Di•as•po•ra: Displaced, not erased.

Betty Álvarez
University of Louisville

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DI•AS•PO•RA
DISPLACED, NOT ERASED.

By

Betty Álvarez
B.A., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2013

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Collage of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in
Studio Art and Design

Department of Arts and Design
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2022
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A Thesis Approved on
March 25, 2022

by the following Thesis Advisory Committee:

___________________
Ying Chan

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Margath Walker

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Rachel Singel
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mom

Leonor Elizabeth Flamenco Álvarez

who has given me invaluable educational opportunities
and a life worth living.

and to my sisters Leonor and Karla

who helped raise me and taught me how to be the person I am today.
Thank you for always encouraging me and thinking I could accomplish anything.

and to my partner

Dalton Wayne Murphy

for loving me unconditionally and supporting me throughout this entire process.
I couldn’t have done this without you.
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This thesis is based on my artistic endeavors and research founded in my culture, family, the history of the United States government’s intervention in El Salvador, and the current political climate Latin Americans face today in the United States. I work within multiple mediums to resurrect pieces of my culture that are being forgotten or left behind due to assimilation. I accomplish this through revisiting and reinterpreting traditions. I aim to bring awareness of the Latin experience in a racially divided United States through artistic expression and my own personal experiences. My works are made to feel whimsical and playful, but convey the heavy burden of passing down cultures while fighting to be seen. Each work reflects a part of my culture & heritage, leading to my own personal awakening with both concepts. My artwork includes mixed-media, installation, printmaking, paintings, and fibers with a focus on traditions within art.
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INTRODUCTION

Oftentimes when there is an occurrence of migration from one country to another in hopes of finding a better life and safer living conditions, there is a need to adjust to the customs of the new country in order to easily move between cultures and be recognized as similar in relation to the citizens of the new country. They must first learn how to speak the language, what the societal norms are, and then must adapt to the living conditions. There is a need for survival at all levels. No one picks up their children and travels across dangerous border lines seeking freedom if the home they left wasn’t an even bigger threat to their livelihood. Just as Warsan Shire said in her poem Home, “No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.” People seek refuge for a variety of reasons; violence, political unrest, crime, war, lack of resources, or to flee persecution. Most second and third world countries are in this state of disarray because a first world power came in wanting their natural resources to gain wealth, wanting to change the leaders in their government in favor of one they like and can control, to gain land in a region important to their world dominance, or to control the people living there since the colonial powers see them as lesser than and disposable. Growing up, I thought that the United States only intervened in the control of the government of El Salvador, where my parents migrated from. I truly believed the abuse and political unrest of the Salvadoran people due to American intervention was a rare
instance. In the American education system we are taught how brave and strong the military is in the United States, that they only go to war to free others, to liberate the masses that are being downtrodden on. That is simply a lie. A government with power and strength will always take advantage of weaker governments because they can. The world is a chess game, and each move made is made to get closer to controlling more and more. The United States does not help and give aid without demanding reciprocation in some form. We can see the civil unrest throughout the history of Latin America after the Spanish conquest and how governments formed afterwards have not been able to last long without international intervention and military coups. This is not exclusive to only Latin America, but a worldwide predicament for developing countries caused by imperialist powers. My research is focused on the culture of El Salvador, but it is additionally founded in uncovering the relationship between the United States and El Salvador to further discover and understand my own culture, what led to my parents uprooting our family to this country, and the perception people have of immigrants. As I uncover new truths I begin to gain critical knowledge into what led my parents to behave and act the way they do, which grants me insight into how I was raised and the reasons we’ve had to abandon parts of our culture in order to assimilate and feel safe from racial persecution as an immigrant family. The aim in my art is to tell a story of the trials and current political, socio-economic, and racial injustices I, and many other people of color, face in this current political climate in the United States. There has been a recent emergence in how racially divided this country is, which was caused by the former leader of this country encouraging racial persecution and violence. This is the reason I chose to
continue my education and pursue the arts again. I can think of no better way to speak up than to lament my history, culture, and myself into the arts to create a platform and safe haven for people of color who suffer from these challenges. Throughout my time researching, I’ve come to uncover that being a first generation American creates a feeling of being displaced, and lost in between two cultures; the culture of the land we came from and the culture of America. We, children of immigrants and first generation Americans, are left to maneuver in a world that sees us as too different on either side. We are never seen as enough in either culture which then leads us to create a new culture with an essence of both we’ve been born into. The life of an immigrant child is very different from that of any other child. We grow up having to find pieces of ourselves while helping our parents navigate a new country; my artwork’s purpose is to tell that story and forge a path for those who come after. We are displaced by our circumstances, but we will not be erased and we will not let go of the pieces of our culture that have shaped us and made us different. Reoccurring themes in my works of art are color, assimilation, heritage, culture, migration, mental health, past traumas, femininity, womanism, and socio-economic status. These themes bring me back to my center and guide me to making works of art that help and affect others in a positive manner. These are things that need to be discussed, we must have conversations about our struggles in order to understand how to fix them and grow from these challenges. There is a stigma that comes with caring about mental healthcare and the treatments that come with it, that is something that has always made me feel uncomfortable that I must address in my art. Learning about our past helps push us forward. These themes all come together to form
my basis in thought. Art is meant to provoke and inspire, I choose to do this through my storytelling in my artworks. By using narrative language I can aid viewers in understanding my works. My hope is that my audience will be able to relate due to similar backgrounds and struggles, or they will gain a new insight into the world and life of someone who isn’t like them. As I work to create an empowering space for people of color, I am working to keep traditions alive by continuing these art processes and delving deeper and deeper into the culture I’ve lost along the way.
HISTORY OF COLONIZATION AND U.S. INTERVENTION WITHIN EL SALVADOR

To understand my art and my position within the spectrum of the art world, we must first discuss the impact the United States government has had on the country of El Salvador, which is reflective of the U.S.’s relationship with Latin America as a whole. El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America known primarily for its violence rather than its beauty and culture. The United States intervention throughout the history of liberated (free of Spanish colonial rule) El Salvador is constant and has undermined the potential for the success of the country. Throughout its history, El Salvador went through many political and governmental changes. The instability of their politics and economy led to revolts and coups which led the way for authoritarian rule. As with any developing nation, there was corruption. Power lay in the hands of the few wealthy elites. Foreign interests were at the forefront of decision making and legislation. This, of course, led to persistent socioeconomic inequality and civil unrest for those who wanted change. Factions within society eventually prompted the Salvadoran Civil War, which lasted from 1979 to 1992, fought by left-wing guerrilla groups against the United States-backed military government of El Salvador (Haskin). I believe that if the United States had not intervened with assassinations, coups, or funded the authoritarian, military-led government of El Salvador and allowed the citizens of El Salvador to make legislation
without interference of foreign interests there would have been no need for a civil war or the political unrest which has lasted for decades.

Geographically, El Salvador shares its borders with Guatemala and Honduras, sitting southeast of Guatemala, and southwest of Honduras. To the south, the coast of El Salvador hugs the Pacific Ocean. El Salvador is known for its many rivers and volcanoes, which make the soil nutrient-dense and perfect for farming. El Salvador is roughly twenty-two thousand and forty-one square kilometers in size, which is roughly the size of Massachusetts in the United States, making it the smallest country in Central America (Beverley). Thinking of its size in relation to the United States, we can see how much smaller El Salvador is and how easy it would be for a country the size of the United States to influence and dominate El Salvador. The two countries are relatively close in proximity which makes the ease of controlling El Salvador more beneficial for the United States. El Salvador is the smallest, but most densely populated country in Central America, and all of Latin America. There is a long history of injustices, including ethnocide, of the indigenous peoples of El Salvador, from Spanish colonial times to the Salvadoran Civil War. Before the Spanish conquests of Latin America, there were three major groups of indigenous peoples in El Salvador who thrived for thousands of years, the Pipiles, the Lencans, and the Mayans. To avoid persecution by the oligarchy and the government, the indigenous peoples refused to pass down traditions and languages to their descendants. They even abandoned their traditional clothing to not be easily identified and tied to their ancestry. In modern day El Salvador, about 90% of the population is Mestizo which is a mix of Spanish and indigenous descent (Beverley).
Social unrest grew in El Salvador due to the abuses of the political class system and the broad social inequality between landowners and the indigenous peoples of El Salvador. Military Dictatorships lasted in El Salvador from 1931, when Hernandez Martinez took power, until 1979, the year the civil war began. From 1931 to 1979 there was a succession of leaders overthrown by coup d’états and replaced with other military leaders. Most of the coups were funded by oligarchs or the United States government who wanted more power and control over the country. The reason the United States wanted to muddle in the affairs of El Salvador is due to the fear the U.S. government had that a Communist leader could take control of the government or become easily influenced by a foreign communist country. El Salvador became extremely entangled with the U.S. Government under President Rivera Carballo and allowed them to influence Salvadoran policies and programs. Socialism was gaining momentum in El Salvador due to the injustices suffered by those living in poverty and being forced to work on farms for little to no pay by wealthy oligarchs who had taken their land from them. The Salvadoran Civil war lasted from October 1979 until January 1992. The civil war was mainly fought between the military-led government of El Salvador which was being funded by the United States and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The Salvadoran Civil War was a culmination of the decades long struggle against the military led government that only benefited the wealthy elites and the military. The peasant majority had suffered long enough at the hands of the government and had finally found a way to challenge them through organizing. Throughout the 1980s we see much more obvious involvement from the United States with military training, military advisors
working within the Salvadoran army, and funding to aid in the Salvadoran military. In 1981, the Salvadoran army employed the use of the “scorched earth” tactic used in the Vietnam War by the U.S. military. This technique of burning anything valuable and in sight was taught to them by U.S. military advisors. An important component of the Salvadoran army’s counterinsurgency strategy was to “drain the sea” which meant eradicating anyone who stood in their way, and anyone who supported their opposition: the FMLN. The aim of this violent action was to displace or kill civilians. These sweeps happened throughout all of 1981, mostly in northern El Salvador along the Honduras border. The United States became so involved in the Salvadoran Civil War that US military personnel began taking over top level positions in the Salvadoran military in 1983 and were able to control and run the war. By 1984 the United States government had funded one billion dollars in economic aid for the Salvadoran military-led junta (Byrne). It was estimated that the government killed at least eight thousand (8,000) civilians each year between 1982 and 1983. In 1982 FMLN called for a peace settlement. The Reagan administration declared this a ploy to turn the government into a communist dictatorship. The peace settlement was rejected by the opposition, the military government. The United States had funded and supported the torture and killing of activists they believed to be communists throughout 1982, 1983, and 1984. In 1991, the U.S. President George Bush funded forty-two and a half million dollars ($42,500,000) in military aid to the Salvadoran army. There was not a cease-fire until January 1992 when the treaty Chapultepec Peace Accords of 1992 were signed. Due to the violent history of El Salvador, the United Nations monitored the peace process in El Salvador from 1991
until 1997 (Doucette). Many Salvadorans have emigrated to the US due to the aftermath of the civil war and the violent crime that still exists there today. Yet, today there are laws in place to harm the safety of Salvadoran immigrants who came here during the civil war which was fueled by the United States, these refugees now face deportation. The United States government kept El Salvador in constant peril due to their own political ideals, now El Salvador is still seen as a developing country and if it were not for the United States’ involvement El Salvador could have developed much further. Sadly, El Salvador is behind many other Latin American countries economically and politically. The country is now mainly controlled by gangs who have become political actors with intentions to continue inter-gang warfare and criminal violence on all citizens of El Salvador who are not with them. These forces plan to shape the political processes in El Salvador and eventually the entire Central American region. With this constant attack on their democracy and wellbeing, many Salvadorans are fleeing, seeking political refuge in the United States. Sadly, U.S. immigration courts continue to turn them away, yet the United States government are the ones who caused El Salvador to be in this situation without any foundation to rebuild their country with its own government and social programs (McNamara). El Salvador still has a long journey ahead of them to solve their socioeconomic inequalities and the injustices suffered at the hands of their government. I hope we can reflect on the U.S.’s involvement in El Salvador and throughout all of Latin America and see the harm this government has done to these nations, leaving them in peril.
ART PRACTICE AND EVOLUTION OF MEDIUMS

Starting my graduate career I was intently focused on painting. I wanted to elevate my culture using a traditionally Western art form that is highly regarded around the world, especially in Europe. I was doing this because I felt this need to be recognized as equal and valued by the general White American public. I have always felt an instinctual need to assimilate so I could be heard and seen, but in actuality it was making me blend into the background and the effect was the exact opposite of what my intentions were. I was trying to tell a story of my heritage in a manner that felt like an opposition to what I was trying to revive. Painting is a medium used in my culture and can be seen all over Latin America, but my original purpose for using it as my medium was deterring me from expanding upon my culture and made me realize it was no longer serving its purpose for me. Painting had gone from a therapeutic and healing medium to something I hated and something that had been used as a weapon against brown bodies, especially by the likes of White male artists, such as Gauguin. My art has gone through an evolution during my studies here and has become more focused on the interpretation of my culture through a narrative and personal point of view. I find fiber arts to be what connects me most to my childhood and is the most traditional art form from my culture that has helped me better understand my family’s history and my experiences growing up in the United States. There is so much storytelling that happens within fiber arts and that has helped shape me
during tragedy and trauma. Bringing this art form to the forefront has also begun a new chapter within my family, of my sisters and I working towards keeping these traditions alive and relearning them. It has become empowering to take back these art forms that we began to desert in order to not be seen simply as women working within a domestic realm, but in order to save artifacts we could lose forever if not practiced and passed down. I have become a teacher to my older sisters who originally wanted nothing to do with art or our traditions. These processes take time, effort, and dedication. This restoration of our culture is beginning a new healing culture, allowing us to be more emotionally open and to speak with vulnerability - something looked down upon in our culture as it is viewed as a weakness. Mental health being perceived as taboo and something not spoken about, we keep it hidden in the dark. Screen printing has also opened a door for me, and given me a new insight on how to get my message out while being more accessible. The saturated colors I am encouraged to use attract new audiences and bring joy to a space where there could potentially be sadness and ignorance. The bright and complex designs of my screen prints have allowed me to express myself in ways I would have often shied away from and concealed from others, but it feels playful and therefore I enable myself to divulge more. There is a layering process that goes on when trying to bring to life the full scope of each screen print design, each color holds its own unique layer and you must layer in accordance from lightest to darkest. It’s like a manifestation of me opening up slowly, sharing the lighthearted stories of my past until I can be fully seen and display my true scars and complete history. It is a time consuming process that demands patience and forgiveness, you have to be ready to make mistakes
and allow yourself the time and energy needed to correct the flaws. It is so physically laborious to bend over constantly and apply pressure to a squeegee to get the colors to bleed through the meshing of the screen. The process of screen printing feels ritualistic and cleansing. Screen printing and traditional Latin mediums granted me a new verbalization of my emotions, my history, and my own aspirations within American culture that showed me how to be successful in communicating my ideas to others and to a broader audience. My research is based on my culture and the history of my own family, which is reflective of many other Latin American families that have emigrated to the United States due to civil unrest and unstable governments. What shapes my art is my desire to tell my story, the story of every first generation American who is not always welcome and often pushed to the outskirts of society if we fail in assimilating. I want people who are often overlooked to feel seen and heard in my art work, to realize what makes them unique is what makes my art beautiful. I have come to the awakening of my career as a multimedia artist whose work explores my family’s history and culture, while also investigating the transitional space occupied by immigrant families assimilating into the culture of the United States, done by establishing foundations in traditional art forms.
IDENTITY WITHIN CULTURES

When I first moved to Kentucky I did not understand where I fit within the United States as an American anymore. Trump was president and everything shifted. I realized I felt a profound sense of loss that could not be replaced. I was in limbo. Not only emotionally, but culturally. I am American. I am Salvadoran. I am both, yet somehow I am not enough of either. The culture I celebrate is not the same as the culture of someone born and raised in El Salvador. My culture is not the same as what my parents experienced in El Salvador and what they passed down to me. My childhood is indefinably different from that of my siblings born in El Salvador and of anyone who had to cross a border to gain refugee and asylum. So many Salvadorans have had to flee our country because of the constant turmoil it suffers through, there are Salvadorans displaced all over the world. My culture is so different from everything I thought it was. Every day I learn more, and every day I realize what has been passed down to me is like a translation that has shifted from what was previously spoken in a native tongue. I share the culture I know, but I have begun to wonder if it is recognizable to anyone else. Is my family creating our own idea of our culture? Perhaps we are a subculture that exists in between Salvadoran and American. I am a part of a first generation American culture and subset that not many people can understand or grasp. It doesn’t just come with understanding our culture, but surviving in this unknown land with blessings my family
before me didn’t have, that my family in El Salvador will never have. I am existing in this land of wealth, but I can barely afford to live here. My mom struggles to pay rent and is still working well past retirement. My sisters struggle to be mothers and have careers. I live paycheck to paycheck and have to borrow on top of that to survive and not ask my family for money. Is this really the American dream? Can I even complain when I live here where I can buy and eat fresh food, like the fruits imported from Latin America? Can I whine when the COVID-19 vaccine is readily available and free here in the United States? Can I be upset and then go to cafes to enjoy coffee that comes from my homeland? The hardest part of trying to assimilate is working to conceal my burdens because if I express any kind of complaint, then I am dishonoring my family’s dream and everything they fought so hard for. There is so much mental anguish in trying to find our placement, yet there are basically no outlets for mental health in our society and culture as a Latina. Throughout the process of making my art I have learned that our culture is what we make it. There are traditions passed down, there are lost stories, there are choices our parents make that affect how we interpret our culture & heritage, and there are choices we make to continue these traditions or abandon them in order to assimilate, in order to survive. The art I have created is an amalgam of my cultures, being Salvadoran, American, and lost in between. This is a culture of every first generation American child who was brought over or born here by their parents and families that sacrificed so much for a dream. I am still piecing together what my culture is, it is something I will always be working towards rebuilding and nurturing. It is something that I have not only lost, but was taken from my ancestors when European nations came over
to colonize our lands. It is something that has been passed down generation after
generation, it is a trauma we must all suffer through. My art is political, emotional,
narrative, expressive, and delicate. My goal is to have something be reborn out of this, to
create an awakening in everyone who feels they have lost a bit of their home and feel lost
in this space. I exist in a very white space and I want to leave it full of color and a bit of
chaos.
ANTI-IMMIGRATION RHETORIC TOWARDS LATIN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES FUELED BY TRUMP

Using my artwork to reaffirm my place in my culture is very important and impactful for me. It is something that began as a path to self discovery and to honor my family. There are so many secrets and past experiences my parents shielded us from so we could grow up happily and safely. I know the traumas and burdens they experienced are things I will never have to face, and things I won’t ever have to prepare for. Growing up in the United States there were different forms of trauma and pain I had to endure. Racism is an unfortunate truth for people of color living in the United States. Living through the Trump administration as an adult was a very harsh reality to face. It was something most sane people would have never expected. It was so laughable that most logical Americans assumed it would never happen, and then it did. It put an unknown fear inside of me, something I did not know I would ever have to confront. The insurmountable amount of hatred the country I was born in had for me - that is what Trump winning the presidential election felt like. Trump spread harmful narratives about Latin American immigrants, his words had harsh impacts on local Latin communities. The fact that people supported this man enough to vote him into the highest power in office was too much for me, and many other Latin Americans to understand. It was this sudden rush of questioning what I do and where do I go, where do I belong. I can’t
belong here if so many people stand behind a man who is so outwardly racist and can
slew words of hatred and false narratives. Trump continuously disparaged Mexico and
Mexicans during his campaign. When doing this, he wasn’t just aiming his insults and
stereotypes solely at Mexicans, though. He was aiming it at all Latin America, because to
him we are all Mexicans. Trump is too lazy and ignorant to learn about all the different
races, ethnicities, and cultures that exist in Latin America. We are lumped into one
nationality and one race for him. To him, we are not deserving of a proper title or
population. In reference to immigrants traveling north to the United States-Mexico
border, “They are not our friends, believe me,” Trump said, “They’re bringing drugs.
They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” This quote has become emblematic of Trump’s
and the United States’ attitude towards immigrants. Trump used this defamation of Latin
Americans as his platform for presidency. He focused on igniting the racism White
Americans who strongly believe in White Supremacy had. His main promise was to build
a wall to keep immigrants out (Martinez). What Trump fails to mention is everything the
imperialistic United States and Spain, a colonial power, has done to Latin America to
make them seek asylum here. Trump’s only concern wascondoning violence upon our
brown bodies and making sure people feared immigrants. He was successful in that, and
successful in winning an election to rule one of the most powerful nations on the planet.
The initial surprise of someone so vulgar winning the presidential seat created this
instantaneous fear that corrupted my whole being: my body, my mind, my soul. I was so
scared of what that meant for me and my family. Would we suddenly be targeted, even
though we are citizens? Would I have to be careful walking around in my predominantly
white neighborhood, was I suddenly the enemy? Through all these questions hurling at me in my mind, I realized that these fears were always there, but I was just assimilated enough, eloquent enough, and educated enough to pass as one of them. I was American enough. I didn’t have an accent. I was well read and had a passion for American literature, politics, and history. I was patriotic by association since my father served in our military. I was a star pupil growing up and made sure to fit in. I never spoke Spanish in public. I did everything in my little, trembling, brown body to ensure I was as American as possible. I was one of them in my eyes. I didn’t correct my friends for making racist jokes towards me, insulting the rice and beans I ate and loved. I didn’t reprimand them when they lovingly called me a wetback, a derogatory word and a racial slur hurled at Mexicans. I didn’t object when they questioned why my sister along with her husband and kids lived with my parents and the rest of our siblings, or why my dad and mom still had accents. I felt like I owed them an explanation. I was embarrassed we had multiple generations living in our household, for no other reason that it was not the norm in the U.S. I allowed all this hatred and experienced all these microaggressions because I had to be the shining example of what being Latin looked and acted like. I had to be the perfect example of what an immigrant child should be, in my mind. I didn’t want to let anyone down, I wanted to make my family proud even though I was throwing away all of my culture to fit in. I was deliberately running away from the world my ancestors left me. I experienced microaggression after microaggression continuously. There was no end since it was acceptable then. Working in corporate America I learned to swallow my anger and accept this treatment, otherwise I wouldn’t get that promotion I
was so looking forward to. The second I show any emotion relative to anger, I am the spicy and feisty Latina who has anger problems. I am no longer Betty, but a stereotype. Everything came to a halt in my mind, I couldn’t exist in these spaces anymore. All of these feelings and instances brought me to the realization that I had to fight back. My weapon would be my artwork. I choose to be boisterous and cheeky in my art. I am unapologetically Latin. I now use my body and art as a political tool and weapon to fight back against those who don’t want me here. To fight against those who pretend to be an ally, but keep pushing me further and further back from a seat at the table. I want to make art so Latin families see themselves in a space that is usually reserved for white bodies. I want BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) to feel welcome and see some form of representation, to see pieces of their culture being highlighted as fine art, not just a domestic craft. These are art forms that are dying out in our cultures, but being taken on by white women without recognition or knowledge of where it came from. I am fighting to keep our traditions alive and preserve them so my family can leave their mark on this earth and feel proud that we never lost sight of who we are even though we’ve lost so much of our family tree and have become scattered. I do all of this to take back the power in being Latin, instead of it being used against me, I will use it to support me. It is my foundation and I am leaving my roots here in this land that tries so hard to dispel me.
TRADITIONAL SALVADORAN ARTS

When trying to provoke an emotion or thought, I often times turn to color. Especially when trying to be representative of my culture. Brightness, saturation, lavishness, and abundance of color are symbolic of being Latin. Our home spaces are full of an overwhelming sense of admiration for color. If you were to travel to any country in Latin America, you would quickly take notice of how much color there is everywhere. Homes are painted in strong, vibrant colors and store fronts are always decorated. There is lush flora everywhere and many fruits growing naturally. Everything is so beautiful and mystifying to me when I visit. I am taken aback by how much life there is and how much gratitude there is for the smallest things there. There is a true sense of community and everyone is welcome, something that feels just like home to me. These thoughts and emotions influence my art making process. Life is a celebration, and colors are highlighted to evoke this. Whenever I think of celebration, I think of piñatas and flowers made of paper or tissue paper. I chose to create two art pieces dedicated to celebration because these were staples in my childhood. I remember every birthday party we held we had to make a piñata and tissue flowers to adorn our walls and welcome our guests. Sitting with my sisters and making tissue flowers was so relaxing to me, it’s something we always did together before any big party or celebration. They were easy to make, colorful, and they added a festive feeling to our home. We would always hang them on
walls and from the ceilings. They carried this magical air about them, they were whimsical and light so any movement or air circulation made them dance. It was so fun to sit under them and watch them move while my parents and their friends danced throughout the night. I would beg my mom to leave them up or put them in my room, but she hated keeping them up. They weren’t appropriate to be displayed every day in our home, but I loved the feeling they brought me. I wanted to commemorate that feeling of nostalgia and childhood by including them in my exhibition space, allowing them to fill the room and bring some magic to the space.

A basis in any culture is food and cuisine. On the other side of these traditional meals is fast food. Fast food is something people turn to in times of necessity. Fast food allows for a quick, cheap meal. Fast food is not healthy or desirable, it does not fuel the body efficiently or make us feel good, but every now and then it is good enough. My mom didn’t have time to make a meal every night, as we got older and things got harder to balance, my mom worked more and more to support us. My father didn’t have a steady job ever in my life and my mom was left to pick up the slack. My father also didn’t cook. What we were left with in terms of nutrition was fast food. It was rare, because my mom would make huge meals and leave them for us to eat
throughout the week, but when she was unable to, my dad turned to drive-throughs. I wanted to take note of the life children in poverty live, their diets are lacking vital nutrients and are full of saturated fats and unhealthy carbohydrates. In this piece, I hope people begin to realize how impoverished populations can sometimes rely solely on fast food for their entire diet, roughly 31.7% of lower-income families consume fast food daily (Fryar). To demonstrate this statistic I decided to combine my tissue flowers with fast food wrappers. They blend perfectly together, and you can’t tell there is a wrapper from any fast food giant in the flower until you get very close to it. Once you stand under the flowers, you can see hints of logos and wrappers. I want to entice people to ponder the relationship between these festive flowers and these fast food wrappers. I find the combination of fast food wrappers with traditional tissue paper flowers is very symbolic of the mixture of cultures as well, because there is nothing more American than fast food.

Piñatas are decorative vessels decorated with tissue paper full of confetti, candies, small toys, gold chocolate coins, and glitter. Watching the piñata explode was so delightful and festive, colors would swirl around the room while children rushed to the floor to collect their prizes. This activity is often centered around children. I decided to create a piece admonishing an agency within the Department of Homeland Security, ICE, that harms not only children, but families at large. ICE, or Immigration and Customs Enforcement, can not morally defend the practices they use to keep families in custody, it is completely disastrous. ICE and the Customs and Border Protection agency are detrimental to our society which was based on our founding fathers seeking freedom from persecution and tyranny. These two agencies work hand-in-hand to harm bodies of
color and detain them. If caught at the border, children are immediately separated from their parents and placed in cages, like wild animals. They walk hundreds of miles from their home to cross the border of Mexico to find safety and opportunity, only to be greeted by violence. ICE does not singularly attack families seeking asylum at the border, though. They target anyone they see as a threat, people who are possibly working illegally or under the table without the proper visas and paperwork. There is no just way for these people to find pay and jobs without doing so, the process to attain a visa is vigorous and not aimed at helping minorities and people of color. The percentage of White migrants being granted visas and asylum versus migrants who are seen as a person of color is deafening. Colorism is a huge issue in this regard. We are even seeing this now with refugees from the Ukraine being granted asylum and people pushing to welcome them into their countries and homes. Yet, where is this welcome for people coming from Latin America, Africa, or anywhere else that is not Europe? There is a global awareness of the need to give refuge to the people of Ukraine who are under attack by Russia. People of color are looked upon like criminals, like we add nothing to the countries we would be moving to. We are seen as predatory and preying on resources, even though so many of our natural resources have been stolen away from us in the shiftiest of business deals and land ownership. An example of the gross expenditures the United States government has to show racial discrimination is the budget for ICE, which was $3.8 billion in fiscal 2017(Krogstad). Imagine the resources the American public could have with that type of funding, but instead it is used to discriminate against brown bodies and force people into dangerous living situations and conditions. The fiscal year 2017
(October 1, 2016-September 30, 2017) is when Trump stepped into the presidency, it was also shortly after taking office that Trump halted refugee admissions when the ceiling was set for about 53,700 refugees. The following year, Trump’s first full fiscal year in office, he cut the refugee ceiling to just 45,000, with the United States government only admitting 22,500 total. Trump continually set the bar lower and lower for the limit of refugees able to be admitted asylum in the United States. In the fiscal year 2019 the cap was at 30,000 and in 2020 Trump allotted a capacity of only 18,000. Every year marked a new record low for the refugee ceiling in the United States under the Trump administration. Throughout Trump’s presidency (January 20, 2017 to September 30, 2019) only around 76,200 refugees were welcomed into the United States. That’s nearly 10,000 less than the last fiscal year President Obama was in office (in 2016 about 85,000 refugees were given asylum). Since 1975, the group most disproportionately turned away is Latin Americans, with most refugees coming from Europe and Asia (Krogstad). It’s an interesting concept to see how quickly Latin Americans are turned away, and how many are hunted down to be deported. Why is there such hatred aimed at us? Why are we targeted so profusely? ICE is an agency that is almost solely focused on the Latin American population residing in the United States. In recent years, an ode, “Abolish ICE” has become a rallying cry throughout the U.S. by protesters who want to see an end to this marginalization and prejudice aimed at minority populations. This is categorically racist, something that has become so prevalent under Trump. As a way to protest, I created piñatas that spell out “Abolish ICE.” Piñatas are made in times of celebration and are meant to be destroyed, the abolition and destruction of ICE fits perfectly into this
narrative. It would be so empowering to smash these words into the ground and have that freedom again, to feel safe in seeking refuge. Each piñata stands two feet tall and are about a foot and a half wide. Abolish is decorated in rainbow tissue paper, while ICE is spelled out with red tissue paper. ICE feels angry, it feels aggressive, and it feels violent. There is no better color than red to distinguish these emotions. Using all the colors of the rainbow in the word abolish is meant to be symbolic of celebration. I wanted to create a very visual, visceral undertone in this artwork to portray to the viewer how violent this action is, not only what ICE does, but the beating of the piñatas in symbolism of how we feel beat down and pushed to the outskirts of civilization and society by the way we are condemned. Inside each piñata that spells out ice there are the commonplace items of a piñata: candy, confetti, and glitter, but in addition I’ve added blood (fake for health and safety reasons). I want to see the room filled with brightly colored confetti floating softly in the air while splatters of blood stream across the room. I find this to be appallingly cathartic for me, and hopefully for my audience.

The continuation of my work to rebuke ICE and Customs and Border Patrol is an embroidery I fashioned. I chose embroidery as my medium because of the tradition it
holds in my family. Sewing and needlework is an art form passed from generation to
generation. I was bestowed with this technical skill as a child and it is something I am
expected to pass onto others. My mother chose me for this as I was the most patient and
obedient of my siblings. Naturally being interested in the arts made it an easy transition
for my mother to teach me as I already had a passion for creativity. A common phrase in
the Latin community is “chinga la migra,” which roughly translates to “fuck border
patrol.” It’s a saying often heard when you are Latin or live near the Mexican border.
Each letter contains a multitude of items which hold value in my culture: fruits, flowers,
and animals. I chose an iridescent fabric that glimmers different colors depending on the
way the light hits it, there are hues of purple, pink, blue, and even green. It’s really
whimsical and beautiful to behold. The way the light interacts with this fabric is
reminiscent of the blankets given to the children held in detention facilities in Texas. The
blankets which look like they are made of aluminum foil are emergency blankets known
as solar blankets. Nearly two thousand (2,000) children were taken from their parents and
families when the “zero-tolerance” policy for illegal entry into the United States was put

Chinga la migra
into place by the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol under Trump (Mann). The reasoning behind the separation is to charge the parents with criminal action. The emotional tole this kind of stress and anxiety puts on a child is demoralizing. This is a trauma they may never recover from (Schrag). I tried to fit as much detail as possible into this work so that the audience may interact intimately with it. My hope is that people will want to be as present as they can be with this work to see all the tiny creations I’ve sewn into the fibers of this fabric. People unfamiliar with this phrase will be inclined to look it up to gain a better understanding of the work and be astonished at the meaning coming from this delicate art form full of cute imagery. People familiar with this phrase will coyly recognize this tongue in cheek phrase and hopefully feel valued and appreciated in my work. This is an empowering phrase, it allows us to take back the power of being marginalized and create a platform for us to fight back against injustices experienced by not only Latin people, but all people of color suffering at the hands of ICE and Customs and Border Patrol.
GOYA FOODS CONTROVERSY

Being political is a strong force in my work. Using art to speak volumes and reach a wider audience is critical to the practice of art as protest. I am leaning into directing art that is critical of the Trump administration and their treatment of Latin families. A series that propelled my intentions to single out Trump while using recognizable imagery for Latin people are my Goya cans. I created screen prints by replicating the design found on the Goya brand of canned black beans. I chose the Goya brand due to the remarks made by the CEO of Goya Foods, Robert Unanue. During Trump’s term in office Unanue was able to visit Trump in the White House and Unanue went as far as praising Trump, saying how blessed the country is with him as a leader. Goya Foods being the largest Hispanic-owned food company in the U.S. and having their CEO make these kinds of comments about a man who has made disparaging statements about Latin populations is disgusting, it shows how disconnected Unanue is from the Latin and Hispanic communities of America. You cannot praise Trump as a great leader while also supporting Latin communities, those two are paradoxical. Goya Foods is Hispanic-owned, though and perhaps being owned by the Unanue family, a Spanish family, creates different values and morals when it comes to the treatment of Latinos in the United States. The difference between Hispanic and Latin will be discussed at a later time in this essay. Goya canned food items could be found in any Latin or Hispanic home in the Western Hemisphere.
before Unanue took this stance. They were a staple in every pantry, just like many other latin food canned items, but especially Goya. After Unanue’s July 9, 2020 statement, there was a call to boycott Goya products, in response to this Trump supporters began to buy Goya products to show their continued support of blind faith following whoever Trump told them to. Unanue again made declarations that would push him further from the communities he pretends to be a part of. During the Conservative Political Action Conference held in 2021, Unanue made claims that Trump was in fact still the real, legitimate president (Gamboa). Alluding to the false narrative that Trump fabricated about the 2020 election being rigged with fraudulent voting, these claims by Trump are what led to the January 6th Capitol Riot where thousands of Trump supporters stormed the capitol and caused harm to our democracy. This riot incited by none other than Trump himself, encouraging his right-wing extremist followers to attack the senate and congress in the capitol and stir up violence. Unanue has a huge platform thanks to his role as the CEO of Goya Foods and what he did was careless and harmful to our communities. With my design, I created a piece made of three large screen prints (18” x 24”) and another piece composed of thirty-six smaller prints (5” x 7”). The idea was inspired initially by Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup Cans, 1962 series. When this all began with Unanue and Goya Foods, I felt the need to make a response. In my art work I like to be playful and nothing is more playful and cheeky in the art world than Pop Art. We are given so much liberty to challenge design and art within it, so it felt like the perfect mode to form a response to something that outraged me so much. In Pop Art, there is so much replication and appropriation of other art works, Andy Warhol was notorious for it, so I decided to
continue that by using the Goya logo and brand design against Goya to insult them on a
depth personal level. The three large prints stand together, and over the can design we
can see the expletive “FUCK TRUMP” spray painted across them in red. I wanted to
combine the idea of graffiti with fine art, it felt more appropriate than a simple design
spelling it out. Graffiti is a street art that is highly regarded in many Latin communities
and is seen as a form of self-expression. I wanted to ruin the Goya prints and show my
disdain for this brand and corporation. My series of thirty-six smaller cans each have a
unique title, their titles are made up of all the nasty things Trump and his administration
have said about Latin Americans and legislation put into effect to harm them. The list
could go on forever, but I chose to stop at thirty-six. The purpose of putting Goya at the
center of these pieces structured around the Trump administration is Goya’s support of
Trump. We have a product that is so trusted and so culturally iconic to Latin households,
Goya, standing side by side with a man who is possibly the most hated figure in Latino
communities. Trump is symbolic of everything wrong in this society and Unanue’s support of him was a slap in the face.
CANNED FOOD SERIES

The original intention of my can series inspired by Warhol was to create a series to highlight the Latin canned foods I had eaten throughout my childhood and adulthood, as they mean so much to me. Both my parents worked to provide food and shelter for their seven children. Canned food is a convenient source of nutrition and is easy to cook with. Canned food is something we trust for safety reasons, as well. It is prepackaged so it goes safely from the manufacturer to the consumer. Food packaging has improved food safety by alleviating bacterial contamination and extending the shelf life. We don’t have to worry about the food going bad or rotting before we consume it, which helps for broader distribution and reduces food waste (Claudio). Most canned foods found in Latin homes are not meals themselves, but ingredients for a main dish. They come chopped up, prepared, and ready to add to whatever dish you choose to make. A lot of times, you can find salsas and sauces already packaged in a can, which makes marinating meats or topping a dish before placing in the oven much quicker and simpler. The canned food is already seasoned perfectly, we don’t need to think about using them because we trust these flavors and these ingredients. They are familiar and feel like home. Outside of chastising people in power to challenge them and bring about change, I want to bring a sense of beauty and appreciation to my culture in my art. Showcasing these cans and their designs instantly bring happiness to me as they remind me of my mom and all her
delicious meals. I can only dream they do the same for others who keep these foods in
their homes. I focused on six can designs, the cans I chose to screen print were cans that
go into my favorite dishes. I discussed with friends of similar backgrounds to see which
cans would be the most recognizable as well to make sure my intentions were visible to
any viewer. Each print is 16” by 20”, mimicking the size of Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup
Cans, 1962. I wanted people to immediately recognize where I got my inspiration. As a
woman of color, I never felt attracted or attached to Warhol’s cans. Campbells soup was
something I have never eaten and something I don’t think I will ever try. It’s so foreign to
me to eat soup from a can when soup is meant to be cooked slowly over the stove for
hours on end. Soup to me is smelling all the spices and herbs steeping in broth overnight
and waking up to a hearty bowl of warmth with a side of rice. I need the air in my kitchen
to be filled with the scent of whatever is cooking to feel like I am at home, not just pour
the contents of a can into a saucepan and heat it up mindlessly. Viewing Warhol’s work is
very interesting and influential, but it was not a work that felt recognizable or familiar to
me. It was just a can. In this series I desire to make minorities see themselves reflected in
a space they usually feel outcasted from. Gallery spaces are not usually open and warm, they are cold and sterile - my goal is to create the opposite type of space with the pieces of art I create. The size of these prints allows me to really take up space in a gallery as well. I think it’s important to see these cans printed larger than life and allow them to encompass the viewer for them to really understand the magnitude of these pieces. Food is culture and even though canned food is not always looked upon kindly or highly regarded, these are the things I grew up with. It’s a new form of culture and it’s an evolution of food. To survive in a capitalist society we must work to afford basic necessities like shelter, food, and water. In doing so, working to afford to live in the United States we must make sacrifices, small and big. Those sacrifices can come in the shape of a can that tastes just like the food back home that enables us to continue to have those tastes and flavors in our lives. I can’t imagine most meals without La Costeña jalapeños. Every morning before school my mom would bring out the container with the pickled jalapeños, carrots, and onions so we could add it to our breakfast of eggs and beans before we left for school. My family can’t make our salsa verde without Embasa’s can of whole tomatillos. Every family has their own version of salsa verde with unique spices, but most families will use this can of whole tomatillos to create that salsa. Rotel’s can of dice tomatoes is the key ingredient to my sister’s spicy tomato rice, without Rotel it just wouldn’t taste the same. For us, carnation milk was used as an ingredient for desserts. My favorite dessert recipes with carnation milk are tres leches cake and my mom’s pumpkin pie, something we have during Thanksgiving. There is no pumpkin pie better than my mom’s pie. My mom never had pumpkin pie in El Salvador, but when she
migrated to the United States she wanted to assimilate and celebrate the holidays here. A part of assimilation is trying the local foods and cuisines, when she discovered pumpkin pie she never looked back. It has become a staple in our family, in our culture. It is something I will pass down to my children. It is a dish my sisters have passed down to their children and their grandchildren. We are now three generations living in this country because of the work my parents put forth and we can celebrate that by keeping these traditions and meals alive.
When I was in middle school I began learning how to dye fabrics with my mom because I wanted to make dresses and painting smocks. She would teach me how to dye fabrics with things we had around our home. Coffee was a favorite of hers to use, she drank coffee every day so we always had a steady supply of grounds to use. We also used wine, avocado peels, beets, red onions, lemons, grapes, strawberries, spinach, flowers, and tea leaves. There were so many natural fruits and plants we could utilize to create beautiful colors, all found in our kitchen. I loved how resourceful my mother taught me to be, it also encouraged creativity and invention. No matter what color I wanted, we would find a way to make it. I loved to experiment to figure out the best way to get the exact color I wanted, it also made refashioning clothes easier for my family as they had someone willing to test out these messy, natural dyes for them. When I decided to properly learn how to dye fabrics with natural dyes in graduate school, I quickly learned the practices I had been using were not the proper way to dye fibers. There were steps to take to mordant the fabric to prepare it to absorb the dye and allow the dye to stay more permanently on the fibers. This was something I had never heard of. Mordant can also be used to create a pattern on fabric, by using different metal-based mordants you can achieve different colors with the same pot of dye. There is alum mordant, copper mordant, iron mordant, and tin mordant. These new tools gave me more opportunities to
experiment and create more distinct art pieces. I was furthering my knowledge of a tradition passed down to me, allowing me to continue this aspect of my culture and hopefully keep it going for decades to come. My artwork is centered around my family, they are my support system and foundation. I like to highlight the matriarchal power in our family and empower all the women in my family, without them I would not be who I am today. They each shaped me and molded me into the person I am today, we all did that for each other. With all the women in my immediate family in mind, I decided to create pieces dedicated to them. My favorite dye I’ve discovered during my graduate studies is cochineal. Cochineal is the most beautiful dye I have ever encountered, not only is it the most versatile dye ripe with life, but it is so symbolically feminine. Cochineal consists of the dried, pulverized bodies of female insects that have feasted on the flowers of cacti, some of them pregnant creating the most intense pink. These female insects are native to tropical lands in North and South America, mainly found in Latin American regions. This dye felt like meeting my first love, it embodied everything I could dream of in my art work - life, death, flowers, femininity, and it is native to the same lands I am. To use cochineal in a dye bath, you must first crush and kill these beautiful insects, their blood and bodies full of pink from the flowers they’ve eaten their entire lives. I held the circle of life in my hands with this dye; this inspired my first fabric piece. The first is two circles made of a flower pattern symbolizing the eight women in my family who I was raised with and who have been a part of my life. The flowers were created by clamping a thin piece of wood shaped into a flower over the folded piece of fabric before submerging in the dye bath. My influences are my sisters, my mom, my
niece, my nephew’s wife and my great-niece. These are the women in my family line, each creating life and continuing the creation of life for generations to come. We are interwoven forever, our bond can never be broken. We are cyclical. I’m sure I once had extended family somewhere, but I do not know them and I never will. During the Salvadoran Civil War, my parents lost a majority of their families, and our family tree is not something we have been able to fully discuss as it causes them too much pain. I want to leave this as an artifact for my future family, the first women of our family who came to the United States and laid down our roots. Blossoming with life and nurturing the soil around us. With my next fabric piece, I wanted to use a symbolical image of fertility - the frog. Again, the subject matter was focused on the women in my family and the creation of life. I laid out eight frog stamps made by cutting a sponge into the sheep of a frog, then placing it in alum mordant before stamping it onto the cotton fabric. The frogs surrounded and protected the fifteen dots in the middle, the rustic burnt orange dots
created by using a sponge dipped in an iron mordant. The fifteen dots represent the lives brought into the world by my mother, my sisters, and my niece. After creating the pattern with the two different mordants and my stamps, I placed the fabric in a dye bath of osage orange which holds hues of golden yellows, and oranges if using an alum mordant. The white cotton fabric became a soft, muted yellow-beige as it had no mordant and the dye was washed out during the rinsing process. These works of art I leave behind as my mark on my family tree, my contribution in the process of creation.

I continued to explore cochineal as a natural dye because it felt so kindred to me. I have this new found obsession with pink. I love the essence of pink, it’s such a soft delicate color. It’s a color that has appeared in a multitude of my works because I am so drawn to it. It pulls this fragility and vulnerability out of me. I don’t like the connotation that we instill gendering to colors in young children, but as a woman I do absolutely love pink. I think I would love pink regardless of my gender. Not because it symbolizes womanhood or girlishness, but because it reminds me of a tenderness only experienced so rarely. The color pink has a strong symbolical meaning in El Salvador as well. Pink is celebrated for its bountiful expression of love and compassion, and innocence. In most Latin American countries when a girl turns fifteen there is a traditional celebration called a quinceanera that commemorates the transition from childhood to womanhood, but in El Salvador it is known as la fiesta rosa which translates to the pink party. The maquilishuat is our national tree, it’s a beautiful pink-tufted tree. The flowers that bloom on this tree are large and majestic, these pink-hued flowers come in varying degrees of intensity in their coloration. They can go from the deepest pink to the palest pink and they grow all
over the tree. It’s such a lovely range of colors within one tree and you can see how each shade of pink harmonizes together to create this wondrous, magical tree. The flowers have thin petals and look almost like they are made of delicate tissue. Their shape is similar to that of a trumpet flower. Using pink as my inspiration I decided to make my own yarn dyed in cochineal from beginning to end as a symbol of my love for my mother and three sisters. I wanted to crochet this yarn into five different squares to represent each of us and the interwoven fibers of our beings. We all came from our mother and that links us together forever, but we also shared so many of the same struggles growing up in the United States and forging our own paths. I first had to clean and scour the wool to prepare it to be spun into yarn. It also helps prepare the wool to be dyed. After I finished washing it and rinsing it multiple times to get it as clean as possible, I let it dry overnight to get rid of any excess water and moisture. When dyeing a natural fiber like wool, the best method is to use a natural dye so cochineal fit the bill perfectly. After my wool was dry and I could inspect it to ensure it was fully clean, I then created a dye bath of cochineal and began the process of dyeing. The first batch of wool submerged in the bath is always the deepest hue, once that is removed and I add the next batch to the dye bath, the color becomes more and more delicate and muted. I wanted the wool to be similar to our maquilishuat tree so I dyed the wool fibers in this manner so I could achieve multiple hues of varying shades of pink. After the dye process I began to card the wool which is a brushing technique used to separate the fibers and prepare them to be spun into threads and yarn. Then I went into roving the wool which is the final step before spinning the wool. Roving is a method in separating the wool into smaller sections to allow it to be
spun more efficiently. Roving also helps to determine the thickness of your yarn, I wanted mine to be fairly thin so I could make enough yarn to crochet the five pieces. Once this step was complete I began to spin my yarn using a spinning wheel, this is the time when I added the different hues of pink to allow them to blend together and create a beautiful contrast. Once I had finished spinning my yarn after multiple mishaps, I began to crochet. I wanted each square to be varying sizes to show our life and placement in our family. My mother’s square is the biggest, then each square after that fell in accordance to age in size. I placed my mother’s square in the middle and going vertically, while my sisters and I were placed around her square and our rows went horizontally. I believe we are all a product of my mother and the upbringing she gave us, but we are so vastly different from her. We were given a much better life than she had growing up, and she suffered so much more than we ever will have to. I think we all aspire to be as strong and
dutiful as she is, but there is a sadness that comes when we reflect on the life my mother lived to give us so much. Like the yarn, we each took threads from her to become who we are, and we had the opportunities to spin that yarn however we wanted and best saw fit. We had so many choices we could make, when she was given so few. She also shielded us from so much pain and protected us every chance she got. She still does this to this day. Each square piece of my sisters and I fit into the square that symbolizes my mother. This piece is for my mother, to show her how much we love her and how we could never amount to the woman she is, the mother she is, or the spirit she carries.

El Salvador has been a historically agricultural country. Two of the main exports of El Salvador throughout its history are coffee beans and the indigo plant which is used for indigo dyes. By the 20th century these two crops made up ninety percent of their export earnings (Boland). These two plants are very symbolic of El Salvador for me, they are at the heart of most discussions when it comes to our natural resources. Things have shifted in recent years as fast fashion and clothing factories now make up a big part of El Salvador’s exports, but in regards to agriculture coffee will always remain on top (Pearcy). To honor these two crops that made El Salvador special I created a dye bath of each. With the indigo I was focused on using it to sew a message into when I stumbled upon the Japanese method of Shibori dyeing. Shibori is a technique that involves different methods to create a design, these include bundling, binding it with a resist (like thread), folding, and bunching and then dyeing it with indigo dye. What is left are patterns of blue that can either be organic or geometric depending on the method used. I created a design using thread to form a bind that when pulled gathered the fabric and
allowed the fabric where it was unfathered to be dyed indigo. Where I had sewn onto the fabric and gathered was pulled tight to resist the dye penetrating that area. What remained was my intended message which read, “ACAB.” This acronym is one used in protest of police brutality against people of color, principally Black and African-Americans, and is used in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter movement. ACAB stands for All Cops Are Bastards. It is a call to change the way the public is policed and correct racial injustices. Defunding the police is at the heart of this movement. Divesting funds from police departments all over the country will allow us to reallocate these finances to public safety and community support through non-policing services such as housing, mental healthcare, education, social and youth services, and other community resources to benefit the lives of impoverished communities. The way the police are trained is rooted in systemic racism. This is an issue that not only impacts Black and African-American lives, but is harmful to anybody that is not inherently White.

Salvadoran coffee is used all over the world, it is some of the highest quality beans you can find on the market. Due to the rich volcanic soil and high altitudes, the coffee produced is smooth and has very little acidity. The flavor is bold and rich, it carries a bright flavor with an aroma that penetrates the air beautifully. The coffee that comes from El Salvador has a slightly nutty taste with other flavor notes of floral, spicy, sweet,
or fruity depending on the region it was grown in. Those flavors are enhanced depending on the roast of the coffee beans (Foley). I grew up smelling coffee every morning as I got dressed for school. It was something my parents always had before they went to work. I can’t think of a time when my mom didn’t have a pot of coffee brewing. Even now when I visit home, I smell coffee and that’s a smell that brings me back to my fondest childhood memories and my mom. I wanted to make a dye bath using Salvadorian coffee as it holds such a sacred place in my heart and my family’s home. I chose to dye paper so I could build a nest. Coffee does not leave a strong color, most likely you will get a creamy beige color. I was able to achieve this soft cream by dipping the paper in the dye bath for short periods of time, repetitively. With fabric, you leave it in the dye bath for hours, but with paper it would easily disintegrate so short, quick bursts of exposure to the bath helps the color adhere to the paper and become richer. I then let these dry overnight so the coffee could settle into the paper. I wanted to create a nest because with my role as a woman within my family I feel an obligation to have children or be seen as a mother, a desire that is not natural to me. I have never wanted to be a mom or give birth, yet I feel it is my duty in a sense. I find myself thinking about my future children even though I have so much fear in ever getting pregnant or giving birth. Unfortunately, I have an underlying health issue that makes getting pregnant very difficult. This is something I’ve known since puberty and something I’ve grappled with for a long time. In the end, I realized that maybe it is a blessing I can’t get become pregnant without challenges as maybe it wasn’t meant to be. It’s something I’ve struggled with in my identity as a woman and as feminine. I don’t believe women need to have children or give birth to be seen as female
or a woman, I think gender is a construct and there should be fluidity to be who you are without restrictions or labels. In my culture, it has been pushed onto me and ingrained into me. I feel ashamed in not wanting to have a nuclear family and only wanting to be married. This empty nest is a visual representation of how I feel, and the small piece inside of me that feels guilt at not reproducing because I am too scared to try and be left without a child. My gender does not limit my capacity, and I will continue to break from the norm because I refuse to conform to any roles placed upon me.

My culture has always been a meaning of celebration for my family. Our culture is what brings us together and ties us together. It is what brings all Latin peoples together, so many cultures in Latin America are family-oriented and family-focused. I am beginning a new chapter in my life as a wife. I am getting married very soon and the idea of marriage has weighed heavily upon me. I never envisioned myself in this position, I always wanted to go against the grain and be independent. Something that is very opposite of my culture and the way I was raised. Within my role as a woman, there comes this burden of being domestic and willing to serve. That is something I will never abide by and something I don’t agree with. I struggle with the gender norms placed on women as I believe we are entitled to be whatever we want and act however we want. Simply because I am a woman doesn’t mean I am obligated to do anything. Yet, there are certain
things that I want to celebrate as a woman which is very contradictory. The idea of
marriage can be very antiquated in the way the roles of husband and wife can be
perceived. I want to celebrate my marriage and honor my husband, but I don’t want to be
seen as property or take his name when I have my own identity within my name I was
born with. I refuse to relinquish my heritage that is so easily seen in my family name. I
am lucky to have found someone who agrees with me on all these points and isn’t asking
me to sacrifice my identity in any way to become one with him as we enter into marriage.
I wanted to create a dress to symbolize my wedding
and bring in my mother’s Spanish heritage. My
mother gave up her maiden name which is Flamenco
and that is something that always made me sad. I love
her maiden name and wish she kept it. It is beautiful
and it shows her rich Spanish culture of the flamenco
dance, which her family carries a long lineage of
flamenco dancers. It is something her family is known
for, and when she married my Salvadoran father she
sacrificed all of that to appease him. She took on the
role of doting wife and mother, never getting to rest.
Always cooking, cleaning, working, and birthing. I
think watching my mother do all these things is what
encouraged me to never become that as I saw how much it weighed on her and how much
it was forced upon her. To honor my mother and my marriage, and to show her I won’t
sacrifice all the things she had to, I crocheted a flamenco-inspired dress. I chose the method of crocheting as it is something passed down to me from my mother and a tradition we practiced every autumn season to welcome in the winter season and prepare for the cold. It has ruffles we often see on flamenco dresses that capture all the movement of the dance and makes the piece feel alive even as it stands still. I kept it white and cream as those colors are often associated with wedding dresses. I used flamenco sleeves to echo the dance and created a high-neckline that is similar to my actual wedding dress. This dress was quite literally a labor of love. It took around thirty-two balls of yarn to crochet this dress. Each ruffle on the lower half took two to three balls of yarn minimum, the very bottom one took four. I try to stand against gender norms, but I often fall into them as I am a feminine being and I relish these moments of celebrating my gender. I found solace and happiness in creating this piece that could honor who I am and honor my culture in the most treasured way possible. It perfectly symbolizes my cultures while allowing me freedom to be who I want to be and to form the type of marriage I believe is true to me. I continued my crochet work by created a balaclava. A symbol of rebellion and revolt. This balaclava is meant to be worn with the wedding dress to show how I am following these traditions while also fighting against them. I used yarn in the same color to compliment the wedding dress. They fit perfectly together and can be interpreted in many ways. It can be viewed as my
own rebellion, or an oath to rebel against marriage in general. I find as new generations
of Latin Americans come of age to marry we are changing the perception marriage carries
and bending our cultural norms to fit our standards and demand equality. I also find the
balaclava to be symbolic of all the rebellions citizens of each Latin American country had
to go through in order to overthrow unjust governments and fight against colonial
powers. I was inspired to create the balaclava with crochet as I’ve never seen it done in
this fashion with bright cream and white, with soft yarn that feels like an embrace. I
wanted to create a new form of rebellion that can be seen for decades to come.

My mother gifted me with a table loom as she saw me beginning to become more
interested in fabrics and textiles. I worked to learn this method through my mother who
lives across the country. It was something we could reconnect through and that would
allow us to become closer in a new way. I’ve seen her created woven tapestry through a
larger loom she had when I was much younger, but that was eventually sold as my
mother began to work more and more, giving up her hobbies. This process was really fun
and helped me gain a better understanding of the work that goes into woven materials and
the traditional of looming. It was nice to create my own pieces that will be hung on the
wall of my future home and those of my family members. It meant a great amount to my
mother to see me create simple designs as I began to venture into this new art form. She
was thrilled with how I combined colors and learned quickly how to create more complex
designs as I changed the intervals of threads and the pattern. I was inspired by the
Southwest landscape and Southwestern art where I am from. Growing up in the desert
you see similar patterns all over and it’s a reoccurring theme in Nevada, Arizona, and
New Mexico. I wanted to create similar patterns within my woven tapestries to interweave my Salvadoran culture with my Southwestern American culture that is influenced by Latin America as it used to be a part of Mexico. In each hanging tapestry I included flowers that are some of my favorites and I feel under appreciated, such as baby’s breath, pink and purple mums, and pink carnations. All of these flowers will be included in my own wedding bouquet and I wanted to bring that into my artwork. The colors of the thread are lavender, a deep rustic pink, cream, and green which also happen to be my wedding colors. These tapestries are a symbol of the woven lives being intertwined by my marriage to my fiancé and our family bonds that we will create. I wanted to create these pieces as a memory of a childhood tradition and as a work of art to commemorate my wedding and marriage. These pieces are very special to me and I love that they go beyond the gallery wall and are fused into my family’s life forever. I hope to
pass down these tapestries and create more of them as a tradition for each new marriage into our family using their wedding colors and bouquet flowers.
MENTAL HEALTH

Dealing with infertility and womanhood, something I experienced was wanting to come to terms with my identity (who I am and the person I want to be) and being open about my own mental health issues. This is another part of assimilation as well, commentary and discussions about mental health are much more liberal and open here in the United States compared to in Latin America. I sometimes live in guilt that I am American. I have been given the privilege of having agency over my body for the most part, depending on which part of the country I reside in. I can go where I want when I want. I can vote freely and openly. I am entitled to a great education. Not once have I ever starved a day in my life. These are just a short list of the rights and liberties I’ve been born into thanks to my parents becoming American citizens and giving birth to me in this country. This recognition and gratitude I have turns into a burden I live with daily. A burden to carry the weight of succeeding for my entire family. I acknowledge that I am the lucky one out of all my siblings, being the youngest I observed how to more easily navigate in this country and smoothly assimilate. I was also afforded more attention by my three oldest sisters who truly wanted me to thrive and live a life they weren’t granted. Whenever I needed help, I had my entire family to turn to. My life has been blessed immeasurably by having a support system in my sisters and my mother. Therefore, I am the one who needs to demonstrate why my parents sacrificed so much and emigrated to
the United States by accomplishing not only all my hopes and dreams, but their hopes and dreams as well. I am the embodiment of the American dream for my family and my ancestors. I am what they fought for and the reason they gave up so much. I have the freedom to do all the things my mother never could, to do all the things my mother had to give up. I have the pleasure of wasting my time. I was given everything she had to sacrifice to assimilate. There is a stigma that comes with addressing mental health issues in Latin households. A lot of my work is centered around the struggles I face trying to find my way in this space occupied by my two cultures. I have hid my mental health issues away from my family because of my guilt. I am the youngest so I am meant to carry the burden. I don’t have time to be weak or acknowledge my flaws. In this exhibition, I’ve decided to plainly and openly share my mental health problems with the world to help break this cycle of silence by creating art pieces dedicated to mental health. I want to break this uncomfortable presence we feel in our culture as Latinos when it comes to discussing anxiety and depression. These are mental health issues I feel like most immigrant children will suffer through, especially children who had to cross thousands of miles to reach the United States and were separated from their parents. That leaves a lasting scar that
can never heal. I made screen prints of my prescription pill bottles, labeled with my exact prescription dosage. They show the progression of my dosage being heightened to try to aid in reducing my anxiety, depression, OCD, and PTSD from suffering sexual trauma as a child and again my first semester here in Louisville. Within two months of moving to Louisville, I was sexually assaulted. My mental health is not something I expected to discuss in my art works, but it is something that has mitigated and controlled most of my graduate career. I often felt as if I was drowning and fighting so hard to stay above water. I had to create art to work through what I had experienced and to figure out how to understand these mental health issues I had ignored for so long. Taking medication was so obtuse and foreign to me. More often than not, I would neglect to take my medication. I have made mistakes in my journey to find peace within my brain. I decided to put my forgotten pills to use and placed them within a resin pill mold I made of silicone. I wanted to cement my relationship with the medication that helps keep me balanced. This is very heavy subject matter, and I, unfortunately, cannot handle being so serious with my own issues and felt a desire to once again make a serious issue more playful. I added glitter and foil confetti to create an air of lightness and to insinuate these are my happy pills as they are so aptly called in day to day conversation. I can distinctly remember asking my mom if I could see a counselor growing up, and her response was that only crazy people took medication and
needed therapy. She made me feel so stupid and awful for wanting help. She told me I wasn’t crazy and only crazy people needed help. I believed her. Every time I was faced with taking a pill, I questioned whether or not I was in fact crazy. I questioned if I really needed these pills or if I could work through it all on my own. Now here I am, two decades later and still trying to understand the chemicals in my brain. I hope my challenges and struggles with mental health can aid someone else in making the right decisions and not feel shame in wanting or needing help.
SELF PORTRAITS

Throughout my time in graduate school, I’ve started a series of self portraits. These are to honor myself as my youth was spent hating my ethnocentric features and trying so hard to fit into the European beauty standards that are so heavily pushed in the media and around the world. In Latin America lighter skin is seen as a sign of beauty and cleanliness. It is a sign that you have more Spanish blood that mestizo or indigenous blood. This idea and connotation disgusts me. I don’t understand why we want to look like the people who colonized our lands and raped our ancestors, and used our bodies for slave labor. These people who came over to take our lands and resources were the ones murdering masses of indigenous peoples through genocide. It is so horrific and heartbreaking to think of our actual lineage now. Instead of focusing on my flaws and how my features don’t fit into the socially accepted standards of beauty, I wanted to create portraits that were reflective of my culture. I wanted these portraits to hold me in a safe space where my beauty can be respected and understood.
Through these portraits I am to resurrect pieces of my I’ve lost throughout the years and to stand against those who don’t want to see people of color in their cities or in their predominantly white spaces. I want to take over with my image and have it be used as a sign of revolt. My first portrait I used flowers to symbolize members of my family. Flowers carry different messages and meanings within my culture, so I wanted to use that tradition within my painting. A pink carnation is placed behind my right ear. A flower behind the right ear symbolizes unmarried and a pink carnation is a symbol of beauty and innocence, along with loving admiration. I wanted to show how I love my body and my features now that I have learned to accept myself and honor myself. I carry a basket of flowers above my head with a flower for each of my sisters and my mother. Again, I often work to honor them as they are my foundation and have made me who I am. My second portrait was painted on a piece of wood. Wood was my first canvas growing up because my father worked in carpentry and he would give me his leftover wood to paint on. We couldn’t afford canvas and wood was always available. The wood absorbs oil paint beautifully, it’s been a favorite of mine to paint on. It can be difficult as the paint shifts on the wood since there is no texture like there is on canvas, but I love using my fingers to blend out the colors and then seeing my
fingerprints left as my own personal signature. I create a crown of succulents and used golden metal rods to be symbolic of the Virgin Mary and her crown of light often shown in Catholic art my mother loves. I wanted to paint myself not as the Virgin Mary in a religious manner, but as an icon seen in our culture. I surrounded myself with flowers and then placed shards of glass all over the oval piece of wood. I cut the wood into an oval to be reminiscent of a locket one carries around their neck. My mother always had lockets and they all contained pictures of her children. I wanted to create a portrait of myself that that would be held like a locket, safe and protected. The shards of glass help to keep people out and allow me to maintain my peace. I often felt pushed out of spaces and unwanted due to me being from an immigrant family, so I decided to protect myself and create a space where I could be left alone and feel secure in my space. The glass is radiant in the light and all the different shapes help create a whimsical feeling, the viewer wants to get closer, but they know they can’t because the glass is sharp and will most likely hurt them. My third self portrait was made to show where I am now in life. I am recognizing my privilege of being American and living in the United States compared to the life I would have had if my parents stayed in El Salvador. I made the tiles myself, I wanted to honor my Spanish heritage of Spanish tile-making but also my Salvadoran heritage with ceramics. There is a commentary on the labor of construction that uses mostly unauthorized Latin American workers as they can pay them basically nothing and get skilled work as well. My dad worked in construction and people would assume he was an unauthorized worker and treat him badly. Even if he was an unauthorized worker, why do people feel the need to treat people so rudely when they are working just as hard as the
person next to them, trying to support their families and provide a decent life for their children? It is such a harmful environment to have to work in. I wanted to make these tiles to demonstrate the difficulty and the patience it takes to do this kind of labor. It was also very difficult to paint on as it created an uneven surface. My tiles were nowhere near perfect and no matter how hard I tried, they came out different sizes and widths. Placing them together created a chaotic canvas, but I wanted them to be painted over in this manner. My figure is seen wearing a mask with my hair done and a pearl earring my mother had given me. I chose to paint a mask to show we are living through the pandemic and I am respecting the health of others, which in itself is a privilege I am given living in the United States. A country where getting the vaccine and having covid tests done is free, and where finding these masks is easy. These are luxuries all over Latin America. The bowl of fruit is meant to look like the tobacco-dyed ceramics of El Salvador. El
Salvador is known for their ceramics, and especially their tobacco-dyed ceramics. The bowl holds bananas, clementines, and avocados; three of the biggest imports to the United States and the world from Latin America. These are fruits I can easily access and purchase without worrying if they are quality or safe. I never have to worry about where they came from, I simply trust it because I am buying them in the United States. To the left is a cup of Starbucks coffee spilled over, coffee being the largest export of El Salvador. The amount El Salvador exports should be enough to sustain the nation and provide many job opportunities to help the country thrive, but first world countries and corporations take advantage of a developing El Salvador and pay them pennies on the dollar for their coffee beans. Beans that are some of the best in the world. Yet, here I am, an American citizen who purchases Starbucks coffee more than I should. It is a luxury I am able to afford that most Salvadorans cannot. I wanted to show my privilege and acknowledge that I too am a part of this system that takes advantage of developing countries and the labor of brown bodies, something I can no longer ignore or live in ignorance of.
CONCLUSION

My work has turned into an evolution of understanding how the American government has harmed bodies of color and then refuses to recognize us as a vital part to this society and country. I’ve found critical insight into how El Salvador has been shaped by imperialistic powers. My work has evolved from painting simple compositions to utilizing limitless mediums to explore my culture and share it with others. I’ve grown in my understanding of how cultures evolve over time and how assimilation doesn’t always have to be painful. We can keep traditions alive by researching and continuing the practice of these traditions. I’ve come to an understanding of why my mom gave up so much of her culture for the survival and success of her seven children. The United States has placed themselves in the middle of Latin American affairs and tried to take over governments behind the scenes through funding, assassinations, and propaganda. Coming from an immigrant family means slowly learning that the reason my family had to flee El Salvador to the United States was due to the United States government itself and their intervention into the politics and control of El Salvador for their own profit and benefit. In present day we are labeled as the issue, but the issue was created here on this land. In policy making and politics we are spoken about like rodents, we are an infestation to the livelihood of America and Americans. Harmful and dangerous language has been used against us. We are seen as disposable. When in fact, we are quite the opposite. We are
fighting for a chance at survival, working jobs most American citizens would never dare
doing. We are the migrant workers in the fields picking their fruits and vegetables for
them, we are the ones slaughtering their cows, chickens, and pork for them to eat at every
meal. We are the backbone of the country keeping it alive when no one else would. We,
the people of Latin America, are displaced due to American intervention. We refuse to be
erased. Our culture will be kept alive no matter where we live and no matter what
language we speak. Racism is a legacy passed down through white supremacy. As a
brown woman, I feel like I don’t belong here in America. I feel as though I’m not wanted,
I’m seen as something negative. In every room I walk into, I am othered by default. It is
an unfortunate mindset that some Americans have, but I refuse to leave. I am here to take
up space. I am here to never stop adding color to the white walls that block my way. I’ve
learned to love my family and recognize their efforts. Despite their dynamic, profound
flaws they have made me whole and I don’t feel as lost anymore. Through my art works I
have gained so much knowledge about my culture and traditions that I will continue to
pass down no matter where I end up or who I become. I will never let my culture be
erased or forgotten. I want to continue and expand upon these practices, I don’t ever want
to stop learning about my culture or sharing it with the world.
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