

ARTIST STATEMENT

Maíz Memory: Decolonizing Art through Mestizx Media

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I am a Xicanx visual artist, zine publisher, independent curator, and educator based in Yanaguana who is on a journey to remember ancestral knowledge and practices. This journey manifests itself through my lifestyle and my artwork. Through Xicanx veganism, I find interest in the decolonization of diet, or a desire to reclaim the pre-colonial plant-based nourishment of my ancestors through food and herbal medicine. I analyze what it means to decolonize art and to embrace the lessons that the earth and the cycles of nature have to teach us. I celebrate an ethics of care through my work, whether it pertains to the earth, animals, humans, or the self.

The art materials I use relate to parts of my identity, and I recognize when they mix or resist one another. The corn husks represent the skin of the figures, recalling Indigenous Mesoamerican beliefs that our very beings are created from maíz. Acrylic paints have origins in Mexico and oil paints have origins in Italy and Spain. This material use speaks to gendered ideas of nature and culture as well as a desire to dismantle the dichotomy of craft or “folk art” and “fine art.” I call these “mestizx media” works, reclaiming the “mestizo” colonial caste label put upon descendants of Indigenous and Spanish heritage by the Spanish. While this term has white supremacist origins, I’m reclaiming and redefining it as a mixture of materials.

Part of my work deals with the origins of language and the complexities of how we identify today. I define mestizx media as when materials originate

from the region(s) of the artist's ancestors. Accepting mixedness or a middle ground is also about embracing queerness and the fluid nature of identities that reject invented binaries. My work serves to work through my own intersections and to strive for intercultural conversations with folks outside of my identities. This, I hope, will open doors to compassion and healing in this world of destruction.

The triptych *Precipitate (Rain)*, *Evaporate (Sun)*, and *Condense (Cloud)* personifies the cyclical nature of water and our human relationship to the elements. It reflects waves of emotions, growth, and change that each person goes through in a day, a year, or a lifetime. The sun shines on the earth, evaporating bodies of water, and this might reflect nourishment or renewal. Then the water vapor forms into clouds through condensation, with feelings of fullness—perhaps satisfying or overwhelming. Finally, the water becomes so heavy that rainfall occurs through precipitation, signifying grief, release, or even joy. And then the process repeats. When we look at our climate today, we know that these processes can be elevated to treacherous levels, and that we are in need of balance. I made this work during COVID-19 quarantine whilst thinking a great deal about plant medicine, mental health, body awareness, and the continuous violence enacted upon people of color and the planet. We are not separate from nature. What lessons have we forgotten that she has to teach us?

Throughout the pandemic, we have seen a rise in mutual aid efforts, whether it be health care, providing groceries, sustaining organizations working towards social justice, and more. Mutual aid is based on concepts of solidarity and community care that are required when the systems of power that exist fail to support our basic human needs. It is about taking responsibility to care for one another—compassionate cooperation rather than capitalistic competition—

the whole rather than the individual. The painting, *Mutual Aid of the Earth*, speaks of our shared experiences and mutual aid that the earth gifts us, and that we may then share with each other, whether it be plants, food, seeds, or herbs. The hands share corn and the mouths share beans to demonstrate the distribution of resources and goods. The eyes share a trail of calabaza seeds resembling tears that speak of the collective and personal grieving that we have endured throughout the pandemic. The palette is inspired by the land and water of the planet that gives us life. The seeds and leaves represented come from las tres hermanas, or the three sisters: corn, beans, and squash, that have long been sacred Indigenous food staples. They work harmoniously as companions in the garden and in our bodies so that we may survive and thrive. When grown together, the corn provides a stalk for the beans to climb, the beans provide nitrogen to the soil, and the squash leaves provide shade to the roots. This lesson we gain from plants is that when we mutually care for one another and work collectively, we grow stronger.

The paintings *Home Again* and *Nature Nurtures* contain figures that are made up of corn husks with oil painted appendages and eyes. The layers of identity within the figures align with the materials used. The paintings embrace the idea of decorative art (which is often undervalued within “fine art”) as they are surrounded by dyed corn husk flowers and grass. The figures could be seen as wearing a corn husk fur or perhaps we are seeing into their muscular systems. They appear to be wearing masks with two faces—perhaps speaking of code switching, or the act of changing one’s demeanor, language, or appearance based on who someone is interacting with. This facial division could also represent colonially invented socially constructed binaries that are tied to race, gender, sexuality, and more. Our innate human complexities are capable of so much more than a dichotomous existence, and working with silhouettes allows me to queer the figures while also making their humanity universal.

The painting *Self-Love* was made in 2021, and began with me thinking of the figure as being stuck in the canvas, just as many of us might have felt stuck in our homes during the pandemic. I taped off a square on my studio floor and my partner photographed me scrunching my body up as tight as I could within it. I wanted to come just up to the edges of the canvas. I tend to make sketches of ideas first to play with composition and color choices, and when I showed the sketch to my partner, they immediately noticed that the negative space of the face created another face in the figure's thigh. I thought that was such a beautiful observation that I decided to go with it! A painting that was at first concerned with feeling stuck became an ode to loving one's self, even when feeling confined. Self-care has become something that we are collectively caring more about as a necessity for comfort, well-being, and survival. I find that a balance of community care and self-care is needed to maintain support within and outside of one's self. The figure embraces themselves as the two faces come together and a complete face can also be seen when the viewer tilts their head to meet the eyes. This image serves as a reminder to take care of ourselves, during the pandemic and always.

With these works, I consider of the corn husks as my collaborators which themselves hold ancestral memory. Over the years, I have trained myself to be really neat and tight with painting, to paint with smooth detail like the "old masters," but what does it mean when modern artists of European descent gained fame by creating abstract expressionism and geometric abstraction as appropriations of the art of Indigenous peoples? The textured corn husks only allow a certain level of this control, so there's a natural Indigenous resistance in play. At some point, I must loosen up to adjust to their texture, in a way decolonizing what it is that people think of when they think of a "good" rendered drawing or painting.

Each of these works has elements of nature, whether literally through the corn husks, or visually through the imagery. Water, fire, earth, air, and the cosmos are represented, and interact with the figures as a means for us to remember our connections to the earth. These connections are within each of us, but it takes a conscious effort to remember and embrace them. I attempt to decolonize art and to work to fully embrace the parts of my identity that have systematically been detribalized. Some ways I believe we can work towards decolonizing art are by re-Indigenizing creative practice through method or materials, subverting Eurocentric art history/unlearning a white aesthetic, making unapologetically political art, self-teaching outside of institutions, being in conversation with intercultural and intergenerational folks, and resisting the capitalist ego by embracing collectivity and collaboration. We are the products of resilience, and for that I am grateful. Because our ancestors fought to survive so that we may exist, we have the responsibility to do the same for the generations to come.

