

ARTIST STATEMENT

La Semilla Sembrada: Life Lessons through the Art and Times of Nivia Gonzalez

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Growing up with a genius-level-IQ-self-made Latina artist-mogul mom who was a local women's empowerment activist was not easy in the least. As twin daughters, we learned from our mom that nothing would be handed to us. As women, we had to make our own way in this male-dominated world with fortitude and courage, and without losing our ability to be compassionate and generous.

One of our childhood memories stands out as an example of our mom's selflessness and big-heartedness. When we were about eight years old, a Mexicana named Juana approached our mom about work. Our mom was juggling several art projects and needed help taking care of us, so they reached a mutual agreement. One morning, we saw Juana and our mom in a serious conversation in Spanish. While we didn't understand what they were saying, we understood the tone of their voice. Later in the afternoon, we saw a large group of people we didn't know, scuttling around the house. They were all speaking Spanish. Our mom was in the center of the room smoking her cigarette, deep in thought. Later that night our mom came home with a little girl who turned out to be Juana's daughter. Our mom had driven to the border, walked across the "day passing" entry, and brought back Juana's daughter to reunite them. We'd learned that Juana came as an undocumented mother in search of work. We had no idea how profound and dangerous this was at the time. We just knew we had to share our toys and clothes for a while with a little girl who didn't speak any English. Our

mother must've thought this was the right thing to do—to use her privilege to reunite Juana with her daughter. How was it that Juana could take care of us, when she was unable to do the same for her own daughter?

Our mom also used her power for good as a Mexican-American artist who wanted to represent every woman of color through her art. This included working with emerging artists in the art world. She would support shows with less well-known artists if she felt they were good people or serious about their craft. She also supported many local nonprofit organizations, particularly those that supported Latina arts and culture. In looking for invoices or contracts after her accident, and then after her death, we realized she'd donated a lot of her art and her time to social causes.

A full-time artist, our mom taught us that art can be a fickle business like anything else that relates dollars to prestige. At the height of her popularity in the 1990s, publishers and galleries asked her to work on book covers and collaborative projects with other artists. We often heard the conference calls in her home studio. The resounding message with publicists, gallery owners, and dealers was that if one wanted to remain prominent, one had to be competitive and maintain a large following. We witnessed our mother, as a mother of twin girls and as one of the few well-known Latina artists at the time, navigate the male, capitalist-driven art world with firmness, grit, and an incredible ability to be both an extraordinarily talented artist and a tough negotiator.

Our mother's path wasn't without great obstacles. Nothing was handed to her, as the story goes for most artists, especially women of color. Her bouts with sometimes crippling bipolar episodes, while raising two daughters, all seemed only to fuel her drive to create. On those occasions, she'd work voraciously, from day to night and night to day. As girls, we'd wake up to her already on the phone,

speaking with someone in a different time zone making deals—tell-tale signs of a manic episode apparent by the rows and rows of Post-its laid out on the table, listing things that needed to be done. As debilitating as it was to her, she harnessed this illness in her artwork; it was never a crutch.

As an intellectual thinker and artist, our mom cultivated a love for music, film, and art in all forms through her profound curiosity and intellectual critique. Our mom loved art shows, as well as movies and television. She always had the TV on in her studio, even if only for background noise while she painted. On any given day, she'd tune in to *Star Trek*, *Jeopardy*, or a film on Turner Classic Movies. As kids, we were always amazed at how much she knew. Sometimes we'd come into her studio in the evenings to listen to her while she watched *Jeopardy*, in complete awe of her breadth of knowledge.

Even after her life-threatening accident in 1997, which left her paralyzed from multiple strokes, she continued to demonstrate her indefatigable spirit and incisiveness. During one of her occupational therapy sessions, one of the nurses asked her to identify an item on a piece of paper, slowly repeating her request as if talking to a child. "Come on, Nivia, tell me if it is a flower, vegetable, or an animal," to which our mom scoffed, "You spelled 'marigold' wrong," showing that she not only knew the answer to such a simple request, but was able to offer advanced cognitive comprehension. It would take seven years of intense physical therapy for her to walk and eventually paint again.

Even though our mother had long since disappeared from the public eye and immediate art circles in her later years after her accident, she continued to be a contributing part of the art world and beyond. From a Chicago art-school graduate who did a project on her in college, to the original cover of required reading in high school, our mother's influence and accomplishments stretch out

from her being like the roots of a sturdy, weather-tested tree. Her message and theme was always clear, constant, and palpable in her artwork: your success in life does not come from your circumstances; it comes from inside you. Being the introspective artist that she was, she wanted brown women to look within themselves and draw strength from other empowered women. This is most noticeably expressed in her art—from the bronze-complexioned women she depicted with their eyes closed, poised in meditative grace, to the work she created after her accident where subjects looked directly out of the canvas with their eyes open as if to not take the world around them for granted.

We are honored that *Chicana/Latina Studies* is paying tribute to our mother's life and artistic legacy, most especially since this is the first time, to our understanding, that her work is being recognized in an academic journal that promotes the work of Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous women writers, scholars, and artists. For the journal, we've selected *Echoes of Edens Lost* (1997), *La Semilla Sembrada*, *Pájaro Azul*, *The Harvest of Strength*, and *Home at Last* to be featured in this issue, namely because these works of art are a part of our personal archive, but also because they speak to her vision as a Mexican-American artist.

We had initially wanted the cover of the journal to feature *Echoes of Edens Lost*, for the front cover of the journal. This image has been reprinted in multiple Chicana/o art books. Painted in 1997 right before her accident, this image captures the unrestrained beauty of a tall, earth-toned complexioned woman in an exquisitely intricate and transparent lace dress that hugs her curves from top to bottom. The woman is surrounded by fuchsia orchids and lush greenery that evoke fecundity and the feminine spirit. For the cover, we choose to feature *The Harvest of Strength*, which illustrates a closed-eyed woman wearing a black and blue huipil, carrying a bowl of fruit in a crescent moon shaped bowl. We both gravitated to this image because of the strong imagery and balance between

the horse, which symbolizes power and freedom, and the fruit harvest, which symbolizes vitality and the feminine energy.

Like many of the paintings produced before her accident, *Pájaro Azul* also features a woman with her eyes closed in a meditative stance. Wearing a deep burgundy colored garment, the woman in this image holds her hands close to her chest. A black raven with vibrant turquoise feathers rests on her right hand and looks directly at the viewer.

While most of our mother's paintings feature solo women, some feature women in groups of three (she often said this represented the three of us), working in community with each other. *La Semilla Sembrada* (sometimes referred to as *Sisters in the Orchard*) is an example of the way she portrayed the power of women when they came together to nurture and support each other.

We also chose to feature *Home at Last*, which she painted after her accident. She did not paint during the eight years of intense physical therapy. Rather than teaching herself to paint with her right hand, she pushed herself to regain strength in her left hand. She was able to paint again in 2005 with the assistance of her right hand and arm. Even though her full technical skills did not return, she continued to portray women in a similar stylized way. For example, *Home at Last* features three women resting their heads on each other's shoulders in a symmetrical fashion, with their eyes wide open toward the viewer(s). The woman on the left is holding an origami bird, a symbol of our mother's ability to regain her freedom of expression. Despite not having painted for years, and despite the difficulty she had in painting again, her vision was still the same: to look deep within and search for one's truth in the world.

During the time our mom was with us, we came to know three mothers. All of these mothers taught us the same incredible lesson of strength, but were all different in the same five-foot-tall, petite body. The first one we knew for the first sixteen years of our lives—the hustler, the single mom, the tough negotiator who took no prisoners in her artistic and entrepreneurial affairs with people. The second one—the one we had for twenty years following her brain injury—was still self-driven, but had a humility and vulnerability that was indiscernible in her younger years. Our third mom was the one we knew the last two weeks of her life. That mom never said a word, but still managed to teach us more than the other two. In those quiet hours at the hospital, late at night and into the break of dawn, that's when we felt we knew her the best—when all her gifts and lessons became crystal clear. Live your life. Make a difference whenever and wherever you can. Tell your truth, and take no prisoners.