

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Art as Life and Life as Art

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I was born with a paintbrush in my hand, before speech, before walking, before everything. I work with paint and canvas and with a pen in my hand; I paint with words. Art is who I am, and I am what art is. Growing up in San Antonio was not easy, especially going to public school on the Westside. My teachers would hit me behind my knees for speaking Spanish, and one teacher in particular would hit me on my back for any infraction. I used to think that she liked the empty, hollow sound that my back would make when she hit me.

It was in elementary school that I began to use art as an escape, right after my fourth-grade teacher lifted one of my drawings and announced to the class that I created "chicken scratch." Everyone laughed. It was then and there that I decided to teach her a lesson; I would show her that I was a good artist. To this day, I use that thought every time I create a work of art. It was at Fox Tech High School that I took commercial art classes, and when I graduated I went on to study at San Antonio College and Trinity University, finally earning a BFA from Our Lady of the Lake University. While in college, I worked as an artist, doing theater design, as well as newspaper layouts.

After I got married, it was my husband, Arturo, who made certain I continued painting. He also figured out ways to get people to see my artwork and read my poetry and short stories. He was the muse who inspired me to create as a professional artist.

In the early 1970s, my first exhibition at Sol Del Rio Gallery, in San Antonio, Texas, launched my long career as an artist. I have gone through many periods and moods, the range reflected in my art. At first, I painted family portraits and moments I recalled from my experiences as a migrant worker. I wanted to capture the beauty of family, work in the fields, nature, and travel through the countryside in order to document my family's journey to the fields of Wisconsin and Michigan. My paintings were colorful, and none were sad or depressing, as that was not the migrant experience for me. But my creativity was not limited to painting. I also wrote short stories and poems about what it was like to live in the migrant camps. One of the short stories, "The House Of Quilts," grew feet and became very popular. That story has been published in several languages and has been reprinted in many anthologies.

Inspired by such women as Maria Antonietta Berriozabal, Rosie Castro, and Sister Maria Carolina Flores, I began a new shift in the early 1980s. These educated activists fought to validate other women and make them aware of their capabilities by working to get scholarships and jobs for women in need. Their example propelled me to examine women's issues through my art. This was when I began what would become the "Mujer Grande" paintings series. These colorful paintings depicted large women who appeared to break out of the canvas. At times, I did just that, extending the painting by allowing arms and legs to jut out of the frame. Soon after, I began to include poetry in the paintings, spelling out entire poems about the hunger to experience everything, to learn everything, to say everything, to feel everything—to be "grande." This trajectory continues today. I painted "Women Wearing The Earth" because that is who we are. We are ancient women who carry the secrets of life, who struggle against oppression, and who are no longer afraid to speak up and to scream at the top of our lungs.

My paintings and my writings are the visions, memories, screams, and tenderness of a woman who is free to express herself without apologies. When called, I rage against fathers, the church, and dominant paradigms that want us to be invisible. In my poem, “Bad Hair Day,” I declare myself the “*Mujer que no se peina / porque no quiere / and I don’t do anything / that I don’t want to...*” This is who I am. That is what I paint and write about.

Five years ago, I lost my husband. He was my support, my mentor, and my love—the father of my son. It was his passing that redirected me. In his absence, I learned to speak to people through a new art form that incorporated colorfully fused glass hearts along with ribbons and beads to celebrate life—which is a wonderful journey that is undertaken through the experiences and people that come into our path. These glass hearts are dedicated to my beloved husband. Through these pieces, I convey to him that after his death I was devastated and lost and felt like broken pieces of glass. But these pieces were also a reminder that friends and family stood by me. In this way, these hearts are a testimony to the duality of fragility and strength that comprise our lives.

As I went through the hell fire of his loss, I emerged renewed. I was ready to continue my path through poetry, paintings, and a newfound art form, because art is my life and my life is art.