

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Learning from the Ancestors: An Artist's Journey Through Life

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Artists are born and made—this was a lesson I learned on my journey with the elders in my family. Grandma Ruth, born Refugia Marmolejo in El Paso, May 25, 1909, was part Tarahumara Indian and the eldest of twenty-four children. From her I learned that Tarahumaras are border people, as are the Basques from whom her name comes. Tarahumaras and Basques have a long history of smuggling goods across borders.

Grandma was forced to marry my grandfather at the age of thirteen because he, at thirty years old, had taken her virginity. Her Catholic family no longer viewed her as viable marriage material, so they forced her to marry Grandpa, telling her to be a good wife and to submit to his entitlements as a husband. The harshness of this Yaqui Apache Indio matched the austerity of his land. By 1926, when she had reached the age of seventeen, Grandma had birthed three boys and was pregnant with her fourth. However, she fell down at Lincoln Park and miscarried. Soon after, Grandpa disappeared for more than six months, leaving her without support. When Grandpa returned, Grandma was already living with a widower by the name of Don Antonio, who I only knew as Grandpa, and his nine children. Branded an adulterer, Grandma chose not to return. Grandpa Francisco, the biological father of her children, legally took them to Mexico—it was during those harsh times of Mexican repatriation. From a telegram, Grandma would

later learn that the eldest of the three boys, Gregorio, had drowned during a flood in Tijuana. That was the last communication Grandma received until she found my father Fernando and his brother Enrique. She had searched for her children by placing ads in Mexican newspapers—she truly became La Llorona on this side of the border.

Even though she had endured the loss of her children, Grandpa Francisco instructed my father that his mother was a whore who didn't want them, giving that as reason to why they no longer had a mother. To make ends meet, my barefooted dad shined shoes and begged for change on the streets of Ciudad Obregon to feed his siblings whenever his father left them alone—something that was likely to happen for weeks at a time. Even though he endured beatings at the hands of his father, who was known to have chained and shackled him to the bed during the beatings, my father professed love for him until the very end. The day came when my father reunited with Grandma, and, at the age of fifteen, they began working to mend their relationship.

My father was the youngest and still in diapers when they were ripped from their mother's arms. However, I was the first-born grandchild that Grandma would hold, as my cousins remained in Mexico. This put me at the center of her universe.

Grandma was a self-made woman who became a nurse at Los Angeles County General Hospital, where she received her nursing degree through practice, and, in the process, became a deputized sheriff because she worked in the County Jail Ward. In addition, she was a midwife, which allowed her to file birth certificates. This is when she became a coyote of sorts—when she helped people get their documents. She'd often go in and say,

“I delivered that baby. I just didn’t get around to filing the papers.” This is how she met my mother and it was also she who introduced my parents to each other. I was the out-of-wedlock product of my mother who was an undocumented worker—I have always said that my first breath was a criminal act; my existence from the start was to identify outside of legality.

Interestingly, it was Grandma’s medical connections that allowed her to legalize my mother’s status. The way Grandma told it to me is with the story of Lupe—a little girl she adopted who had died of tuberculosis of the bones in the communicable diseases ward at the County General Hospital—whose birth certificate sealed my mother’s identity until after I was born.

It was Grandma’s practice to take me places with her. By second grade, Grandma would come to school and tell the nurse that I had a doctor’s appointment and that I had to go with her. From there we went downtown and boarded a bus to Hollywood Park Race Track in Inglewood. We bet on the horses. I learned to pick horses and she gave me an allowance to choose tickets she would buy. The reason she took me to the track, according to her, was that I brought her luck. Every time we went she won at least \$100. However, this was not to my mother’s liking; she would get upset because I was going to the track and missing school, but Grandma would call her and promise to buy me a winter coat. Soon my mother would calm down and negotiate for more, but under her breath I always heard Mother’s words.

“¡Libertina! ¡Callejera! Woman of the streets!”—That’s what she called Grandma.

During these excursions, on a very rainy night, we were returning from the track. As we stood at the back of the crowded bus, holding the metal poles,

an old drunken white man began ranting. There were no seats for him; he stood in the middle of the bus spewing racial epithets.

“I hate niggers. I hate Mexicans.”

Frightened by his display of hate, I pushed closer to Grandma, burying myself to her side. My grandmother lifted up my face with her hands and asked me.

“Are you scared?”

I nodded silently. My eyes wide open. She replied.

“Don't be. He's just an old drunken fool.”

My grandma, who was merely four-feet-nine-inches tall, turned around and pointed her umbrella at the man, cautioning:

“I am a Mexican and I'm from Texas. If you don't shut up I will put this umbrella right through you.”

The entire busload of people broke out in applause. Then I heard someone say:

“That's right! And, we're going to help her!”

The back of the bus, filled with mostly black people, reinforced the threat. The white man could see he was outnumbered. Though he acted foolishly, I see now he wasn't a total idiot. He shut up and rode the bus in silence back to Union Station.

My grandmother provided me a space for adventure and also supported my dream to become an artist as something positive—she dabbled in the arts. In addition to outings and movement in the landscapes of our community, which gave me the source of my visual narratives, Grandma supplied me with art books and gave me access to impressionistic imagery, but she also warned me.

“My books are my friends, and I don’t like to have my friends abused. So take care of my books.”

It was in her books that I first saw a reproduction of a Degas; I was sitting in her back room leafing through the pages—I still recall feelings of awe. The colored pastel works by Degas—a woman bathing—beautifully shimmering off the page.

Grandma wasn’t the only one I heard this from. At the age of six I heard my father assert that I was an artist when he brought home my crayon drawings from kindergarten. He proudly exclaimed, “You are an artist!” I believed him, with all my heart. Even though I did not yet understand what it was to be an artist, I simply accepted that fact, without really knowing what I meant. I didn’t have all the stereotypical nuances—unaware that artists were perceived as always starving, that artists are only men, or that you have to be crazy, or an alcoholic to create art. But I imagined it being the best thing I could want.

Now, as I go about practicing my love for visual expression, I am in awe of the lessons and love that guided me here. My eyes, heart, and knowledge of the city unfolds in my cityscapes. In the night, how many times have the mercury lamps glowed pink as I drove down the freeway? There is much

mystery in the city streets—death lurks among the shadows. I hesitate to drive over debris or rolled up carpets fearing there is a body there. As I come upon a cat or dog lying on the road, it turns into a black plastic bag caught up in the wind like a black crow that flies directly into my windshield, missing me. I swear I could hear its laughter.

Who knew that the Pasadena Freeway—the 10—was paved over the burial grounds of Native Americans? The Arroyo Seco Parkway is now deemed a Cultural Heritage Monument and boasts of being the oldest freeway in the world. The beauty of sycamore groves that line the curves distinguishes the deadly treachery of speeding pasts. During the day, take your time here, but do not get distracted by the golden green leaves and hills of Ernest Debbs Park and the Arroyo.

On a moonlit night the rolling hillside flows under bridges and gleams like a silver snake into the horizon. Here is where Celia's son, Timmy, was killed by a drunken off-duty police officer. Timmy, in his long hair and headband represented, like many of us then, the hippie generation. The officer, who was drunk, attempted to pull him over, forgetting he was in his civilian car and his civilian clothing. Timmy, who thought he was trying to get away from an angry old man, sped up and kept driving. The infuriated officer took out his gun and shot at him, hitting him in the back of the head.

On the 110, driving south, you will cruise up the slope that then come down into Chinatown, making your way East, turning left on Alameda, and down to Fifth Street in front of the Salvation Army, where you will find cardboard boxes lined up against the walls, pre-packaged humans ready for Saint Peter. No one claims them. Not one knows them. Just as the children who were recently murdered by a son who may have believed that

his mother loved her students more than him. Some mother's child is gone. Some mother's child is homeless or suffering, and I think of the lost lives—yet, I have learned that even in death there is beauty and identity, if we only humanize each other.

As a child, when I was in Mrs. Tanaka's third grade class, my dad asked: "Do you have any homework?" I had a spelling list that I had already memorized. So, I read the list to him in a hurry. He was trying to spend more time with me, and be a parent; I was trying to escape—show him how smart I was, so he would let me go play.

"No. No. There is something I can teach you here. I can show you how smart I am, as your father."

What I had done was not enough for him. So he asked me to memorize the words forward and backward—the teacher's homework was too easy.

"Do I have to do it, Dad?"

The next day, Mrs. Tanaka gave me the test and I spelled the words perfectly forward and backward; she gave me an "F" for doing something she didn't request. I had failed her test. This was my father's way of teaching me to think outside the box, to remember things, and to think about things in multiple ways—it was not about knowing the list, it was about thinking creatively—his knowledge came from an Indio background because his learning had to do with placement, remembering, and solving problems. He was teaching me to not simply learn by rote, but to become a critical learner. That was but a glimpse of what Dad taught me about life: There are other ways of knowing. He had something to offer me—alternate ways of seeing.

My life journey has provided me ample options to become an artist with a critical consciousness and a heart. I seek beauty and truth in whatever I do, and I try to impart the knowledge that has been shared with me—authenticity is what I aim to attain in all that I do as I honor the lives of those who came before me. I recognize their history and acknowledge the humanity they express, by claiming my own sense of being.