

## ARTIST STATEMENT

### Painting as a Self-Care Ritual

Emilia Cruz

**I am a Chicana** artist residing in Ventura County, California. While I am interested in exploring a variety of materials, my medium of choice is paint, specifically oils and acrylics. Creating a painting has become a ritualistic practice and I am adamant about handling each step with care. I nurture my pieces well in order to bring them to life. The process begins with a separate preliminary drawing that is later transferred onto a wooden panel with graphite powder and it ends with a painted signature that acts like a seal of approval. Halfway through the process, everything has an order and is mapped out, which in turn balances out my unpremeditated choices and the chaotic moments in which I am just frantically pushing paint around. This is a reflection of my general outlook on life—a contrast between control and unpredictability. I frequently turn to my daily experiences and my own identity in order to create art. In the six pieces featured, I relay messages about belonging, self-care, and my cultural pride.

Women of color are universally marginalized or rejected in all types of settings including mainstream media. This lack of visual representation takes a toll on young brown girls and our development. My painting *Am I Too Dark?* conveys the detrimental outcome I experienced from colorism. In this painting, I am recalling a potent memory of my six-year-old self. I was playing with my white Barbie dolls and as I looked up to watch a telenovela that was playing on the TV, I noticed that the main character was light skinned with blonde hair. I thought to myself, “Am I too dark?” when I realized I look

like neither of these two examples of women being centered. I also remember visiting galleries or art museums with my aunt and realizing that most of the art included only white women that were painted by white men. At that age, I had a darker complexion and became conscious of how undervalued it was through the backhanded compliments or even the straight up insults I would receive regarding my skin tone. It was especially confusing when a few of these messages came from my own family member or people with similar skin tones. I spent most of my childhood and adolescent years building up internalized hate for my own appearance. Multiple times I even attempted to get rid of my melanin. Being honest with myself and others has played an immense role in my healing journey. When I first decided to paint *Am I Too Dark?*, I was nervous to share my story and to admit that, for so long, I was carrying around all this built up shame. I quickly came to understand that so many of us have shared similar experiences, and through this painting I was able to feel an immediate connection with others. Another form of healing was brought forth when I decided to change the common narrative by creating a space where I can now center and celebrate women of color. I feel as if I achieve this goal every time I display one of my pieces. I am filled with pride knowing that another young brown girl can see herself reflected in my painting. My little sister Camila appears in many of my pieces because she is a perfect model of self-confidence. Camila has always admired her own complexion and constantly uplifts herself along with those around her.

Painting people I know and whom I admire allows me to form a deeper relationship with my artwork. When I had the idea to paint *Estamos Aquí*, I contacted my two friends Ivonne and Lorely. All three of us are Mexican Americans who, for most of our lives, grew up in a conservative suburban city called Simi Valley located in California. It was difficult to feel a sense of belonging in this city, and numerous times I tried to convert myself

into someone whom I was not in order to fit in. Hanging out with Ivonne and Lorely during high school felt familiar and safe. We would converse comfortably in Spanglish, traveled to the Valley to attend ska shows, and many times discussed any identity issues we struggled with while growing up. I can always see the resilience in their eyes and the pride they have for our people. I wanted *Estamos Aquí* to be a reminder that even generations from now, we will continue to preserve all the power that our ancestors have left within us. In this piece my two friends are sharing a moment of ease, a moment in which they can embrace themselves and their culture without feeling threatened in any way. Lorely is pictured burning sage while a hummingbird appears out of the smoke. I have been told that the Aztecs believed hummingbirds could cross back and forth from the afterlife to pass on messages. In this piece I depicted three different books—two of which are written by authors I admire: Sandra Cisneros and Reyna Grande. The third book is a biography about Frida Kahlo, an artist who has influenced my work since I was a kid. I had Lorely and Ivonne wear traditional clothing items that I bought when I went to visit Guanajuato. Lorely has green ribbons woven into her hair the way my abuelita used to braid hers every day. Ivonne sports her large silver hoops like the ones I used to wear frequently in 9th grade. I used bright color choices as a way to pay homage to Mexico and all the vibrant colors it possesses, found in the folklorico dresses that the dancers swirl through the air, to painted houses covered in a variety of plants.

*A Self-Care Ritual* also presents a moment in which two amigas convey the power that comes from loving and caring for one's self. For this piece, I particularly wanted to evoke bruja and healer vibes. I chose colors that are often correlated with a dreamy nightlife such as a neon pink, dioxazine purple, and a glowing blue. Surrounding myself with inspiring, loving, and talented

femmes is always incredibly healing. In *A Self-Care Ritual*, my friend Jackie places her arm over me as a symbol of protection and support—two important traits to have in a sisterhood. On the day that we took the reference photo for this piece Jackie, my other amiga Melissa, and I had our very own self-care ritual. We created, caught up on chisme, ate hot Cheetos and ultimately empowered one another. It is important for women of color to have a safe space to go to that has a support system and to form these type of healing circles. In *A Self-Care Ritual*, I illustrated myself burning sage in order to silently exude kindhearted intentions into the universe. Next to my leg, I have placed a handbag that I still sport daily. My abuelita on my mom's side left it to me before she passed away. This bag was handmade by her goddaughter who was a part of the Cora tribe in Nayarit, Mexico, my abuelita's hometown. Knowing that I carry around this piece of history is an honor. I am also depicted wearing an opalite moon hand crafted by an amazing artisan Oil Ramos. The moon is an important symbol for me because I see her as the ultimate healing goddess who many times has guided me through darkness, literally and metaphorically. Behind Jackie and me is a shadowy figure that represents any lingering trauma we carry with us, but we are positioned ahead of it to signify that we will continue to flourish and prosper.

My two pieces *The Ritual and Conversations with Death* discuss how life and death create an even balance. 1993 was the year I was born, but it was also the year that my cousin unfortunately passed away at the age of nineteen. His name was Emilio Cruz and my parents decided it was only right to name me after him. My parents and I were living in Tijuana up until I turned three. That is when Emilio's mom decided to move us into her home located in Simi Valley. A part of me always hoped that by doing so, we could fill a portion of her void since her only son had passed away. My tía became a second mother to me, and when it was her turn to pass on, I felt a sharp pain in chest;

however, I also knew she could finally soar the skies with Emilio somewhere out in the vast unknown afterlife. *Conversations with Death* takes place in the silent woods of Iceland where I was fortunate enough to visit last year. While exploring these lands, a drape of silence cut me off from the busy world I am so used to. I leaned my head up against one of the tree trunks and suddenly I could hear every vibration that moved throughout the woods. Words cannot describe exactly how magical that experience felt. In *Conversations with Death* a woman draped in a sarape gently holds up a skull to her face while smoke dances out of the cracked frontal bone. This smoke guides her through her meditative practice while she is covered for protection and comfort. Ultramarine blue is perceived as serene, deep, and mysterious just as is the ocean. I tinted my piece with this color in order to depict an otherworldly setting.

Limbo is a realm located between the living and the afterworld. The little girl getting her hair braided by death in my painting *The Ritual* is being prepared to be passed on to the afterlife. She is wearing a turquoise mosaic mask inspired by the ones Aztecs used mainly for decorative purposes, but which would also sometimes be placed on deceased nobles. A proper death mask has closed eyes and an open mouth. I began to think about the quote “the eyes are the windows to the soul” and I questioned, “What would happen if the eye sockets in masks were uncovered?” I believe it could symbolize a bridge that allows one to cross between the two different realms. In my painting, the girl wearing the mask can still see the world she once belonged to but understands that soon she has to move on. Next to her, death wears a long drape to cover up its frightening appearance, but it is situated to convey a nurturing sentiment. My notion that death is a motherly figure stems from my knowledge of the Aztec goddess Mictecacihuatl who was said to have guarded and cared for the skeletal remains left in the underworld. I reinforce this idea with the depiction of hair weaving because the act of braiding

someone's hair is intimate and sacred. I personally hold onto the image of my abuelita braiding my or my sister's hair while she shared with us stories from her childhood growing up in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato.

Many of my paintings are influenced by Mexican folklore and storytelling. Frida Kahlo was a master of depicting both within her artwork. She was raw, vulnerable, and all around unapologetic and, as a little girl, that was how I aspired to be. I have completely different experiences and stories than Frida did, but her pieces in which she shared her heartbreaks inspired me to do the same. I used the composition from her painting *Las Dos Fridas* to create my piece *Ni Tu Santa, Ni Tu Puta*. I painted two different versions of myself; the one on the right wearing all white is an Emilia that existed during a three-year-long toxic relationship. The one sitting on the left wearing all black depicts an Emilia who has finally cut herself free in order to rebuild and rediscover herself. I had a difficult time coming to terms with the fact that I was ever involved in such a manipulative and emotionally abusive relationship. I went as far as to completely transform myself to fit into a mold that my ex-partner would approve of and even then, I was never enough. I distanced myself from my own family and friends and eventually I felt myself sink deep into depression. I hated looking in the mirror because I could no longer recognize my own image.

In *Ni Tu Santa Ni Tu Puta*, the Emilia sitting on the left side carries a more reassured facial expression and body language, while the other Emilia sits with her legs crossed and stares wistfully to her right. Her heart bleeds and a thorn-covered vein attaches itself to a stuffed figurine that is symbolic of my ex-partner, while on the opposite end, the other Emilia's heart is flourishing. As much as I wanted this piece to be recognizably Frida influenced, I also wanted to make it my own in every way possible. I gave it a modern-day

setting with the two Emilias sitting in green plastic chairs on top of dry yellow-green grass—a reference to the lawns in Southern California with which I am familiar. In the backdrop I included a brick wall with clouds that are sinking. “Ni santa, ni puta” is one of my favorite sayings. Women are always being put into binary categories and in the end, it seems as if we can never be in the right. We are either too much or not enough. I felt powerful when I wrote “Ni Tu Santa” and “Ni Tu Puta” on my painting. It was my form of retaliation; I felt as if I had finally found my voice to with which to defend myself against anyone who had once tried to criticize and change me, or even demand anything from me.

I had a similar experience when I painted my piece *Cruz*. Initially I did not have a storyline set up; I simply wanted to paint a self-portrait. As I was getting ready to take my own reference photos, I realized how every step was important. I lined my lids with a sharp, cutting-edge eyeliner. I chose to wear a red traditional dress that was gifted to me from my prima who lives in Tijuana. Red expresses passion, anger, but also love, and I wore it with the intention that all three emotions could be read through the aura of my piece. I also put on a leather harness that instantly allows me to feel rebellious and comfortable. This style of harness is influenced by BDMS (bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism), an erotic subculture in which people can express different types of sexual interests while also creating up healthy boundaries with their partners. My sexuality has always been a difficult topic for me to discuss, mainly because it took me a long time to acquire the correct language to articulate it and to form a healthy perspective about my preferences. I identified as Catholic until I reached my freshman year in high school. I was raised with this religious practice, so I grew up believing that there was a very specific set of rules and guidelines that one had to follow in order to get into heaven. In my painting

*Cruz*, a gold cross necklace I used to own breaks free from my neck. Although I occasionally still have to fight off Catholic guilt, I also allow the memory of my abuelita praying with me every night when I was young to linger through my mind. I knew her intentions were to ask for my protection from a higher being because the prayer began with “angelito de la guarda, dulce comañia...” and I included this writing in the text that envelops my head. I also quoted my dad when he would say to me, “Always remember, *mija*, eres Mexicana!” along with every teacher’s opening mantra, “Ok class, let’s stand for the pledge,” a creed that I never fully memorized. My identity is comprised of two different cultures and like most Mexican Americans I have struggled to feel like I could fully fit into either one. In this self-portrait I give myself validation and assure myself that I am both and much more, that I am a proud Chicana.