

# lime green is for the taco stand: stories of immigration, grief, and tenderness

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tenderness**

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Muralism

Nicho

Nepantla

Ometeotl

Virgen de Guadalupe

Whitewalling



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*introduction*

*And then, Nana, I painted these round shapes, they don't really make sense but they feel right. They could be joining together or separating from each other. If you could, would you go back?*

*Yes, mija*

*Nana, look at these borders I painted, I wanted them to look like the borders I sewed on the dress*

*Yes, mija*

*Borders and border crossing are always on my mind Nana. The pieces of canvas on that one almost touch each other, and a wound lies in the middle. Did you cross the border?*

*Yes, mija*

*The birds fly together like arrow points just like in the movies Nana. They cross imaginary borders just like us, north, south, north, south. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be a bird?*

*Yes, mija*

*This one seemed like it should sit on the ground and not hang. But still close enough to the other ones to feel kindred and also calling attention to the floor and to our feet. To our root. It's hard for me to explain. Does that make any sense at all Nana?*

*Yes, mija*

*I chose purple and turquoise for the wall because they remind me of you and the dresses you wore. Those are still your favorite colors right?*

*Yes, mija<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> A woman with waist length silver hair who only spoke spanish and wore exclusively white, held my face and told me in Spanish that we all could benefit from healing our inner child. She had us make little dough versions of ourselves to hold and whisper to lovingly. She told me to close my eyes and wail into the earth, and let out the things I had never said. I wasn't ready to give myself up yet in front of her and so I did my own version privately, part of that experience is documented in the poem above.





Figure 1, *4 walled nicho*, 2022, installation view

I wrote the above poem imagining that my late maternal grandmother and I were having a conversation while standing in front of my artwork (figure 1). She was the first painter I ever knew and I often see my work first through my eyes and then through hers. In my work I address the complexities of immigration; much is gained from leaving our homeland and much is also lost. I use storytelling, painting, and sewing to make sculptures, murals, fiber works, semi-transparent window installations, and books that share my family's experience with moving across the U.S./Mexico border, across the United States itself and across Texas.

In this thesis I will be describing my work using the following major themes: storytelling, in between and joining (piecing), muraling/painting, and spirituality. To begin with storytelling and memory acknowledges the impetus of my work at the core. I make

art to share in experiences that I have had, that my family has had and to make connections and create community with people who have had similar experiences. Being in between and joining together is my second theme where I address the difrasismo,<sup>2</sup> where two separate words combine to create a third meaning. This is where I address my mestizaje<sup>3</sup> and how I've created my identity through the joining of multiple places, multiple identities and multiple homelands. In my artistic practice I use sewing or piecing<sup>4</sup> to address this process, where two pieces of fabric are joined face to face, the stitching bringing them together and then being pressed apart again, the two pieces of fabric now only joined together by two threads, along one seam. This nepantla<sup>5</sup> state is how I see the construction of my identity. Where Mexico and the U.S. were once one length of fabric, of land, they were cut by governments making claims, and now my identity is the seam, migration is the seam. In the third section I describe my painting practice and my relationship to my late maternal grandmother's painting practice, domesticana<sup>6</sup>, murals and hinged paintings. Finally I discuss spirituality in my work and the ways that my upbringing in the Catholic church has influenced my relationship to the light, color and objects within sacred spaces.

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<sup>2</sup> Difrasismo is a literary trope used by the Aztec people that describes the creation of a third idea through the invocation of two others. Ex. flower and song (in *xochitl* in *cuicatl*) referred to poetry or art

<sup>3</sup> Name for a new people created as a result of the mixing of Native Indian blood with Spanish blood during the invasion of South and Central America in the 1500's

<sup>4</sup> Piecing: process where fabric pieces are sewn together to form a block, garment or quilt.

<sup>5</sup> Nepantla: the Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, used contemporarily to convey the Chicano state of transition between one culture and another

<sup>6</sup> The female equivalent of Rasquachismo which centers around the domains of women and their cultural practices

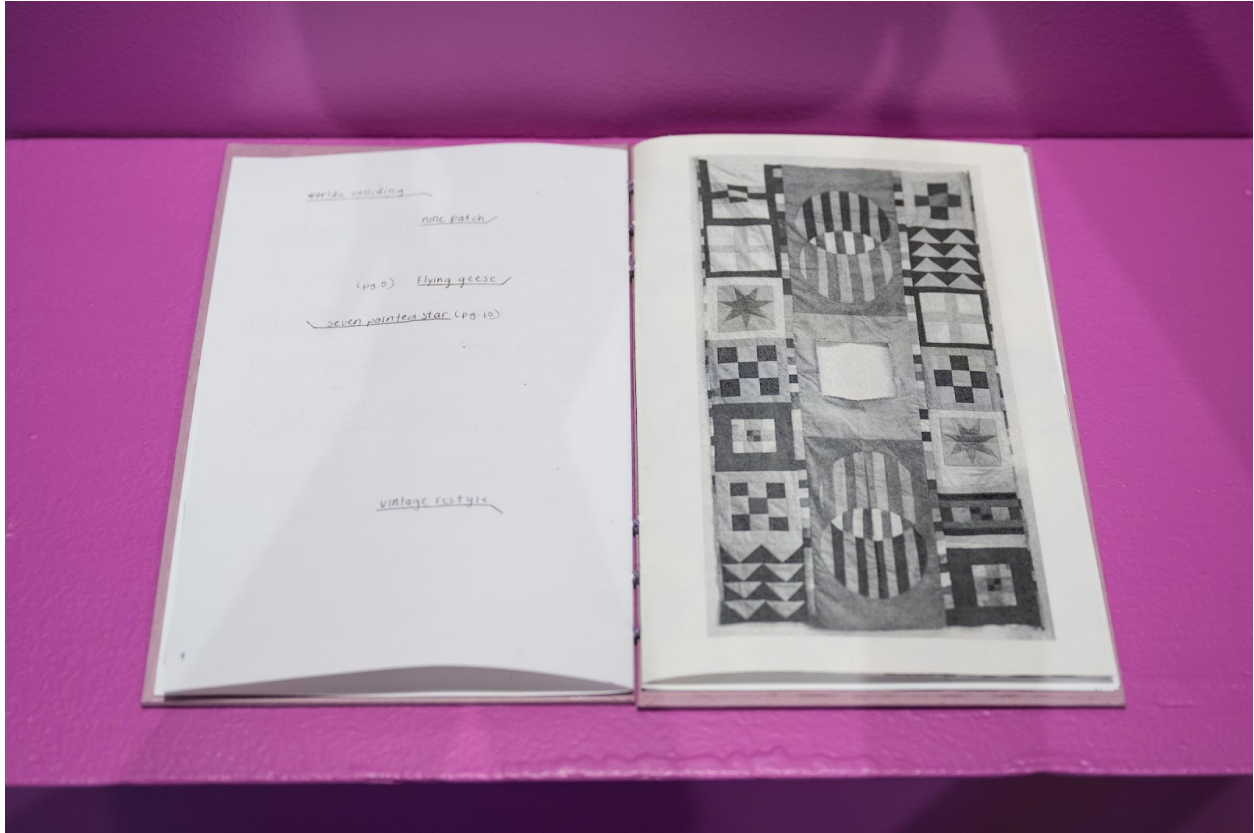
*storytelling and memory*

Figure 2, *versos, tiernas*, 2022, coptic bound artist book

I created a book of poems and images to go along with my works in a few installations, including the thesis exhibition. The book started as a miniature key or index of a room in which the poems serve as an index to the various paintings and walls. The book was a simple folded zine printed on astrobright paper. This felt like an important gesture in service of offering a decoded view of the space that viewers could choose to engage with or not. Later this book evolved into the above form (see figure 2), a coptic bound book with 15 pages folded into signatures of varied paper types, with hard purple covers and purple stitching, that included poems, photographs, scans, and drawings. I remain

committed to the idea that the book is an optional invitation to understand the work on another level, and, while important, is not absolutely necessary to engage with and connect to every viewer.

While book making is a relatively new addition, writing has been integral to my studio practice since 2014. Finding the conviction to share my written work along with my visual work is in part due to the reading on indigenous epistemologies in a critical Indigenous studies class that I took while here at Michigan. Robin Wall Kimmerer writes of the ability of stories to convey a relationship between indigenous ways of knowing and healing the earth in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. This framing of knowledge passed down over generations spoke to me particularly in the way that I think of the traditions of making that have been shared with me by my previous generations.

I was also lucky to read *and* hold a zine made by the artist Amy Sillman, called *the O-G* vol. 3 from 2010. I had seen her other zines online but I was able to physically interact with the third volume. The zine is the size of a half letter sheet, with 28 pages, stapled in two places, the staples in my borrowed copy have become rusted, a CD is adhered to the back cover. I don't have a CD player so I haven't heard the audio. The contents appear to be a deceptively clumsy (not clumsy) compilation of fuzzy reproductions of artworks, collages, screenshots of websites, LP covers, and the drawings/notes by the artist. Seeing this object and knowing a little bit about Amy Sillman's paintings gave me the permission that I needed to be more wide ranging in my inclusions in my own artist book.

### *Migration story*

In Mexico my family lived in a town called Miguel Aleman, Tamaulipas. To the north is the US/Mexico border and the Texas side town of Roma, to the east is El Azúcar, a large artificial lake created by a dam, and finally to the south and south east is the border of the neighboring state, Nuevo Leon. I've visited this place once; I tell people we only travel to Mexico when someone dies. I tried to convince my father to come with me last summer, but he was too afraid. Afraid of the kidnappings, random killings and of being stopped by border patrol.

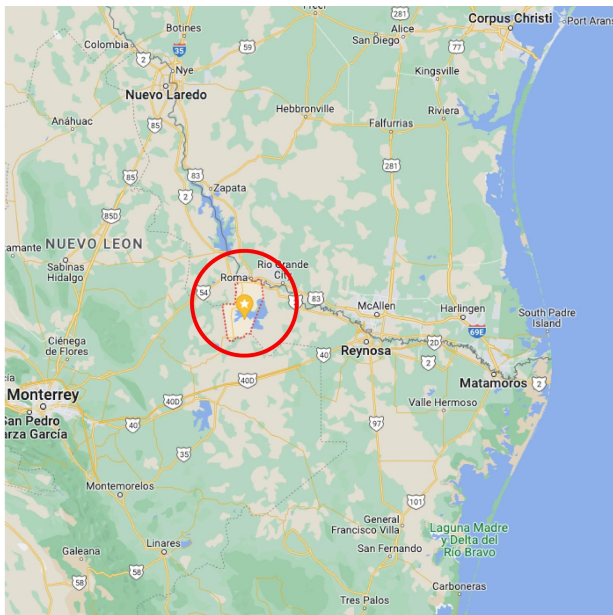


Figure 3, Google maps image of South Texas showing Nuevo Laredo, Miguel Aleman (marked), Reynosa, and Matamoros

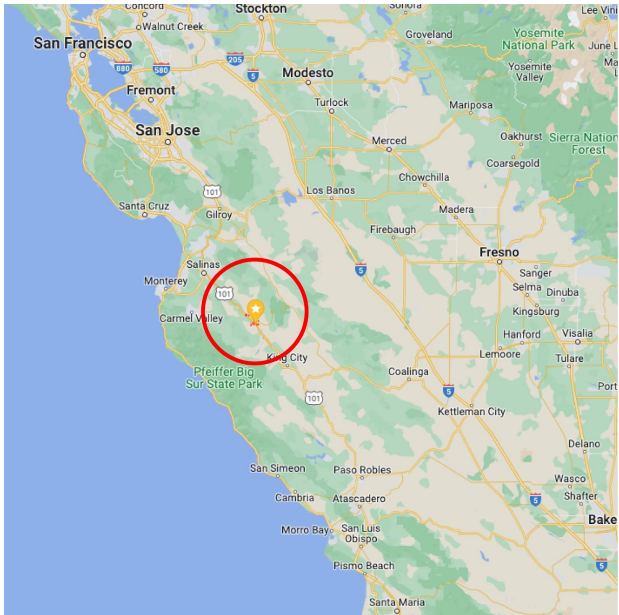


Figure 4, Google maps image of Northern California showing San Francisco, San Jose, Soledad (marked), and Fresno

My father's family left this area in the mid 1960's, the destination was the Salinas Valley, California. They settled in a farming town 50 miles south of San Jose. My youngest aunt is the only one born in the States, the rest of the siblings went through the long and expensive process of becoming citizens. It took my father 25 years from when he arrived to become a US citizen. I have a photo from his naturalization

ceremony in 1993, holding a tiny American flag, his glorious crown of curls stolen by chemo treatments, but with a huge grin on his face nevertheless.

My father learned English in school and in the summers he and his four other siblings worked in the fields. His stories from those times are burned into my soul.<sup>7 8</sup> Having been so far removed from the fields of California by both time and distance; those stories helped me understand what it had been like for my family in California.

On my mothers side the story is much more fuzzy. My great grandparents seem to have been the generation that left Mexico between 1896 and 1927. They came from San Luis Potosi, Mexico and settled in a mining town about halfway between Austin and College Station called Rockdale. All my grandmother's brothers and sisters, fifteen in total, were all born in the US and stayed in the area as the mines closed and Walmarts opened.

This history of movement and eventual settling in Texas is an important context for my sense of identity both within my work and in my life.

## Memory

In many ways memory and remembering are as much my materials and methods as paint and fabric. I cherish the moments when I'm at home or on the phone and my father bursts into telling a story. In my life I catch myself prompting my friends and family to tell me stories and I am delighted when people let me tell stories.

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<sup>7</sup> He told me about the taste of a still warm tomato he snuck off to eat while on a break. And then how starkly contrasted the taste was by the inevitable stench of the fruit fallen from the plants a few weeks later. And still having to step on the fields to harvest as they rotted, every cell in his body telling him to retch.

<sup>8</sup> He told me how my grandmother would wake up at 3am most days to make a fresh pot of beans and a fresh batch of tortillas for the rest of the family to take to the fields. They would sit in the shade eating those bean tacos wrapped in foil.

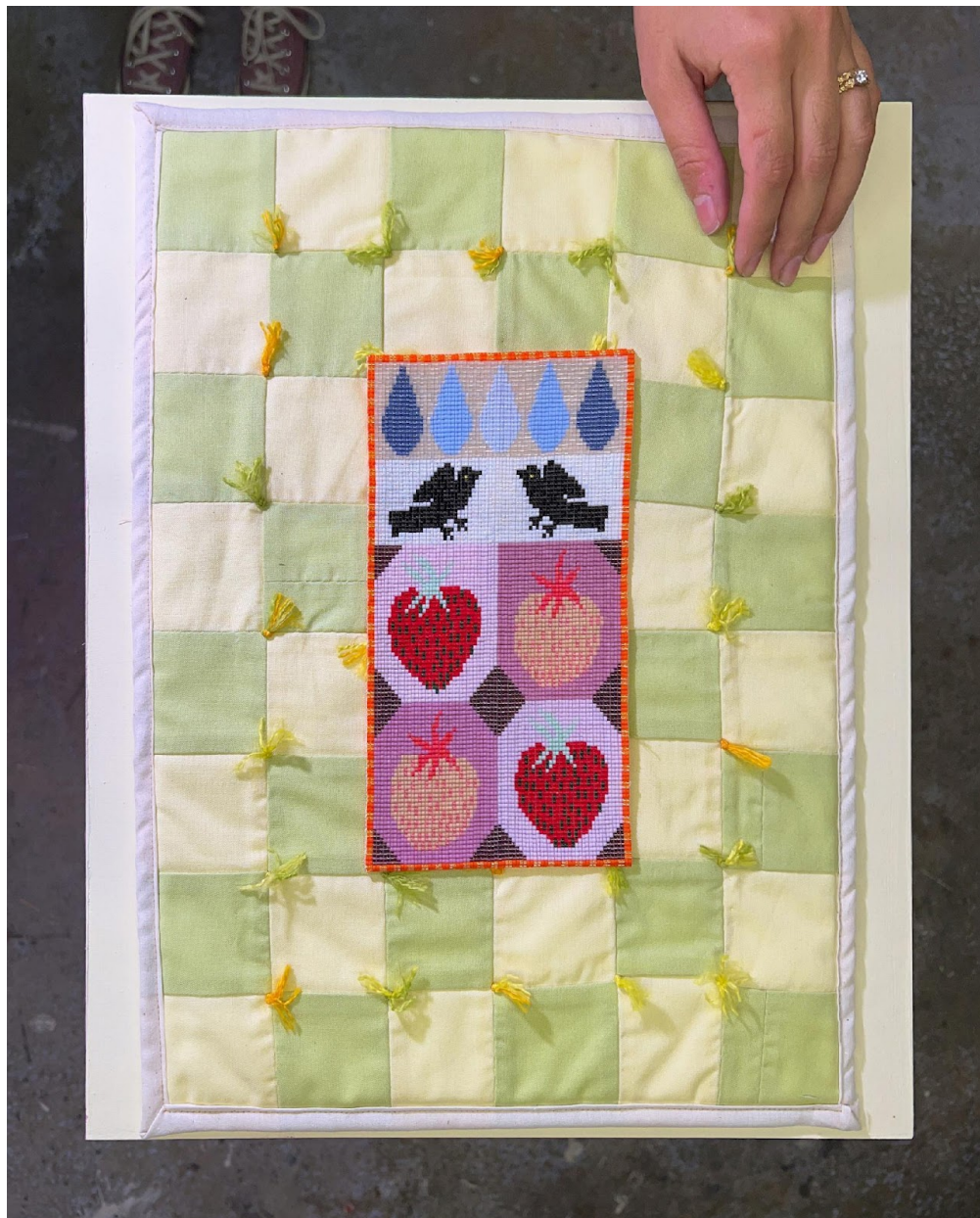


Figure 5, *raindrops, crows, strawberries*, 2022, beads, string, quilted mat

In 1970 strawberry farm workers in the Salinas Valley joined Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta's strikes against exploitation and for better working conditions. My Tia Aminta, Tio Milo and Tio Gilbert participated in the United farm workers union (UFW) organizing and marched many times. My father was too young to remember. In the movement there were gains overall and wages rose incrementally but ultimately working in the

fields was still extremely difficult work. Ultimately in 1975 they were able to leave the area for better opportunities and to be closer to family in Texas. They packed up their home and traveled there, crossing the country in the other direction, again toward better opportunities.

After a trip with my father last summer beginning at the border in Texas and eventually ending in New Mexico, I wrote a poem about strawberries.

in how many bites is a strawberry usually eaten?  
one, if it's small enough two, maybe 3, perhaps 4  
"this one will be different" the woman on the stage calls out  
a wet, cold strawberry sits in my hand

now, eat this strawberry in 20 bites, 30 bites  
eat the top too, the green leaves are crisp and bitter  
let each bite keep a busy mind grounded in the moment  
let the thoughts run in and out, and bask in the calm

finish your strawberry, cross the threshold to a courtyard  
to find the group of black crows,  
who are usually talkative, squawking and calling out to each other  
"they're probably talkin' shit" my friend would say to me

but today they are silent  
and the air is heavy  
and then the sky starts to cry  
the kind of cry that had been slowly building

a sigh of relief leaves my chest  
the rain is an answer to prayers  
said around drumming circles, screamed through tears  
it rained for 4 days

I wove a beaded tapestry (figure 5) as a storytelling tool for the poem above. In the photograph it sits on top of a pedestal, resting on a quilted mat in checkered yellow and green. The quilted mat is hand tied with yellow, green, or orange string at each intersection of the grid.



Hand tying is a method of quilting where instead of a continuous running stitch, the quilt layers are tied together every few inches with string or yarn. In the quilting world, hand tying is seen as a beginner friendly alternative to the unwieldy task of quilting on a home machine. I found that I liked the contrast of the soft texture of the ties next to the glass beads.

In this piece I was working with the material of stories. How might holding and touching this item engage the listener and storyteller more deeply in the story being told? I was thinking of Faith Ringgold's story quilts as well as the extremely varied woven and embroidered huipils of Mexico which tell their own stories about how indigenous dress and fiber techniques interacted with Spanish imports

### *Medicinal story-telling*

Storytelling is a way to heal from grief, both familial and colonial grief. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, the border is an “open wound” (2012, 25). A visible and invisible line that radiates, generates and perpetuates pain. In her piece, *Historian as Curandera*, Aurora Levins Morales talks about using history as a way to “restore to the dehistoricized a sense of identity and possibility” (1997, 1). In my work I want to highlight the loss of identity my family and other Latinx/Chicanx families have experienced through the traumatic event of colonialism which manifests via racialization and racism in the United States. Further, Morales writes that “Such ‘medicinal’ histories seek to re-establish the connections between peoples and their histories, to reveal the mechanisms of power, the steps by which their current condition of oppression was achieved, through a series of decisions made by real people to dispossess them; but also to reveal the multiplicity, creativity and persistence of resistance among the

oppressed.” (Morales 2019, 1) Through my work I engage with my family history and colonial history to contextualize and produce my work in pursuit of radical healing.

Again, Gloria Anzaldúa writes in her foundational text *Borderlands/La Frontera* that the border is a long wound, where the 3rd world grates up against the first and bleeds, and before there’s a chance for the wound to scab, it bleeds again and again (Anzaldúa 2012, 25). I propose storytelling as a potential salve for the wound, where telling, sharing and acknowledging are mobilized for healing.

*being in between and joining together*

Figure 6, Detail of geese wall in “lime green is for the taco stand”

I always knew that my family came from Mexico. It was a place that has always been a few hours drive away and yet was completely inaccessible. Accessible by memory and material remnants but not the land itself. Mexico the physical land was always off limits. Even in the summer of 2022 when my father and I returned to the border towns near where we had crossed many times, it was too dangerous to go back to the place we had lived before. I had never lived there, and my father had only lived there for the first four years of his life. It was always so strange to hear my friends at school talk about their summer vacations and spring breaks on the beaches and nearby islands of

Mexico, knowing that I was not allowed back, because of fear. Perhaps the beaches would have been beautiful but how could I go there knowing that what my heart really yearned for was the dusty hot farm town where my father was born? Beaches wrapped up in a still present colonial tourism which marks some areas of Mexico as being safe for visitors (especially white visitors) and not safe for visitors. The small border towns where the most beautiful stories of my family history are marked as not safe, they represent unpredictable violence and unpredictable people.

I constantly ask my family to tell me stories about living in Mexico, how exactly we got here, when they remember traveling back, what the journey was like, what they missed, how a Tia or Tio we've lost touch with or who had passed on would cook this meal and so on. If I could only just remember every detail then maybe it would be as if I had been there too.

I began to see my sewing practice as related to this place of in betweenness. I found some connection to the invocation of the Nahuatl word *nepantla*<sup>9</sup> and the goddess Coyolxahqui.<sup>10</sup> Chicanas and our multifaceted identities, whether created by movement, different languages, different cultures, are marked and marginalized by this fragmentation (Cruz 2001, 668). These ideas of the fragmented self are related to my dedication to sewing - a process of construction and deconstruction. Construction when I sew, deconstruction when my needle slips and I use my seam ripper. I find a similar

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<sup>9</sup> A Nahuatl word that refers to experiences of violent colonization, miscegenation, and transculturation that began in the 16th century and that placed the indigenous people of Mesoamerica in an "in-between" cultural situation. *Nepantla* is the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures. (Anzaldúa 2002, 549)

<sup>10</sup> Coyolxauhqui is the Aztec moon goddess. Murdered out of jealousy by her brother Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of sun and war. Their mother is Coatlicue, goddess of life and death. Coyolxauhqui is the banished and mutilated sister who is transformed through her pain and betrayal into the moon. For Chicanas she represents the efforts to rebuild ourselves amidst the colonial present.

process of construction in the methods of making that my mother and grandmothers passed down to me. I am broken by their experiences of displacement, our disconnection from our home and language, I am reconstituted by their unconditional love and creativity. Then when the quilt is sewn up in the end, it exists as a record of my many fragmentations. Nepantla describes the inbetween space that my family and I occupy as Americans, Mexicans, immigrants, and I look to the wisdom of Coyolxauhqui for ways forward.



Figure 7, Artist at work

### *Difrasismo*

The difrasismo is a Nahuatl literary trope, which invokes a third element through the combination of two others. Still spoken in a modern form today, Nahuatl is a group of Uto-Aztec languages spoken in central Mexico, and is the indigenous language of the Aztec people. The concept of the difrasismo is important to my approach to painting, my position in the art world as a visibly Latinx woman, and the practice of understanding my

location in the Latinx community. Laura E Perez speaks of the use of *difrasismo* in her book *Chicana Art* (2007), to maintain the sometimes culturally untranslatable coexistence of non-western and otherwise non-canonized aesthetic systems (14). I work with the concept of *difrasismo* in my writing practice and also through the combination of text and image; high art (painting) and low art (crafting); Western art sensibility and Indigenous epistemologies— through these combinations I aim to evoke a more complete story.

### *Mestizaje*

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* focuses on the cross cultural and cross media which resonates in many ways across my project. Anzaldúa describes the border and mestiza consciousness as places of possibility for growth. She writes that while the border is an open wound, it is also a place where crossing and connection can and do happen. Mestiza consciousness is an acknowledgement of Latinx heritage of being mixed race, between Spanish and Indian. Anzaldúa brings attention to this mixed state beyond racial categories but also extends her theory toward different classes, sexual orientations, gender identities and the religious/spirituality. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa mixes historical writing, her poetry, poetry by others and personal stories together to create a broader representation of a mestiza experience. This text is useful to me to give language and permission to use my identity to speak across cultures. Giving language to what I have always known and felt but could not verbalize until reading her work. Anzaldúa writes: "The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the

images in her work how duality is transcended (2001, 102).” Her writing inspires me to create alternative perspectives through my work as well as mix multiple mediums.



Figure 8, *granny squares*, 2021, wool and acrylic yarn

*Granny square, quilting, piecing*

Granny squares are made by working in rounds and are a modular crocheting technique that is used to make blankets of any size, clothing and home goods.

Sewing and fiber art has been a part of my life since I was born. I was wrapped in handmade baby blankets the moment I parted from my mother's body. Then, my grandmothers fought (lovingly, jokingly) over which handmade baby blanket I would sleep with. I was scolded for eating dinner on the 5 foot wide crochet lace tablecloth my father's mother made for our coffee table. My halloween costumes were almost always embellished or made completely by hand by my mother. I've slept countless nights under hand sewn quilts. My mother made all of my sisters' high school dance uniforms, each sequin and tassel sewn by hand, this was Texas after all. My home environment was full of examples of the women in my family making what they didn't have, asserting that they could do it themselves, and taking control of the place they loved.

By coincidence, I was sent to a Montessori school where we were encouraged to follow our own interests. I have memories of pouring over a book of crochet squares, turning each page exclaiming that "no, *that one* is my favorite one!" I spent hours winding yarn balls until my hands cramped from holding the ball. Still in my heart is the rhyme that taught me to knit.

Under the Fence

Catch the Sheep

Back you go

Off you leap.



Fiber work played a critical role in my development during my childhood, connecting me to my family members and connecting me to making as a futuristic, radical act. As I grew older and started to study “Art” more formally in high school and college I started to see that aspect of my creative work be dismissed while painting and other mediums were favored.

I created two granny squares (see figure 8) from a variety of bright, textured, extra chunky gauges of yarn. Creating these granny squares allowed me to explore women's work and the knowledge passed down to me through my female family members.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2015) discusses and legitimates stories and storytelling as an epistemology, a way of thinking, holding knowledge, and interacting with the world, something deeply rooted in indigenous epistemologies. This framing of knowledge passed down over generations spoke to me particularly in the way that I think of the traditions of making that have been shared with me by my previous generations.



Figure 9, Flying Geese Variation Quilt, 1935, Annie E. Pettway

Toward the end of my undergraduate education I worked with a professor who told me that painting is a fiber art, and in me a light clicked back on. I had been told that painting/drawing and sewing were separate and that I needed to make a choice about which kind of artist I was. I came to quilts and fabric piecing through collage. I loved that

sometimes while looking at a quilt I could trick my eyes into thinking it was paper, and same with collage, tricking my eyes into thinking it was fabric instead. The intense and strong graphic quality of quilts that are simultaneously soft and pliable was so much more interesting to me than a static, hard, delicate object like a collage or even a painting. The Gees Bend quilts in particular were extremely transformative to see. Their innovative patterns and use of repetition excited and delighted me. Faith Ringgold's story quilts also served as an influential precedent, along with quilting as a community practice and as a wayfinding technique along the Underground Railroad. Quilting became a vehicle for storytelling, collective memory, love, and futurity in my work. I began to work to tell the stories of the women who influenced my creative journey and started with my grandmother.



Figure 10, *quilted huipil*, 2022, quilting cotton

In 2011 my grandmother laid in hospice care. I was thinking of her while I made this pieced huipil (figure 10). I never sewed it together completely, I had been thinking of how the huipiles she had always worn were cut up to allow for ease of care, she hated the hospital type gowns. I had made this piece in the same design as the back strap woven huipiles of Oaxaca. I dedicated this piece to her spirit of creativity and skills in the fabric arts. I included specific blocks and colors that reminded me of her. The seven pointed star is for her unwavering faith and the piñata's she had for our birthdays, and the purple nine patch is in her favorite shade of purple.



Figure 11, Installation view of "lime green is for the taco stand"

In my thesis exhibition I used the flying geese quilt motif because geese and their natural impulse to relocate themselves feels akin to how my family and other families must cross and recross the border, and cross and recross the U.S., both guided by various instincts. I hung my geese wall with the points of the geese toward the south, as a nod to where I come from (see figure 11). I wrote the following to accompany my work with the flying geese:

Flying geese go north  
A quilt in a window with flying geese used to be a sign for people seeking  
freedom  
I think of my ancestors, going North  
Heading to California  
Looking for work, looking north  
My green geese point north too

And they point down  
Rooting me here in this box  
This box of my own making  
My angel number is 3  
I've never really liked even numbers which is funny because my name is a very  
satisfying 12 letters  
8 + 4  
But if you break it down by halves thankfully you get back to 3  
12 6 3  
I love flying geese  
I never saw them actually flying like that outside of a movie or a painting until I  
moved here  
I love making them too, there's a no waste pattern I found online that comes  
together so fast  
Then I made some nine patches, that's a good odd number too  
If 3 is my angel number, then 9 feels like a sister angel number

The geese wall is roughly 10 feet tall, a little less than a third of the height of the actual border wall at some sections. Further, the geese wall served as its own boundary between my exhibition space and the work of another in my cohort and the window walls were a transparent boundary between the corporate lobby space outside the gallery windows. In this case demarcation of space was an act of care for my cohort member whose exhibition needs were different than mine, as well as an act of separation between the corporate space and my exhibition. Though the separation was only superficial as my colorful homage to familial knowledge spilled out uncontrollably into the sterile space on the other side of the windows (see figure 19).



Figure 12, Yolanda Lopez, Virgen de Guadalupe series, 1978

The act of refusal to be contained and enclosed connects to the body and spirit of the Chicana. Yolanda Lopez created a series of works in which the Virgen de Guadalupe appears as different everyday women. Her work disputes the disempowering patriarchal interpretations of the Mother of God which cast her as a model of female acquiescence. These images refigure the racialized body of the Latina/Chicana into a temple of the sacred. As I sat at my mother's sewing machine creating my geese wall, I couldn't help but see myself and her and both of my grandmothers as the woman in the middle picture: skilled, valuable, creative, makers, dedicated to their work and to their families.

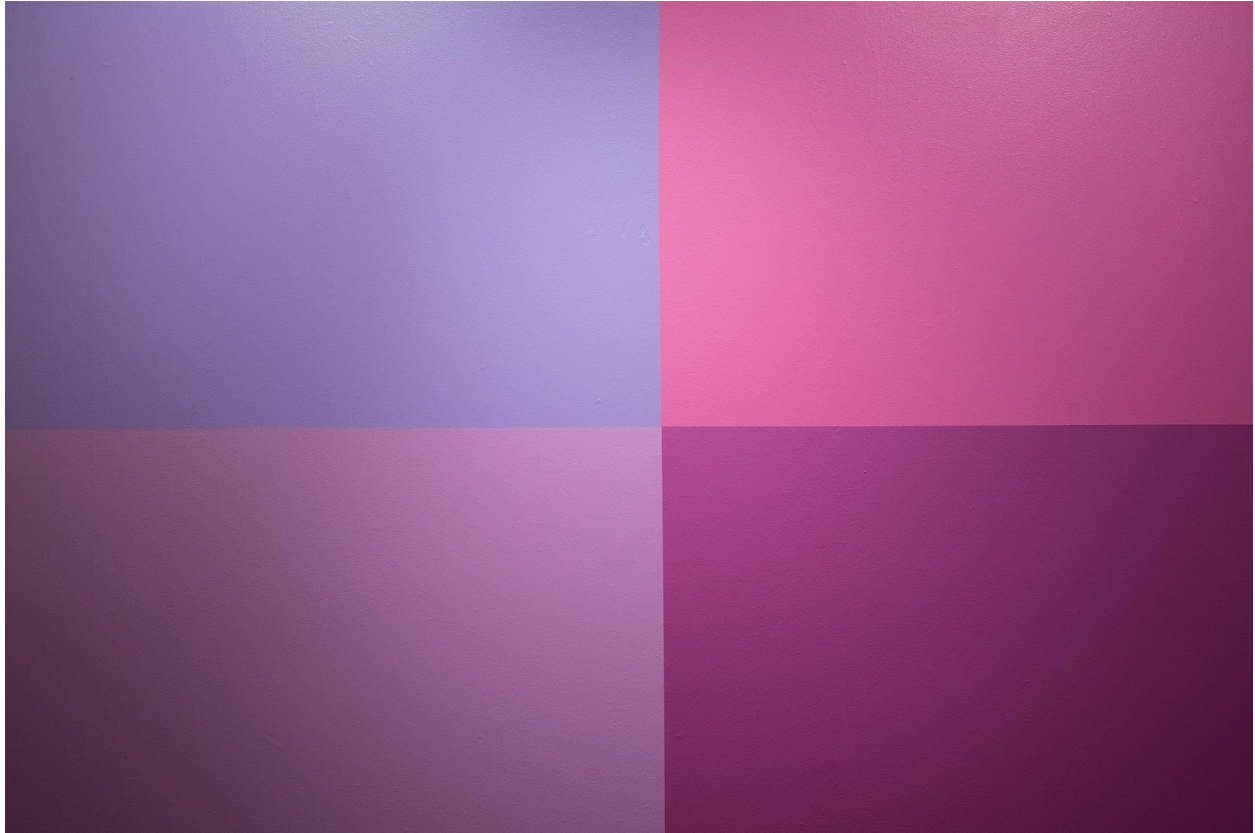
*folding hinging painting muraling*

Figure 13, Detail view of *quilt painting* in “lime green is for the taco stand”

*Painting*

My grandmother painted the walls of her dining room with fields of green grass, wildflowers, cows, chickens, and barns.<sup>11</sup> It was a simple pastoral scene, not unlike the land on which she lived. Before moving to Houston she had grown up there with my great grandparents and it was my mother and her siblings who had been the tiny visitors to the land across the highway from the mines. My grandmother was the first painter I ever knew. Hanging in my kitchen right now is a painting she made on the bottom of a

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<sup>11</sup> With the scent of fresh tortillas in the air I remember sitting at the round table, leaning over the sticky plastic table cloth and staring at the painting that spanned the little corner of the room



small metal cooking pan. I never saw her paint but I know she did. The hidden nature of her painting practice makes me wonder if for her there was a sense of shame or maybe even deep privacy that came along with painting. Calling myself a painter or an artist makes me feel closer to her than any famous artist.

Did my grandmother know that she was taking part in a long tradition of Mexican women expressing their agency and creativity within the home? She might not have. But her painting practice left a lasting impression on my own artistic practice. Painting her small house was one way that she could take control of her space, her kitchen and the dining room. Amalia Mesa Baines writes of the practice of domesticana,

Chicana rasquache (domesticana), like its male counterpart, has grown not only out of both resistance to majority culture and affirmation of cultural values, but from women's restrictions with the culture. A defiance of an imposed Anglo-American cultural identity, and the defiance of restrictive gender identity within Chicano culture, has inspired a female rasquachismo. Domesticana comes as a spirit of Chicana emancipation grounded in advanced education, and to some degree, Anglo-American expectations in a more open society. With new experiences of opportunity, Chicanas were able to challenge existing community restrictions regarding the role of women. Techniques of subversion through play with traditional imagery and cultural material are characteristic of domesticana.

(Mesa-Bains 1999, 161)

Perhaps the only place my grandmother could express herself and her subjectivity was within the walls of her home. Nevertheless, it remains an important influence in my development as a painter.

*Muraling*

Any time I show the paintings in figure 13 and call them murals, there's always someone who brings up Chicano muralism<sup>12</sup>. Every time this comparison comes up I try to extend the comparison one step further, I admit that I tend toward mild distaste for the masculine centric war-like images that were glorified by this particular style of public art. It was a popular belief by the male mural artists that the work of painting murals was too difficult for women. I learned from Laura E. Perez about the distinctly different approach to muralism by Chicana feminists. In the 1970's Chicana feminists used their mural practice to tell unique stories from the perspective of women without the common stereotyping. Making complex paintings that involved experiences that were common to the lives of women in the barrios they painted.

I find that sizing my paintings up to wall size has a similar effect on the viewer as other mural work; the walls act as a monumental expression of reverence for the methods of quilting I make reference to. The size also leads to an increased level of immersion of the viewer into the piece. It's important to me that viewers are given an opportunity to interact with color intimately as I made careful decisions about individual colors and my associations with them as well as the relationships between colors to create complex color theory relationships and enhance a sense of space and form.

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<sup>12</sup> The barrio mural movement is perhaps the most powerful and enduring contribution of the Chicano art movement nationwide. Created and nurtured by the humanist ideals of Chicano struggles for self-determination, murals functioned as a pictorial reflection of the social drama. (Ybarra-frausto 2012, 139) Following the robust history of the Mexican muralists, especially, David Alfaro Siqueiros ... Chicano muralism was significant in actualizing a communal approach to the production and dissemination of art. Brigades of artists and residents worked with a director who solicited community input during the various stages of producing the mural. Through such collaborative actions, murals became a large scale, comprehensive public-education system in the barrio." (140)

*Hinge paintings*

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's (Mexican, b. 1988) interest in the history of painting, focusing on 15th-century European altar paintings, informs her queer futuristic multi-paneled works. With a nod to the sculptural forms and religious symbolism of that period, which was synchronous with Western colonial expansion, Toranzo Jaeger reclaims and expands these references, imagining constructions for a decolonized world (Sielwitz, 2022). Referencing devotional altars and autonomous luxury cars, Toranzo Jaeger uses erotic imagery to imagine queer futurity that resists the colonial project of heteronormativity and repression. I admire the reuse of the structure and narrative material of altar painting employed by Jaeger's paintings.

In my work I grapple with my complex relationship with Catholic themes, icons, and materials. Seeing Jaeger's paintings at MoMa PS1 exposed me to another artist's approach to a similar dilemma with a slightly different acknowledgement to futurity. Like many Chicanas before me I'm interested in using the materials of Catholicism to imagine decolonized futures.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See page 41 for a more in depth discussion of Catholicism in Chicana art.



Figure 14, folding painting, 2023, plywood, brass hinges, acrylic, mdf

### *Folding*

I think of my hinged paintings as a miniaturization of a border. Where sections of the border are sometimes one long line, they can also be angled to accommodate the changing topography. The hinges and ability of the paintings to be manipulated became a way to symbolize criticism of the US government negotiating laws that govern borders between the United States and Mexico. The fact that the hinge paintings (border) could be picked up and moved around or flattened and discarded felt like a futuristic proposition of what a world without borders might look like. The modular nature of this installation was intentional and that quality is what makes the piece transcribable onto other border experiences.

In the thesis exhibition I turned the folding paintings into pedestals. The paintings had already been hinged and occupied space differently than a flat painting. Nails and glue replaced hinges, fixing each plane into a relationship with the others. Each side of the pedestals is painted in a different color, with similar smooth surface treatments. As one surface of color touches another, the line where they touch is an intersection point. If each color were a race, a definition, a name, a state, a country; how many sides would my box have? If each color were a story, a myth, a deity, what might my faith look like?



Figure 15, Installation view of "lime green is for the taco stand" showing two of the folded paintings

When juxtaposed with the rest of the installation, the sculptures blend in, becoming planes of color in space with which the viewer could exist. My hope is that as the viewer walks through the space, the impression is that colors and textures are put in

conversation; window films with pedestals ; pedestals with fabric; pedestals with walls.

I'm interested in the positioning of the US/Mexico border as both an amalgam of fear and possibility as well as an ordinary yet legally contested space. The wall exists simultaneously in the minds of those for whom the border crossed, those that crossed once and will never cross again, those who stay away from the border like its mestizaje could infect them, those who seek to control it, and those who seek to end it.

*spirituality*

Figure 16, Beads installation, 2021, nylon rope, pine, acrylic paint

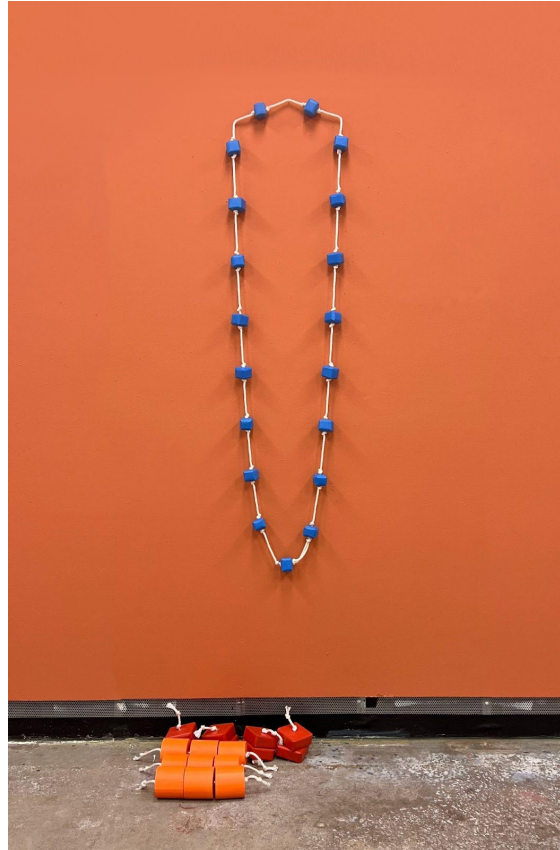


Figure 17, Beads deinstallation, 2021, nylon rope, pine, acrylic paint

## Rosary

I created an arrangement of wooden beads tied together like pearls on a necklace on a circle of white nylon rope. The arrangement of beads is mounted on an orange wall. In the very middle of the circle were orange cylindrical beads arranged in three rows. Around that central arrangement were some more squared beads, in a deep red. The purpose of this grouping of wall beads was to transform a tiny beaded piece that I had

made with a needle, thread and fabric to a larger scale. Some interpreted the beads as prayer beads, an excellent and unforeseen connection to religious objects.

The practice of praying the rosary and collecting rosaries is important to my family, especially as a part of the Catholic tradition of praying the rosary the night before someone is buried. At my grandmother's funeral each attendee received a small box with a blue and silver rosary inside. Then, many weeks after her death I received another rosary, this one had beads made from mother of pearl. I had bought it for her from a nun in Rome three years earlier. My collection of rosaries includes one that was given to me at my quinceañera, one from my grandfather's funeral, another from my paternal grandmother's funeral and another from my Padrino's funeral last year.

Though wrapped up in death, the rosary serves as a connection to those who've passed on and I hang them up in every house I live in, though I'm not an observant Catholic anymore. The rosary is also a beautiful piece of jewelry, a rearview mirror ornament, a wall hanging and a collectible nostalgic object. It can also serve as a tiny pocket church which the user can pick up anywhere to find connection with the divine. Like the kitchen paintings of my grandmother, the rosary connects to a domesticana sensibility, where the rosary is also a rearview mirror ornament, a wall hanging and a collectible nostalgic object. I had a similar goal when creating my nichos, of enacting agency on a space in order to transport the viewer mentally or physically into a contemplative, healing, calming space.

### *Nicho*

In 2022, with the intention of creating a space of possibility and healing, I painted every wall of a project space with large scale quilt motifs. On one wall was an arrangement of



shaped canvases suspended on a turquoise and purple wall. Within the room were two sculptures which held two nichos.<sup>14</sup> The installation is a room that is both an altar and a nicho. Usually a nicho would be the size of a shoebox, hand held. Here the viewer is held in colors and stories.

A nicho is a devotional object, usually in the home, that is sometimes dedicated to a specific person such as La Virgen de Guadalupe, St. Christopher or another popular saint/figure. The nicho is usually constructed and maintained by the women in the family and is usually made from found materials like shoeboxes, magazine cut outs, paper flowers, and other ephemera. The nicho can be a place where creativity and ownership are exercised. It is a fairly common medium that other Chicanas and Latinx artists employ; it often connotes various religious practices such as saint worship as well as pop culture. They can serve as a critique of institutionalized religion from within through irony and humor (Pérez, Chicana Art, 2007).

The nichos I made for this space referenced the eight pointed star and the log cabin quilt patterns, they are dedicated to the spirit of the future and to the eternal search for home. The eight pointed star is usually associated with the morning star or the star that led the shepherds to baby Jesus. Instead of leading my family to Jesus, I envisioned that the eight pointed star would lead my family across the border and back

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<sup>14</sup> Established through continuities of spiritual belief, pre-hispanic in nature, the family altar functions for women as a counterpoint to male dominated rituals within Catholicism. Often located in bedrooms, the home altar locates family history and cultural belief systems. Arrangements of bric-a-brac, memorabilia, devotional icons, and decorative elements are created by women who exercise a familial aesthetic. Certain formal and continuing elements include saints, flowers (plastic, dried, natural, and synthetic), family photos, mementos, historic objects (military medals, flags, etc.), candles, and offerings. Characterized by accumulation, display, and abundance, the altars allow a commingling of history, faith, and the personal. Formal structures often seen are nichos, or niche shelves, retablo, or box like containers highlighting special icons and innovative uses of Christmas lights, reflective materials, and miniaturization. (Mesa Baines 1999, 160)

again. The log cabin in this case represents the apartments, mobile homes, rental houses, ranchitos, and hotels that sheltered my family as we traveled.

Transcribing these quilt blocks into wood represented a transformation of the soft to the hard, the delicate to the brutal, the crystallization of our identity as immigrants. Laura Perez writes that while “nicho work... can indeed be accurately read as third world inflections upon Eurocentric Christianity that do not fully reject Christianity” (2007, 94). Chicanas occupy a wide grouping of identities, and explorations of these forms can also “offer sustained reflections of what is in fact a more complex picture of hybridized spiritualities whose compass navigates *through*, rather than *to*, dominant forms of Christianity” (2007, 96) [emphasis in original]. My nichos use Christian forms as a framework to draw conclusions about that which sustains us as we move across national and state borders. Communal practices of making are what kept our family together.

### *Spirituality*

Laura E Perez makes further points on the importance of spirituality in the art of Chicanas in her book *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*. Spirituality is an often dismissed theme in Chicana art because of its existence within the context of western epistemology. The legacies of Enlightenment thought which promote a separation and distinction between the soul and the body, is a largely secular postmodern and post structuralist framework which surrounds the analysis of contemporary art. Perez’s work examines the themes of the spiritual and political in Chicana art through a deep analysis of artwork made by a wide group of Chicana artists as well as theories and practices surrounding their work. She states that the use of

spirituality in Chicana art can “[pierce] romanticized cultural identities and spiritualities, challenging the meaning of the sacred for us, particularly as it undergirds our valorizations of certain kinds of men and the devalorizations of a particular woman” (Perez 2007, 132). This book is an invaluable source for understanding and contextualizing recurring concepts and themes of the spiritual, political and aesthetic in my work as a Chicana and in this community of artists, scholars and activists. Perez’s clear and detailed writing makes plain the cross cultural subject matter that is common for Chicana artists, allowing for a clarity surrounding the many different media and content of my work.



Figure 18, Rothko Chapel, Mark Rothko, interior, Houston, Texas



Figure 19, *Austin*, Ellsworth Kelly, front entrance, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas

### *Inter-latinx cathedral*

The secular chapel mediated by art is not a new concept, in fact my first significant experience with a work of art was while standing inside the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas when I was around 10 years old. It was the first time I can remember realizing that viewing artists' work could be a conversation between me and the artist. As a child who grew up in the Catholic church, I believe that I was already primed to have this experience; I had been conditioned by experiences that taught me to listen and be contemplative in spaces that were called chapels. Walking into a silent and dim stone

building that was not dedicated to a specific God and had its own flavor of rules and myths and seeing black paintings on the walls sent my little brain into overdrive. Rothko himself writes "I realize," he explained, "that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however . . . is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon your experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command." (Rothko 2006)

A more recent artwork in this genre of chapel-like spaces is Ellsworth Kelly's last project *Austin*. Located on the University of Texas campus, *Austin* is a work that further explores Kelly's career-long investigation of pure form and color (Miller 2018). Though the project itself is strictly secular, Kelly was inspired by Romanesque architecture and the life of Christ as a subject explored in art history (Wolf 2018). The structure of the building itself is cruciform, inside along the walls are 14 marble paintings which reference the stations of the cross. At the place where the high altar would sit is a totemic sculpture and the interior itself is entirely bathed in colored light from four large groups of stained glass windows. This monumental work is a reference that I called upon in my thesis show through the installation of colored films along the eastern wall of windows in the gallery.

My own colored windows make references to quilt patterns and color fields (see figure 19). The transparency of the windows has a dual function, they are both artworks and lenses to see through from both sides. The windows are highlighted as a liminal space where the demarcation between inside and outside is questioned. In much of my

work I ask questions and tell stories that involve migration across the US/Mexico border. This border is not just a line on a map or a river but is also a point of origin for violence, trade, surveillance, radio waves, connection, love and conversation.



Figure 20, Installation view of "lime green is for the taco stand" showing the a portion of the window walls

*conclusion*

*The East - Cinthya Martinez*

*The East  
The place of new beginnings  
Here I contemplate the mystery of life  
I don't know when my death will arrive  
And tap me on the should  
I accept my mortality and vitality  
All at the same time  
I don't know what lies ahead of me  
But I openly embrace it  
I determine nothing  
I'm no longer a prisoner of the rigidity  
That existed inside of me  
For so long.  
I consciously release the uncontrollable  
And here I meet with Quetzalcoatl  
As he covers me in his blanket of a million stars  
I will sing a thousand songs  
And write a hundred poems  
All in one night  
I am grateful for my essence  
This is the place of air, of my breath  
I inhale my resignation  
Because I am my greatest friend  
I am the love of my life  
I am who I've been waiting for  
No one can complete me  
Because I complete myself.  
The East  
The place where I welcome the many rising suns that greet me  
The place of new beginnings*

My work addresses storytelling, being in between, painting, and spirituality. Each work is laden with stories about colors, places, movement, love and grief. Throughout

my time at Stamps I have tried to make sense of the interconnected web of ideas and memories I rely on to create my work. Researching my family genealogy and receiving oral histories has led me to honor my own writing and documenting practice through the creation of a book of poems and stories. Familial practices of making such as quilting and crochet have become the very center of my practice in order to honor the labor of the women that made each new place my family moved to feel like home. I've found connections between my family and the Chicano labor movement and been able to locate my making within a larger history of Chicano/a/x art and activism. I have also explored what it means to utilize a critical and referential lens to make a chapel-like space in the tradition of other modern and contemporary artists. Together all these notions were combined in my thesis exhibition and a poetry event where I created a space bathed in the light of the quilts.

This conclusion is also a beginning. With that knowledge in mind I will turn to face the east, which in the cosmology of the Aztecs is the direction of new beginnings, corresponding to the color red and the energy of the sun. Here I will draw strength and delight with the opportunity to turn my sights to new opportunities and projects.

Ōmeteōtl!



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