ARTIST STATEMENT
From a Lone Printmaker to Socially Engaged Artist

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My journey as an artist has taken me from an individual who creates political prints to an artist who works in socially engaged collaborative projects. As a resident of the Rio Grande Valley—the southernmost tip of Texas—I had very little resources as a printmaker due to its geographic isolation from the rest of Texas. There are currently no independently owned press co-ops available for artists, and the only presses available are in university settings. Over the past ten years much of my work has focused on documenting and creating imagery based on the militarization of my homeland, the Rio Grande Valley. Bookended by the U.S-Mexico border and the Gulf of Mexico, this sub-tropical five-county area of Texas cannot be exited without going through checkpoints along Highway 281 North (Falfurrias, TX) and Interstate Highway 69 North (Sarita, TX). Those coming from the Mexican states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon must also pass Border Patrol checkpoints at the international bridges to enter the Valley.

I started as a painter and migrated to printmaking after a colleague invited me to a collective printmaking event where I fell in love with the process of carving and relief. Relief printing is a process in which the artist uses gouges to cut away the negative spaces of an image in wood or linoleum. The leftover positive images are inked and run through a press, much like a big stamp. It is a time-honored process used by artists like José Guadalupe Posada[1] and Albrecht Dürer.[2]

The magic of letting go of the pretentiousness of painting, creating multiple copies, and connecting to the tradition of the political print felt like an anchor point for my practice. The collaborative nature of printmaking communities, with their ingenuity and open skill sharing, felt like a natural fit, as opposed to the hermetic tendencies of painters.

After the U.S. Congress passed the Secure Fence Act which authorized the construction of 700 miles of a fence along the U.S.-Mexico boundary in 2006, many portions of that border wall began to be erected throughout the Valley. This legislation and its implementation had a huge impact on my work. I began creating images based on checkpoints, walls, bridges, and detention camps, as well as on communities with mixed citizenship status. Iconography I frequently utilize in my art includes razor wire, fences, and bridges. Common themes in my work include migrant/border experiences of women, children, and families, which include living with militarization, living adjacent to narco-violence, and the discrimination of brown, native-looking bodies. My work, then, is a tool to understand and deconstruct oppressive paradigms in my physical, spiritual, and psychic environment.

Notably, the Tejas landscape—with its history of colonization, revolution, land disputes, and border walls—are of interest to me because of how these forces and historical moments impact how Mexican, Mexican American and Indigenous peoples moved and move through this fraught environment. I, thus, explore the complexity of the relationships between borderland peoples and their landscape. For instance, the woodcut *Necrocitizen* is my depiction of how these various systems impose second class citizenship on Brown bodies. For this image, I draw from anthropologists Miguel Díaz-Barriga's and Margaret Dorsey's (2020) coinage of the term "necrocitizenship" by identifying the personal anxiety of checkpoint crossing as a symptom of a

larger systemic American prejudice against Brown/migrant people. The cover copy of their text notes that Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey "argue that border wall construction manifests transformations in citizenship practices that are aimed not only at keeping migrants out but also at enmeshing citizens into a wider politics of exclusion." Inspired by the old racist science of phrenology, my piece shows demarcated areas in the brain that are devoted to things like "adapt to exclusion," "negotiate militarization," and "death."

Another theme throughout my work is what I term "survivor's guilt," which I use to articulate when a Brown documented American citizen doesn't feel particularly worthy of or confident in that status. The spiritual struggle of this conflicted identity is most evident in *Our Lady of the Checkpoint*, which shows a desire to transcend borders, as well as overcome spiritual pain. In the piece, this spiritual pain is instigated by arbitrary borders that differentiate between citizens and non-citizens. There is an unspoken anxiety that many people feel when approaching the checkpoint. For myself, I often wondered what this feeling, as irrational as it seemed, was about. There are multiple factors at work in these anxieties, but inherited ideas about citizenship, worthiness, and not appearing "suspicious" played a big part in my own feelings. I can remember being with my family at border crossing checkpoints and international bridges and having the idea that we had to behave "correctly" and appear "American enough" to cross over without bringing about undue attention to ourselves. I can remember my parents' unspoken shame and fear. In *Our Lady of the Checkpoint*, I attempt to answer the question: To whom do I pray to alleviate the anxiety? The commercial Guadalupana? The Virgin de Los Lagos? I realized, I needed a special virgin—a virgin of the checkpoint. In my imagination, I see her shimmering in the heat, blinding me with her reflective blanket, emanating barbed wire rays and a razor wire halo around

her head. She is standing in front of the checkpoint shelter, which becomes her capilla, and the cameras are the all-seeing eyes not of God, but of the government. She came straight from one of the detention camps, I think. This is the appropriate virgin for this place.

I also use my art to problematize the objectionable term "anchor baby." A racist and xenophobic slur employed post-911 in mainstream news discourse—a pre-cursor to the Brown migrant hysteria generated by Trump—it was employed in mainstream news discourse to promulgate the idea of hordes of migrant women gaming the American system by giving birth on U.S. soil, thus anchoring the parents to the U.S. and providing welfare benefits to the whole family. My work deconstructs the hateful ideology of this symbol by providing a more human face to the babies whom anti-immigrant, right wing broadcasters such as Lou Dobbs condemned. The woodcut *Breach Baby*, for example, shows a baby nestled with its feet pointed downward, a presentation that makes birth a potentially dangerous situation. Behind the child is an anchor, implying that this child in limbo is an "anchor baby." The work also shows a scroll and abstract views of land, which symbolize the U.S. and Mexico. An image of a woman's body as a vessel and political battleground is the context for this birth. It matters on which side of the river she will give birth to her baby, a grave matter indeed. *Texas Hold'em* is a linocut on paper about the state of Texas refusing to issue birth certificates to American born babies of undocumented women held in detention camps. The child is another "anchor baby" and references the game of poker, implicating the State in playing games with people's lives.

Three other images featured in this issue also illustrate the tensions and complexities that concern me as an artist. The image *No me pides perdón* is part of a three-part series, which includes *Out of Fire*, *Flight #1* and *Out of*

Fire, *Flight #2*. In *No me pides perdón*, the woman centered in this piece is a modern day La Llorona who is crying for her lost children. The children—who are shown as roses in this image—have been lost to her as a result of our current administration's paternalistic and violent immigration policy, which separates immigrant families. La Llorona's face remains passive as she mourns her children while death lurks behind her. Above is the same image of asylum seekers crossing a bridge on the edge of death's sharp, unforgiving blade. I find it fitting to portray asylum seekers as potentially facing death on their quests for a better life, as they are hunted by human traffickers who have created an organized business out of kidnapping and ransoming immigrants and their families who want them back. Female asylum seekers face the constant threat of being sexually assaulted or becoming a victim of femicide. I incorporated a fence and U.S. flag imagery in the background of this piece. Although *No me pides perdón* was my first attempt to articulate the injustice and reprehensible circumstances created by the U.S. government at the border, I was not completely satisfied with it. I wanted to incorporate the resilience, strength, and spirituality that endured such atrocities. *Out of Fire, Flight #1* and *Out of Fire, Flight #2* are its sister pieces that allowed me to tell this larger, more well-rounded story.

In both of these, a quetzal bird is shown flying out from cactus and fire, a symbol of resilience and survival. In *Out of Fire, Flight #1*, the quetzal bird is paired with a mysterious image of a crystal-eyed ocelot morphing through the border fence. Both the quetzal bird and ocelot are animals prevalent in Aztec imagery. The ocelot, a small wild cat native to the Rio Grande Valley, is threatened by habitat destruction due to the wall and other developments. This image is about unfettered freedom from man-made environments and is a commentary on the federal government's official Prevention through Deterrence border policy. It functions as a necro-policy, as it diminishes the

value of human life and uses Mother Earth in a twisted fashion to entrap vulnerable migrating peoples in the harshest parts of the land and prevents them from entering the U.S. via death through exposure. The ocelot image evokes the future because it enables me to answer the question, "How can endangered border wildlife survive in an imagined world where anything is possible?" In my piece, I depict ocelots that evolved the ability to morph through border walls. The crystals in their eyes symbolize clear vision, something which is a desirable ability.

In *Out of Fire, Flight #2*, asylum seekers are crossing a bridge made of Santisima Muerte's blade. Santa Muerte is a folk saint that has quickly gained popularity as the patron saint of laborers who work at night, such as taxi drivers, bar owners, police, soldiers and prostitutes, as they face a particular set of dangers. Not sanctioned by the Catholic Church and not to be confused with the European Grim Reaper, Santa Muerte is often described as having Aztec roots and I carry that genealogy in my work. For this piece, I was also inspired by Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa who described the borderlands by writing: "This is my home, this thin edge of barbed wire," (1999, 25) in her revolutionary text, *Borderlands/La frontera*. I drew on that to illustrate the Matamoros-Brownsville asylum seekers who wait on the international bridge perched between life and death. Their make-shift shelters and tents rest precariously underneath Santa Muerte's blade—reminiscent of the sharpened edge to which Anzaldúa alludes. The roses with faces represent children who have been separated from their parents. The quetzal bird strategically placed in this image still rises up and gives hope.

I also work in large-scale relief prints on fabric—usually thrift store fabrics with a history—and create art quilts of my work. By combining the traditionally masculine medium of large-scale relief with the traditionally

feminine art of sewing and domestic fabrics, I strive to make a connection with content and form that the "militarized violent border" is home to women, children, and families and also a domestic space: home. *Paranoia Quilt* is an example of this. It is a caricature of the hysterical reaction that others have to stereotypes about border citizens and the U.S.-Mexico border. I imagine this quilt as something that someone who watches National Geographic Channel's *Border Wars*—a documentary television series that follows U.S. Border Patrol, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents—might wrap themselves up with on the couch. Perhaps some people are comfortable in their paranoia. Fabric pieces are the part of my practice that can be most liberating. Whereas traditional printmaking on paper can be harrowing—always colored by European standards, and invoking my own perfectionism—working with fabric holds none of that baggage. After printing on paper and fussing over registration, I print on fabric wildly and then later rip or cut and make quilts, blankets, banners, flags, or whatever I desire with my haphazard sewing. Materials used in my fabric work are archival ink, thrift store sheets, ribbons, T-shirt, vinyl, and, at times, store-bought fabric.

By mapping geopolitical aspects of my environment onto all my art, I understand myself better. The post-911 militarization of my home space has been the catalyst of conocimiento, a raja, or golpe for me, a concept written about by Anzaldúa. Furthermore, Anzaldúa offered autohistoria as a tool to understand and deconstruct oppressive paradigms, which is the function of my artwork in my physical/spiritual/psychic environment. While I had unconsciously been experiencing nepantla throughout my life, this golpe put me on the path to spiritual activism. I now know that my lived experience of the borderlands stems from a feminist viewpoint that contradicts superficial border violence stereotypes. Many people erroneously think that borderland

spaces like the Rio Grande Valley are unsafe and mirror the Netflix television series *Narcos*. Former students have relayed to me how friends from other areas in Texas will refuse to come visit their homes because of these harmful stereotypes. By processing and making images, I have made sense of the Rio Grande Valley as a liminal space, untangled my conflicted feelings, and ultimately created change in myself and decolonized this space from within.

Although these images happily found audiences within my own and other communities, I wanted to ensure my creative actions were indeed transformational. In 2016, an opportunity to do so emerged when I was named the artist in residence for the Activating Vacancy Arts Incubator (AVAI) program, an initiative sponsored by bc, a non-profit community design center that aims to improve the livability and viability of under-resourced communities in Texas through thoughtful design. Through this program, I worked with the Brownsville residents to create public works for the city based on Brownsville history, interviews, and public workshops. These workshops included my own funded printmaking workshop—the first of its kind in the Rio Grande Valley. We invited local artists to print blocks and also crafted collectively produced "community blocks." The community blocks were created in several workshops. The Rebel Corridos Workshop, for example, invited the public to write their own corridos, a unique Mexican narrative song form. Verses from the songs were carved into blocks through community carving parties. Other community blocks included one memorializing the Brownsville Raid, a notorious event in which a battalion of African-American soldiers were run out of town due to false allegations and anti-black sentiment in the Brownsville community. The resulting image, *Buffalo Soldier*, questions anti-blackness in Latina/o/x communities by addressing the past in the context of the current Black Lives Matter movement. Another community-produced art piece is *Woman Fence*, which is

installed on one of Brownsville's iconic buildings. This work addresses the criminalization of migrant women and their children.

During the AVAI residency, I met two women—printmaker Nansi Guevara and performance and video artist Christina Patino Houle. Together, we co-founded Las Imaginistas, a socially engaged art collective living and working on the U.S.-Mexico Border in Brownsville. Our work is rooted in this city as it has a rich but complex history. From conquest and the displacement of native peoples, to revolutions, annexation, secession, land disputes, and border walls, the tumultuous history of Brownsville and the Rio Grande Valley has both transformed the regional landscape and impacted the way people move through, construct, and occupy the built environment. The history of colonization and current militarization can play an invisible hand in perpetuating inequality by subduing residents into accepting certain truths. By unearthing and remixing the way these legacies are told, Las Imaginistas hopes to provide access to some of the tools needed to collectively construct a city that better serves all of its residents. As a collective, we counter traditional hierarchical power structures and work to make decisions collaboratively and through consensus. We also pursue printmaking because it lends itself well to socially engaged art projects as messages, images, and ideas often need to be repeated. Moreover, printmaking is ideal because printmaking communities are naturally collaborative spaces that tend to share knowledge, skills, equipment, and space. My path, then, has me currently developing my own artistry, as well as engaging in meaningful collaborative projects that allow me to tell alternative stories about my borderlands.

Notes

[1] A Mexican illustrator and lithographer, José Guadalupe Posada (1851–1913) used relief printing to produce satirical and politically acute calaveras that have inspired and influenced Latina/o/x artists today.

[2] A celebrated and influential German painter and printmaker, Albrecht Dürer's (1471-1528) high-quality woodcut prints revolutionized this medium.

References

Díaz-Barriga, Miguel and Margaret E. Dorsey. 2020. *Fencing in Democracy: Border Walls, Necrocitizenship, and the Security State*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1999. *Borderlands: La frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.