

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

### Images of Life: Witnessing Atrocities

Liliana Wilson

Most of my works appearing in *Chicana/Latina Studies* speak to immigrant experiences. They are about those who cross the border into United States territory and what happens to them when they arrive, most especially the oppression they confront in a new nation.

Through my art, I convey a message that exposes difficult circumstances that, usually, are not of immigrants' doing: These circumstances and events happen to them because of scarcity of socioeconomic circumstances and because of who they are and where they originate. For instance, in the case of disappearing maquiladora workers or the young boy who drowns trying to cross the border, they are all poor. That is why they are expendable; it is their poverty that casts them into the oblivion of social silence. Rich people have no compulsion to move for survival—unless they are running away from something. They do not have to experience displacement; they do not have to jump trains to migrate. The rich may drown in the luxury of their pools, but not for venturing to another country to seek a better life.

I feel deeply for the oppressed—my work reflects this sentiment. There is something about inequality that will not let me rest. Es como una decepción, a betrayal of one another, of our humanity. It is my emotional connection to the suffering of the oppressed that inspire me to draw or paint images. I create to make visible the invisible, to tell our stories, to honor our people, and, ultimately, to offer hope.

For me, to tell these stories is an obligation. I am called to draw and paint porque están marcados y entiendo la opresión de pobreza. With my images, I aim to purge the fences inside our bodies that limit our capacities to reach out. My offerings are of solidarity, a coalitional gesture to say: “**I** see you.” It is easy to create when the work is embroiled in the twists of political power. To depict somebody wrapped in barbed wire, somebody who disappears or is drowning, is the way I make visible and give a name to wrongs. Through my works I call out for justice.

The images of my work first surface in words. For that reason, I present the foundational narratives that gave voice for the visual work of my pieces:

*El Adiós.* Pencil on paper, 1998. This drawing represents an immigrant woman walking across the water. She carries her house with her, como un caracol. She waves goodbye to all she knows: her family, her people, and her land. The difficult journey she is about to undertake is reflected on her face. The tragedy of this situation rests on the economic system and how it is constructed; otherwise, she would not have to leave her country. In today's context, this drawing is even more relevant because of all the women that leave their countries who are also raped, killed, or become enslaved on the road to a better life.

*Denial.* Pencil on paper, 1997. This piece depicts a woman covering her eyes in order not to see the atrocities being committed in front of her. I feel that there is so much denial because of the socioeconomic systems that are in place in the world today: the way women disappear, or are abused by their spouses; the poverty; the contamination of the planet; and so many more atrocities committed against us because of gender and poverty.

*El Calvario.* Pencil on paper, 2001. A young girl with a partial crown of thorns floating above her head, blood dripping onto her forehead, conjures images of women sacrificed. Women and young girls in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, are disappearing on a daily basis. A crown of thorns indicates the uncertain future of violence that marks them. It makes me wonder about the hatred with which this is done not only in Ciudad Juárez, but also in Central America, and other parts of the globe. Do these men not have daughters, mothers, and sisters? Why all this hatred toward women? It is difficult for me to understand.

*Niña en el Desierto.* Acrylic on wood, 1998. This work speaks to the hopelessness that one young girl feels on her way to the United States. This is the reality I aim to capture. Maybe her group left her behind, or maybe she got lost, but ultimately she is alone in the desert. Whether she will be found is uncertain, and her future hangs in the balance.

*Muerte en la Frontera.* Color pencil on paper, 2007. This drawing represents a young boy who is in the water with dollar bills pouring like tears from his eyes. He is drowning and will lose his life for the few dollars that he will most likely have made in the United States. He is among the many who do not realize the dream they were sold.

*Soy Inmigrante.* Pencil on paper, 2010. In this drawing, I wanted to show the effects of immigration on a child. She floats in space on a ball with stars that symbolize the United States, where she resides. She floats because she is not on stable ground. In one hand, she carries her dreams, symbolized by the egg—the potential for a new life. In the other, she holds a building that could represent a place she or her parents work, factories such as a poultry processing plant or a slaughterhouse. She

carries part of the land she has left behind, represented by a turtle, a butterfly, and a small frog. Her gaze is tentative because of the uncertainty of what might happen in her life, such as impending deportation.

*Maize Girl*. Mixed media on paper, 2010. This was a painting completed for an exhibition on the topic of corn. It is a hopeful piece where a young girl holds a basket of corn with a bird, a ladybug, and a butterfly; she and they are one with Nature. In contrast to prior pieces, this one speaks to the hope of ancestral knowledge as sustenance. As a pre-Columbian form of food, corn represents survival for peoples of the Americas.

All the pieces I have submitted present a narrative of my life as a witness to atrocities. Now, more than ever, I am compelled to document the ways in which economic systems impose the greatest burdens on the very people who work the hardest to survive. It is a never-ending cycle; it just goes on and on. For me, images surface as I have imagined or experienced them in my life.