

ARTIST STATEMENT: An Altered Point of View

Annie López

A short paragraph in the newspaper led me to an art career. A local Chicano art group sought new members. I gathered my photos into a portfolio, went to the meeting, and asked to be considered for membership.

That was so unlike me.

Growing up, I did not know that art was something you could do as an adult. I thought it was just the fun, messy stuff you played with in elementary school. In high school, I began to search out my art form. I always took photos, so I took the one-semester-only class in photography. That led to ceramics and basic art. That's how I learned I couldn't draw and had no talent for painting. I enjoyed ceramics, but knew I would never have access to a kiln on the outside, so photography became my art. I began taking pictures as a child. We had a Kodak Brownie, the type you hold at your waist and look down into to compose the photo. My mother tended to move the camera as she pressed the shutter, which made for a blurry image. I took over as family photographer at around nine years old. From that point on, like a vampire, I rarely appeared in photos.

Born in Phoenix, Arizona, I am a fourth-generation native on my father's side and second-generation on my mother's side. Both sides are native to Mexico, from the states of Sonora and Jalisco. I can trace my family in Arizona back to 1871. My mother was a homemaker and my father an upholsterer. My father worked two jobs throughout my childhood and whenever my mother was ready to give birth, she would place a call to my dad at work, and he would pick her up at home and drop her off at the front door of the hospital, then

speed back to his jobs. When she was ready to go home with the child, she would call him again and he would pick up mother and child and deliver them to the front door of their home, then head back to work.

I am a middle child and a middle daughter. That is significant because it shaped my personality and life. I was born on my brother's fifth birthday, so I never had one of my own. Whether designated (my father made me a step-stool when I was four so I could wash dishes) or whether I naturally leaned toward the domestic arts (I ironed clothes to raise money), I alone, out of five children, was expected to be home after school every day to help my mother. My extreme shyness and orders to be home prevented me from participating in extracurricular activities. My mother arranged for my older sister and me to take a few sewing and embroidery lessons from a neighbor. My grandfather sat me down when I was thirteen to tell me, in his broken English, that it was time to consider marriage. My grandmother was fourteen when she married him. I did well in high school and was offered a scholarship to college, but my parents would not allow me to take it. It was expected that I would finish high school and marry.

After high school, I studied commercial photography. At every critique, my classmates always identified my images in the anonymous slide show. They used the word "arty" to describe my photos. I had a different way of seeing. That got me thinking about art and artists. I continued experimenting with color and black and white photography. That's when I found the paragraph searching for Chicano artists.

The artist group was Movimiento Artístico del Río Salado, or MARS. Founded in 1978, it filled a need. At that time, Chicano artists were not exhibited in mainstream galleries or museums. The group arranged exhibits in and around the Phoenix area. Just before I joined MARS in 1982, they managed to

find and rent a gallery space in South Phoenix. Having never been an artist, much less an exhibiting artist, I spent my first year in the group listening and learning. I learned about matting, framing and hanging work. I learned to write grants and P.R. I learned about mission statements and board obligations and negative publicity. The most important lesson I learned at MARS was that I could use my art to say what I could not speak.

Because I felt that black and white and color photography didn't give me a way to say what I needed, I learned a new technique: cyanotype. Cyanotype is a photographic printing process. It creates a blue image and because it involves contact printing, I could add text or objects and use photographic negatives or positives. I continue to use cyanotype, though in the past few years, I occasionally go back to straight photography. I take my old color or black-and-white photographs or ones found in the family photo album, and combine them with snippets of family stories in my "Storybook" series. I often share too much, but I have found that the viewer can relate to my experiences.

I was a MARS member for seventeen years. When I left, I felt a bit uprooted, so I made a series titled, "Uprooted." I reflected on my early years, when I quietly watched my fellow artists, and created a series titled, "The Almost Real History of Art in Phoenix." In this series, I exposed some strange practices but used a sense of humor to tell on my fellow artists. I began to use my art to divulge my story and my family history. I use it to tell the embarrassing, funny situations. I use it to relieve myself of burdens or tragedy. I feel that once the work is on the paper, then up on the wall, I no longer have to carry that weight. I have given it to the viewer.

I like to relate to the materials I use in my art. Because I am the subject, there should be a reason I chose them. I tend to look for materials in places other

than art supply stores. While grocery shopping, in the “Hispanic Foods” aisle, I noticed tamale wrapper paper. My family made tamales, but we never used that paper. I tried cyanotype on the paper, and it held. Then, because my sewing machine was available, I sewed on the paper. It held the stitching. I knew I had found my medium. The tamale wrapper paper suited me culturally and because I have sewn since the age of eight, it suited my personal history.

Recently, I created a series of garments made of cyanotype prints on the tamale wrapper paper. Each garment has a story within and represents the person I would be, if only I wore dresses. The styles are from the 1950s, '60s and '70s. These were formative years, the ones I experienced daily and through movies and television. I wanted to be glamorous, but my family did not have that kind of life. I made my own clothes, but always wished I were more “girly”—the type who would wear dresses. A dress meant a special occasion, and these dresses each reflect an important event in my life. This series began in 2012, because I wished to sew my troubles into a dress—something I said but didn’t understand why. I realized, once I began, that I meant that I could wear my burdens. Once the issues are on the dress, I no longer have to think about them. I don’t see them. They would become someone else’s to consider or ignore. I would not have to explain—the dress says it for me. They become my armor. You see a dress and know the story belongs to a woman. They come from my perspective.

The dresses are made of anywhere from twenty to forty individual prints. The prints are sewn together to create my “fabric.” A pattern is then placed on that created fabric and the pattern pieces cut out. The pattern pieces are sewn back together to form a garment. Each is a different pattern and a different subject. I have made dresses using my maternal grandparents’ naturalization papers (“Naturalized Citizens”), my first-grade report card (“C Student”), my father’s

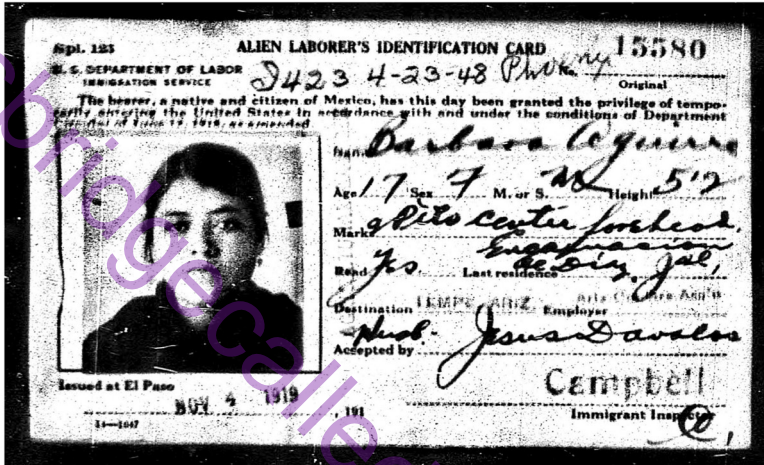
ANNIE LÓPEZ

Alzheimer's disease ("Remnants of Long-Term Memory"), my obsession with medical issues ("Medical Conditions"), Día de los Muertos ("Memorial"), and the things I loved best growing up ("Favorite Things"). This series took my artwork from two-dimensional prints to sculptural objects.

I am always looking for new ways to present my work and new surfaces to try. I will continue making dresses as I find new styles and more family stories to fit. I am grateful I have art as an outlet and an audience for my artwork.



My father was the third child born to my grandmother. Each child had a different father. Each child's father was married to someone other than my grandmother. The first child died before my father was born. My aunt was four and my father two when their mother died. My aunt was seventeen when she was introduced to her father, in the alley behind the Boston Store in downtown Phoenix. I was twelve and my father forty-two when my family met the man who gave my father his last name. We met at the man's home in California. The reunion did not last long because the man's wife threw us out.



Campbell, the person assigned to inspect aliens from Mexico and not outer space, noted the wrong age for my grandmother. She turned seventeen a month later. My grandfather-Barbara's husband of two years-was given a new surname by the immigrant inspector. My grandparents came to Arizona to pick cotton in Tempe. Within months, they moved to Jerome where my grandfather worked in the mines. My grandmother gave birth to the first of her ten children seven months after she entered the United States legally through the El Paso Port of Entry. The baby was named after his father, but later known as Shorty.



My mother was born on her family's kitchen table. Before Nana climbed up, she gathered her first five children and made them huddle underneath so they would not witness the birth. Mom was the first of the Abalos children born in Phoenix. The oldest was born in Clarkdale while Tata worked for the Santa Fe Railroad. Numbers two thru five were born in Flagstaff. In 1929, the family relocated when Tata's Flagstaff employer, the Dolan Burrus Box Company, opened a facility in Phoenix. Dolan Burrus provided housing for their workers next to its location at Grand Avenue and Lateral 14, or "La Catorce," as it was known by the factory families.