources of pleasure, not least in the delicacy of the painterly hand and depictions of task-untethered object intimacy. While the works register that “flexibility,” once marketed as the emancipatory promise of telecommuting, is just a gentler kind of handcuff, they do make space for implied sites of exception. In *12:45 am*, a woman on a phone call gestures towards a third space, a possible exit from her Slack thread. A seam loosens; we have the hint of escape. *Typing ...*

Vanessa Gully Santiago (b. 1984 in Boston, MA) lives and works in Queens, NY. The artist gained her BFA from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in 2006 and her MFA from The Mason Gross School of Art at Rutgers University in 2013. Solo and two-person exhibitions: Cheremoya, Los Angeles (2025); James Fuentes, New York (2022); James Fuentes, Online (2020); Jack Barrett, Brooklyn (2018); Thierry Goldberg, New York (2017); and American Medium, Brooklyn (2016). Selected group exhibitions: Turley Gallery, Hudson (2025); Andrea Festa, Rome (2024), Collaborations, Copenhagen (2023); Europa, New York (2023); The Green Gallery, Milwaukee (2021); Rachel Uffner, New York (2021); Mrs. Gallery, Queens (2021); In Lieu, Los Angeles (2020); Embajada, San Juan (2020); Assembly Room, New York (2019); Sibling, Toronto (2019); Helena Anrather, New York (2018); JTT, New York (2018); Marinaro, New York (2018); Charles Moffett, New York (2018); Foxy Production, New York (2017); Deli Gallery, Queens (2017); C. Grimaldis, Baltimore (2017); Smart Objects, Los Angeles (2017); 247365, New York (2016); Situation Room, Los Angeles (2015); and Bruce High Quality Foundation, New York (2014). Her work has been featured in *Artforum*, *ArtNews*, *Forbes*, *The Observer*, *The New Yorker*, and *Nylon*, among other publications.

² Mark Alizart, *The Climate Coup* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), p. 63.

³ Daisy Lafarge, *Life Without Air* (London: Granta, 2020), p. 112.