

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Living Among Curanderas and the Imaginary of Artistic Creations

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Ancestral, Cultural, and Environmental Legacies

Education is a lifelong learning process as we gather knowledge from our surroundings. Tía Mary's red kitchen table was the raíz of my educational journey. There, surrounded by women, I learned in the indigenous manner of the oral tradition. One of those women was grandmother Mapi, short for Amá Lupe. She taught me to love color in the making of piñatas. Her stories of running barefoot on cobblestone streets transported me to her childhood in Mexico. Through her, I gained a love for a country in which I had never set foot. Amá Juanita, my maternal grandmother, transformed before I was born, but not without first leaving me the greatest legacy of language. From my jefita, who never called herself a curandera, I learned most of my healing practices. I am still trying to live her greatest lesson, to love unconditionally without judgment. These mujeres gave me the first lessons in art, history, and language. Enveloped in our culture, I continue to rely on the healing practices they taught me, using the remedios, sobadas y tecitos with my familia and community today.

At Tynan Elementary in San Antonio's Eastside, in addition to the racialized and classist experiences most of us confronted in our early schooling, I found another place of major influence in my interactions with black classmates. I was but one of two Chicanas. In that small school, I learned to embrace black culture without appropriating it, as I maneuvered my way within it, without erasing my own cultural roots. As I advanced in age, with each school I attended came additional experiences.

Even though the violence intensified, the experiences revealed a distinct manner of learning. For example, amid a violent brown/black struggle, I found myself negotiating my ethnic identity as a Chicana as I recognized that the majority of my friends were black. Without the formal theory, but understanding the violence of internalized oppression by race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality we confronted in common, I learned to mediate our environment and to negotiate our common humanity. This layered experience would teach me much about relationships to women and men. These early formations inspired me to continue doing work that heals others, as I attempt to carve out an equitable environment for all of us.

Now as an adult, I more clearly understand our connections to African ancestry and spirituality. Moving beyond the binary of *mestizaje*, I can now connect my African ancestry to the third root of Mexico. Thus, work with the Orishas and other spiritual practices does not appear foreign or imposed, bringing me back to the things I intuitively felt as one among blacks in my neighborhood and community. The indigenous knowledge of the spirit world I learned from my ancestors allows me to easily fold our common beliefs into practice. African spiritual practices, como los Concheros, went underground, as did the Orishas in efforts to survive, later emerging as Catholic saints. This knowledge, these symbols and signifiers, frames my artistic practices today. In an amalgam of mind, body, spirit, and imagination, I am able to create the art I live, experience, or carry as my ancestral legacy.

Praxis and Practices of Creativity

My concentration remains in exploring and experimenting with the artistic perception of cultural hybridity as I examine the foundation of origin culture as an approach to unite and develop this concept. As stated, traditional cultures influence my creativity, and I am particularly fascinated with the ways in which origin cultures are inspiring the artwork of contemporary society.

My work combines tradition and contemporary art-making techniques with ethnic and popular culture subject matter. For me, scholarly interests and artistic endeavors can merge, although they can also be separated in our global practices, even when undercurrents shape the flow within the work. My artistic research converges on three foci: (1) Postmodern and global approaches to contemporary art, (2) indigenous, Native American/Chicana/o, and African spirituality—processes concerning ecological balance through traditional medium, and (3) Chicana feminist perspectives; these generate characters that contribute to our academic tenacity through multi-generational relationships.

Current interests combine ceramics, painting/drawing, digital/video, soft sculpture, and installation, and these areas encompass my life. My art gives me balance in my work and informs the manner in which I move through this world. With Café Citlali, a natural, local, and organic taquería based on traditional Mexican indigenous culture, I am engaging food as art and healing. Café Citlali was a 6-month art project/installation. In addition to the eclectic cuisine, art exhibits and workshops, group meetings, and limpiezas—or cleansings—Café Citlali facilitated these activities within the space. As an activist, my work shifts as public art taking the form of murals, cover illustrations and books, and 15-foot banners for social justice actions.

Mujeres of MALCS

Mujer, an acrylic on canvas painting, was developed as the artwork for the cover of *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social*. It was created in the same artistic style as portraits of the *Retratos de Mis Heroes*—a series that documents the presence of those who have influenced me in my activist endeavors. This body of work began with portraits of Gloria E. Anzaldúa and prison activist and poet Raul Salinas as a process of conveying their empowering spirit to those who witness the images. From their

portraits, I moved toward a different type of shero, women who have survived abuse. These were a series of portraits and compositions painted on found objects and/or recycled material. As metaphors for mujeres, they make visible those who have survived violence at the hands of family, husbands, intimate partners, and at the border.

Mujer emerged as a manifestation of images flashing through my mind as Josie Méndez-Negrete narrated work that had been submitted for publication volume thirteenth, issue two of *Chicana/Latina Studies*. The image clearly appeared, as I tilted my head back, closed my eyes, and took in the words that translated into images and glittery symbols against midnight sky, illuminated by flashes of light and color. Roses splattered with blood and coppery golds radiated in my mind to manifest woman's challenges or blossoms of success. Some, more subtle; others, hearts bursting out of our chests enflamed and winged, longing for freedom. The process was magic. The layering of the painted images over symbols and text is a metaphor for the complexities of cultures, gender, class, sexuality, and lived experiences. The heart hangs on the large jade beads, precious joyas, as are mujeres, linked together and holding the fire intact within our hearts. In Mexica culture, jade beads are the magic keys to travel through the seven levels before reaching the final resting place. The two hummingbirds are symbolic of our two-spirited sisters drinking from the nectar of other amazing mujeres. Blood flows from the holes left by track marks. The blood, glazed with gold, puddles at the bottom. A tortoise shell staff houses a gold nib tip loading ink in preparation of writing our stories. On the opposite side, blood flows from a healing scar as a rose unfolds simultaneously. In the upper right corner of the painting, Koyolxauki—Diosa de la luna—illuminates the night skies, while the Koatl or serpent nibbles on the Xochitl or flower earring. The Koatl is symbolic for change. When self-evaluating and discovering negativity, the skin can be shed and regenerated.

On the left, the elements whisper enchanting consejos or advice into her ear. From her ear hang a two-headed Ketzalkoatl protecting the flower. The Ketzalkoatls are symbolic of energy, the flower of the arts, beauty, displaying the flowering love that is possible. The Mexica bird symbolizes freedom, and the butterfly metamorphosis. Nopales or cacti on the forehead symbolize connection to cultura.

Un Mundo Nuevo: Creativity and Spirituality

The pieces published throughout the journal reflect a trajectory of my lifeworks. In all that I do, it is my intent to reconnect to the practices of ancestors, as we breathe visual life into our stories and disperse them like healing magic into the four directions. It is in our creativity and the calling back of our imagination that allows us to create change. I leave my work with you as an offering of healing and as a gift to the seven generations that will follow. May the Diosas illuminate our paths to create un mundo de paz.