

The Adobe Ceiling:

An Exploration of the Latina Experience within Higher Education

Beatriz Lozano
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Introduction

Latinas hold only 7.4 percent of degrees earned by women nationally¹, and 2.2 percent at the University of Michigan², even though they constitute 16 percent of the female population in the United States. This disparity is caused by both external and internal factors at higher level learning institutions. I will create a time based installation that explores the concept of the adobe ceiling, a theory developed by Chicana scholar Cecilia Burciaga, which discusses the personal and systemic inequalities Latinas face in higher education, and professional working fields.

“With a glass ceiling, you are allowed to see the next level, at least you can see through it, and practice for the promotion. But an adobe ceiling is dense, impenetrable, and it doesn’t allow you to see to the next level. I would like that luxury to see what’s next. Once Latinas break through it, they are often surprised by the personal and professional costs.”

By creating a spatial and time-based experience of this concept of the adobe ceiling, viewers will be able

to experience a perspective that they do not often consider. My multi-part installation will include vinyl quotes pulled from racist mainstream media clips, a 6’ x 8’ hanging slab of adobe embedded with speakers that will play audio stories from Latinas on campus, and a participatory printing press. This installation aims to create a new level of awareness for individuals who do not have to face these often-subtle forms of discrimination first-hand. I want to create an experience that will be simultaneously informative, while revealing the emotional experiences that come along with these inequalities.

Racism and sexism are experienced in realms of higher education everyday but they are not discussed because people tend to excuse themselves from the conversation. Especially at a university like the University of Michigan, by being part of this elite, people automatically credit themselves with being too liberal to be racist, and too educated to be contributing to systemic inequalities. I hope my piece will help the audience recognize that a formal education does not automatically equate to being socially and culturally conscious.

1 Jackson, Mareshah. “Fact Sheet: The State of Latinas in the United States.” American Progress. N.p., 7 Nov. 2013. Web.

2 “Ethnicity Reports.” - Office of the Registrar. University of Michigan, 2014, Web.

Contextual Discussion

I want my installation to be an experience that will challenge the audience to step outside of their roles as viewers and encourage them to become active participants. To better understand this dynamic and find direction in accomplishing this, I turned to the works of artists like Félix González-Torres and Yoko Ono. Torres is known for his minimalist installations as well as for the participatory elements he incorporates in his pieces. One of these installations, "Untitled" candy sculpture, consists of a large pile of generic hard candy that is placed in a corner of the gallery.

Torres has created many iterations of this sculpture, in some of which the initial mass of all of the candy is equal to his body weight at the time he made the piece. This detail coupled with the fact that Torres was dying of AIDS, and losing weight rapidly during the time of these installations, completely changes the meaning of the piece. Torres' work is enlightening to my process because his installations demonstrate how to engage the audience in a space that is simultaneously welcoming yet confrontational, a way that allows them to engage with heavier topics that at times can be uncomfortable.



Figure 1. Félix González-Torres, *Untitled* (USA Today)³

³ *Untitled* (USA Today). Félix González-Torres. 1990. In ARTstor [database online]. [cited 20 April 2016]. Available from ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York.



Figure 2. Pepón Osorio, Son's Bedroom ⁴

I want my audience to not only physically engage with my work, but more importantly I want them to emotionally engage with what they are seeing and hearing. I aim to create an experience that will encourage them to empathize rather than sympathize. Pepón Osorio, a Puerto Rican artist, takes on this challenge in his piece, *Badge of Honor*. This work is a two-room installation that invites the audience to watch a conversation between a teenage son and his father who is in prison. Each one is filmed portrait style, and their footage is projected into a room full of trinkets that embody their personas.

Although the son and the father are having a conversation with each other, because of the layout of the space you are only exposed to footage of one speaker at a time. When the audience approaches the rooms the filmed speaker is directing his conversation at them and in that moment the audience is no longer an outsider with sympathy for the tragic situation but instead they become part of the conversation, making it easier for them to empathize. This installation by Osorio inspired me to include clips from recorded audio conversations that I have been having with various Latinas on campus. Making these

⁴ Son's Bedroom. Pepón Osorio. 1995. In ARTstor [database online]. [cited 20 April 2016]. Available from ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York.

one on one conversations public by including direct audio clips creates a sense of vulnerability for the women who are speaking, but also allows the audience to enter a space they would not have access to otherwise.

Dr. Alison Landsberg addresses how individual experiences can be shared in public ways that foster empathy. In her book *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Landsberg coins the term “Prosthetic Memory” which “is the basis or mediated collective identification and the production of potentially counter hegemonic public spheres.”⁵ In her book she talks about simulated experiences like the ones created in the Holocaust museum in D.C., or the African American museum in Detroit, which allow audiences who do not have first hand exposure to those particular traumatic events to immerse themselves in those situations. Landsberg argues that these manufactured experiences can create “prosthetic memories,” where people who never experienced the Holocaust or American enslavement can take on those memories, and take ownership of them as if those memories were their own. Although I do not agree with how far Landsberg

extends the comparison between lived experiences and simulated experiences, I do agree that an immersive and direct method of story telling can help the audience develop empathy for a situation they have not lived through.

Methodology

I came across the inspiration for my project over the summer, as I was sifting through a digital archive on Chicana history and stumbled upon an interview of Dr. Burciaga explaining her concept of the adobe ceiling. Immediately I knew that I wanted to center a project on this concept because it resonated with me as a concentrated specific with an encompassing reach of the Latina experience.

This concept was a rich starting point for exploration. I began to brainstorm how I could translate this academic theory into something people of all backgrounds could feel and understand through visuals. Although I believe in the importance of academic scholarship as a form of knowledge justice, I feel more strongly about using visuals and narratives to disseminate academic information to audiences who normally would not have exposure

5 Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. 21. Print.

to this research. From the moment I first heard the term “adobe ceiling”, it created a feeling of inescapability, discomfort, and constriction. Although I primarily consider myself a graphic designer I felt that in order to capture all of its complexities I had to create some kind of installation.

Once I had a solid idea of how I wanted the environment to feel I began sketching possible structures that could embody those qualities. Sketching is an important aspect of my methodology, as it begins to bridge my ideas and physical work. I use my sketches as a form



Figure 3. Laser Cut Prototype

of reminders for what I want to make or to render all of the different possibilities my project can take. However as I have learned from my previous experiences working in three-dimensional space, in this arena sketching is very limited in its problem solving potential. These sketches soon led to small paper prototypes, followed by laser cut wooden iterations. This exploration also included experimenting with the materials I planned on using, to better understand their physical properties and capabilities.

This exploratory approach to my methodology allowed me to broaden the scope of my project. After multiple critiques I began to transition the idea of my installation from a very literal small and uncomfortable physical environment to an environment that could convey those same traits through other media. I began to shift my vision for this project from a visual exploration of Cecilia’s adobe ceiling to a multimedia one, with an emphasis on the auditory experience. In the beginning I wanted to create a space that would focus on the feeling of being oppressed in a university setting like the University of Michigan. But after hearing feedback from my peers I realized that focusing on this specific experience was a bit too abstract for an audience that has not been exposed to these everyday

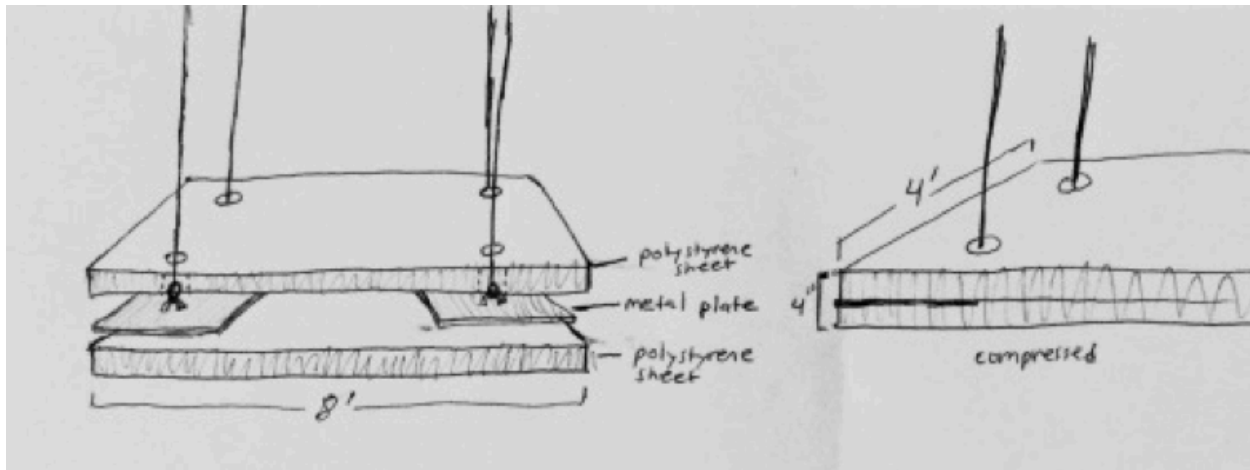


Figure 4. Ceiling Sketch

experiences. I shifted to recording audio interviews, because they were able to convey both the feelings I originally anticipated with the detailed directness that was missing in the beginning of my process.

Another pivotal period in my process occurred nearing the end of the fall semester. During critiques I began to realize that the connections I was expecting the audience to make — between the installation and the struggles of these women — were often not happening. I believe this was the case because I was expecting a non-Latino audience to feel these struggles even though their lived experiences were so far removed from the stories they were hearing. After receiving consecutive constructive feedback the installation began transitioning from a singular structure to a multicomponent journey. This structural evolution ultimately

encourages the audience to better understand the Latina experience through a gradual buildup, which begins at a very general level and then works its way up to the specific experience of being a Latina in this institution.

Creative Work

The layout of my installation is every bit as important as the individual works themselves, because it dictates how the audience will experience the narrative I am trying to create. I wanted my installation to be a gradual experience, slowly introducing the audience to the specifics of being a Latina in institutional environments, starting from a distanced critical view and ending with an internal understanding of and participation in the individual experience.

A projection of quotes from moments broadcasted on mainstream media serves as the entry point to my installation. These quotes are pulled from footage in contemporary popular culture that reveal direct and indirect forms of racism and xenophobia towards Latino Americans. The purpose of this work is to let the audience know what the installation is about without being confrontational about their actions and identities. This piece allows the audience to be critical in their engagement without yet forcing them to be self-critical.

The second component of the installation is *El Techo de Adobe*, which consists of a 6' x 8' slab of

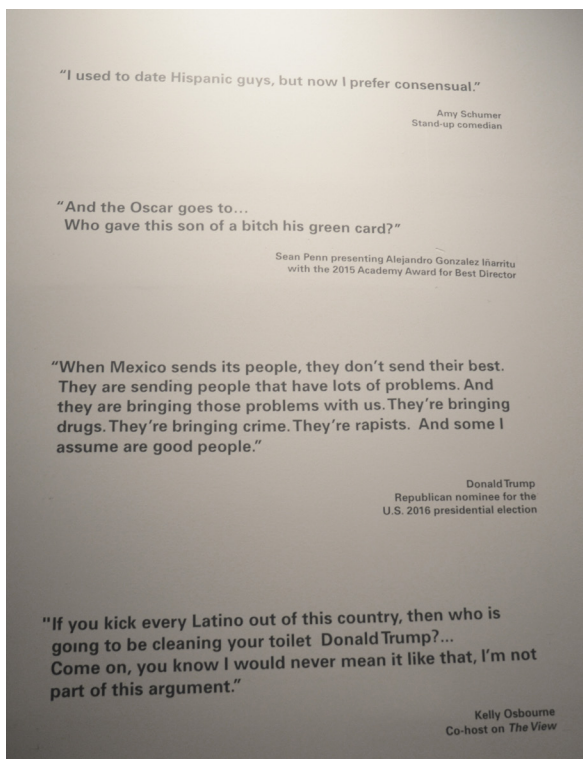


Figure 5. Vinyl Quotes

adobe that hangs 7.5' off of the ground. The final iteration is made from coated sheets of polystyrene foam, which made the ceiling significantly lighter. This ceiling is embedded with five speakers that play short clips of interviews I have recorded of women sharing what their experiences have been like as Latinas at the University of Michigan. The audio only plays from one speaker at a time and alternates with each story. The purpose of this piece is to transition the experience from a general critique of bigotry in America to a record of very specific instances that we might each have been a part of at one time or another.

The final component is *La Tortilladora*, a small 5" x 7" sculpture in the form of a tortilladora. This piece is set on a small wooden table next to a stack of white sheets of paper. Instead of making tortillas, this press allows the audience to interact and engage with the installation, as they create an embossed print on a sheet of paper to keep for themselves. Each print reveals a quote from one of the interviews, accompanied with the link for the website where the audience can listen to the audio clips that will be playing from the ceiling. The purpose of this sculpture is to continue pushing the audience out of their self designated roles as viewers.



Figure 6. *El Techo de Adobe*



Figure 7. *La Tortilladora*

Conclusion

The goal of this project was to create an experience for a non-Latino audience that would challenge them to step outside their roles and become active participants in understanding the personal and systemic barriers that often make higher education environments unwelcoming for Latinas.

After seeing *The Adobe Ceiling* come together in person I would like to expand the installation beyond the three pieces. In its current state the installation is catered towards a non-Latino audience, but in the future I would like to add a few more pieces that would be directed at Latinas in hopes of making the experience take

on more of a dual purpose. Perhaps I will make a piece that touches on the tokenization so many of the women described.

I am currently in the process of creating a website to house the documentation of the installation. The website will include a short description, images from the sculptures, and the edited audio interviews. While I am still in Ann Arbor I will continue to interview Latinas on campus and record our conversations to put up on *The Adobe Ceiling* website. In the future I can see this project expanding beyond the University of Michigan, and including stories from women on campuses all across the country.



Figure 8. *The Adobe Ceiling*

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