I know now...I am here

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I KNOW… I AM HERE

by

ANA CAROLINA MEZA MENDOZA

Under the Direction of Ruth Stanford, MS/MFA

ABSTRACT

*I know now... I am here* is an exhibition about the process of immigration. As an immigrant in the US, I feel dislocated. This exhibition will display a series of sculptures inspired by my personal immigration process. The main piece of the exhibition consists of a translucent wall made of a plastic grid. A light illuminates the wall creating what I call a space in-between. As a result, *I know now... I am here* produces a feeling of empathy. Even though some people haven’t gone through an immigration process we all know the feeling of not belonging from one place to another.

I KNOW… I AM HERE

by

ANA CAROLINA MEZA MENDOZA

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DEDICATION

To my family and most of all to my sister.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee, my family, previous professors and friends for always encouraging me to make things.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................................................................................. V

LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................ VII

1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

2 IMMIGRATION BUREAUCRACY ......................................................................................... 1

2.1 Immigration and time ........................................................................................................ 3

3 TRAVELING ........................................................................................................................ 5

3.1 Wayfaring and the grid ..................................................................................................... 6

3.2 Transport and the in-between .......................................................................................... 8

4 ASSIMILATION .................................................................................................................. 13

4.1 Displacement and micro-displacements ......................................................................... 13

4.2 Dwelling and inhabiting .................................................................................................. 16

5 CONCLUSIONS ................................................................................................................ 17

6 REFERENCES ....................................................................................................................... 18
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Ana Carolina Meza, Waiting, 2017, paper, wood, nails, aluminum tube, 4”x4”x1.” ...... 3
Figure 2 Ana Carolina Meza, Borderline, 2019, PLA filament, 18”x42”x8”. ............................... 7
Figure 3 Ana Carolina Meza, Amerika, 2019, PLA filament, 20’x8’x0.5’ ................................. 9
Figure 4 Gego “Drawings without paper” in ‘Autobiography of a Line’ at Dominique Lévy..... 10
Figure 5 Ana Carolina Meza Mendoza, Amerika (detail), 2019, 20'x8'x.5’ ............................... 11
Figure 6 Do Ho Suh: Almost Home, 2018, Smithsonian American Art Museum. Photo: Libby Weiler. Image courtesy the Smithsonian American Art Museum. ................................. 12
Figure 7 Ana Carolina Meza, Tiny Ladder, 2019, Paper, 1"x.25". ...................................... 15
1 INTRODUCTION

I was born and raised in Barranquilla, Colombia. I came to the U.S. with my family at the age of eighteen. The process of immigrating was a life-changing experience.

Waiting for immigration paperwork to be approved can create a sense of uncertainty. This waiting and uncertainty changed my perception on how immigrants view time, and how immigrants require a sense of patience and an appreciation for small achievements.

The act of traveling or going from one place to another displaces a body. As an immigrant, I feel misplaced living in the U.S. and now when I go back to Colombia to visit family and friends, I am also out of place. This has developed into a nagging sense of feeling in-between. Within my artwork, I create a visual representation of this in-between place.

Assimilating to the new environment is also part of immigrating. The need for blending in and the desire for dwelling can cause a split identity, one identity that blends in with the surroundings and one that does not belong. Immigrants experience tension between a public, inhabiting identity and a private, dwelling identity.

I know... I am here shows a series of sculptures where the experience of immigrating is described using architectural elements such as line and space to change how people view immigrants and, more specifically, depict how immigrants view time, space and identity in relation to the migrating process.

2 IMMIGRATION BUREAUCRACY

To best grasp how this body of work represents my experience as an immigrant, it is necessary to understand the immigration process entirely. Immigration can be a long, exhausting process. People must file a petition for immigration. Once it is turned in they wait several months until the immigration office approves all this paperwork; After this approval, they set up an
appointment months ahead for the interview. The interview is the primary deciding factor for whether the person is approved or not. If the interview is approved, then a doctor appointment is set up for general checkup and the vaccines required to come to the U.S. Even after the immigration office approves a visa, if a doctor determines that the petitioner suffers from a disease, or may cause self-harm or harm others, the person will be denied entry to the U.S.

This series of steps takes much patience, and the immigrant’s life is put on hold. Each step of approval is a reassurance that they are on track. However, even at the last step, there is still a chance for the visa to be denied.

Figure 1 *Waiting* is a paper ladder rolled up on a spool. The ladder symbolizes the want and need to go somewhere better, which is the main reason people immigrate. When unrolling the reel, the ladder must be handled carefully because it is made of tracing paper, so it is easy to break. Just like the process of immigration, people need to fill the forms with caution; otherwise, the visa could be denied or in the case of *Waiting*, the ladder could break.
2.1 Immigration and time

There are many different reasons to immigrate and each reason requires a different type of paperwork. The different U.S. categories for immigration are: immediate relative and family sponsored, includes U.S. citizens spouses, fiancés, adoptions and individual family members; employer-sponsored, which includes employment-based immigrants, religious workers,
translators/interpreters, and U.S. government foreign employees; and last, other immigrants such as diversity lottery and returning residents.¹

When an immigrant is coming from Latin America to the U.S. via family immigration, the immigrant family needs to file a petition to move to the U.S. Once the U.S. embassy processes this petition, an interview is conducted. In this interview, the U.S. government makes sure to verify the petitioner information and documents are correct and valid. The interview process also works as a judgment of character. If the person conducting the interview believes that the immigrant petitioner could be a threat to the country, the interviewer has the power to deny the visa. Once the petitioner is approved in the interview, the actual visa will be added to their passport, a health check will be made with the proper vaccines administered, and then they are ready to travel.

The immigration paperwork could take a long time for the United States Citizen and Immigration Services to process. According to Ashwanth Paul, “the visa petition can take up to 8 months to be reviewed by the USCIS and being sent the paperwork can take another one to three months. Scheduling an interview can take two to four months. If the applicant is already in the US, the whole process can take up to one year, and this timeline may be longer for people applying from outside the US.”²

The time to process immigration paperwork can take a long time and the immigrant never knows exactly how long it will take, leaving the petitioner feeling in a state of limbo. Just like the length of the paper ladder in *Waiting*. There is no way of knowing how long the ladder is but

we do know that the size of the spool is around 4”. There is hope that the process will end but the petitioner does not know exactly how long this process will take.

The immigration process is different depending on the case. Waiting at least one year for your immigration papers can be a frustrating process. Minor mistakes in the paperwork are considered red flags even though the immigrant has to complete all the paperwork in a language that is not their native language. The immigrant’s life is also put on hold for the entire process. They are uncertain if they are going to move away; they cannot make any plans, and they do not know what their life is going to be like in the country to which they are immigrating.

3 TRAVELING

After all the paperwork and waiting for approvals, the next step is traveling. New immigrants have to pack all their belongings and travel with them. Leaving home to find a better home is not easy. This process can also take some time. In many cases people immigrate to be with other family members or a spouse. In other case immigrants can end up traveling to all kinds of places. Sometimes, traveling becomes their new home.

Two different types of travel are important to my work: wayfaring and transport. Wayfaring is a slow and natural way of traveling. A common place to find wayfaring paths is in the wilderness. Hiking trails are paths of wayfaring, where the whole point is to follow a human trail, and not disturb nature. Hiking trails often start at a parking lot and end up at another location: for example, a waterfall. In contrast, transport is a more direct path to a destination. Imagine a straight line drawn from the parking lot to the waterfall. Transport is the most efficient way to get to the waterfall. Due to steep terrain and nature conservation reasons, the trail must remain winding and irregular. A wayfaring trail might not be the most direct path to the destination, but it does make us value the time spent getting from one place to another.
3.1 Wayfaring and the grid

The first time that western culture encountered wayfaring was during colonization. Ingold explains that “From time to time in the course of history, however, imperial powers have sought to occupy the inhabited world, throwing a network of connections across what appears, in their eyes, to be not a tissue of trails but a blank surface.”

Colonization’s goal was never to assimilate to the new land. Its whole purpose was to extract as much richness/resources as possible, and then send those resources back to the colonizer’s homeland. Transport from place to place in a straight-line path was the most efficient way of transporting goods. This hurt the preexisting mode of traveling that was present in the “inhabited world” by cutting right through it. The easiest way of understating how colonization transports its goods is by laying a system of straight lines that intercept each other similar to a grid system. I like to use the grid as an example of this “network of connections.”

Wayfaring is the type of travel that respects nature the most. Ingold states “wayfaring, I believe, is the most fundamental mode by which living being, both human and nonhuman, inhabit the earth. By habitation I do not mean taking one’s place in a world that has been prepared in advance for the populations that arrive to reside there. The inhabitant is rather one who participates with in the very process of the worlds continual coming in to being and who, in laying a trail of life, contributes to its weave and texture.”

Ingold clarifies that whoever is using a wayfaring trail must assimilate to the environment instead of imposing their way of living. Similarly, immigrants arriving in a new country, are expected to inhabit the space they are in without changing the preexisting “trail of life” however that may be.

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4 Ibid.83
In the artwork *Borderline*, I overlay a grid on top of a blank surface. *Borderline* consists of a white rectangle protruding out of the wall. Upon closer examination, a grid is hovering on top of the surface, held by a series of thin, long columns. The grid has undulating organic slopes that could be read as a landscape model. A blue wire is woven across the grid from left to right of the rectangle. This blue wire is woven into the grid but it does not follow it. The wire follows a winding and turning path in contrast to the intercepting 90 degree lines of the grid. The wire represents a wayfaring path in this landscape model.
3.2 Transport and the in-between

Like many immigrants to the U.S. I came to this country by plane, which could be a disorienting experience if never taken a plane. Traveling by plane, there is only sky through the window, and a few hours later the plane reaches a different place. This is a very different experience than arriving in a country by car or on foot. On the road from country to country, the transition is slower and requires passage through a physical border. This border could be a river or an actual wall.

Countries are like rooms. A person can go to another room by going through a door. That is exactly what people experience when traveling to another country by car. People use a door, or in the case of a country, a border checkpoint that helps us go through a physical border like the walls of the room. When people use airplanes and fly to another country, the experience is much different from traveling by car. There is no border checkpoint when people use airplanes; therefore, they don’t use doors when going to another room.

Ingold describes “Transport, by contrast, is tied to specific locations. Every move serves the purpose of relocating persons and their effects and is oriented to a specific destination. The traveler who departs from one location and arrives at another is, in between, nowhere at all.”

When traveling from room to room, we use doorways. People are constantly moving through space and thresholds and there is very little attention put in the liminal spaces as we transition from here to there.

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5 Ibid. 85
My work titled *Amerika* is about this “in between” space that Ingold identifies. The piece is constructed using a 3D pen that extrudes hot polylactic acid (PLA) plastic at less than 1.75mm in diameter. The object is constructed by the connection of three-dimensional dots in a grid system. Resulting in a see-thru object. Thanks to the light in the room the shadow of the object is cast on the wall directly behind it. This gives the object another layer of physical presence.

Another artist who is interested in transparencies and relies on light and shadow to make her pieces visible is the artist Gego. Gertrud Goldschmidt, commonly referred to as Gego, was a Jewish architect born in Germany who fled to Venezuela because of Nazi persecution. Her most notable works were her *Drawings Without Paper* series, which consisted of interwoven stainless-
steel wire constructions placed at a distance from the wall, creating shadows that looked like line drawings on the wall.⁶

Figure 4 Gego “Drawings without paper” in ‘Autobiography of a Line’ at Dominique Lévy

Gego’s interwoven wire constructions create a grid in her work that is very similar to the grid present in Amerika (see Figure 3). Even though Amerika and the Drawings Without Paper are three-dimensional objects, the viewer perceives them as two-dimensional because of the 90-degree angles produced by this grid. Josef Albers explains “Apparently, it is little recognized that a right angle -90- on a frontal plane is perceived-normally-as frontal, which means flat.”7 This contradiction of a three-dimensional object that looks flat creates what Mari Carmen Ramirez sees in Gego’s works as “an in-between zone.”8

This ‘in-between’ zone is achieved, in part, by the illusion between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality but also through light and shadow in Gego’s work. Ramirez describes, “On one hand, light dissolves the neutrality of the wires, turning them into an ungraspable shimmering; on the other hand, the shadow they cast on the wall reaffirms their material

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8 Gego and Ramírez, Gego.
presence as wires in space.”

By placing *Amerika* in front of another wall and lighting it so the shadow of the object hits the wall, I aim to create a space of the ‘in-between’ zone. The result is an empty corridor where the viewer encounters the intangible shadow of the transparent wall. The empty corridor creates a space for metaphysical contemplation; especially when the viewer enters the space and is confronted by their own shadow.

![Figure 6 Do Ho Suh: Almost Home, 2018, Smithsonian American Art Museum. Photo: Libby Weiler. Image courtesy the Smithsonian American Art Museum.](image)

Another artist who uses the corridor as a symbol for the in-between is Korean artist Do Ho Suh. Suh’s exhibition at the Smithsonian American museum in 2018 exhibited an installation *Almost Home* where he combines sections of his previous homes to create a long corridor. (see

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9 Ibid.
figure 5). “I see life as a passageway, with no fixed beginning or destination. We tend to focus on the destination all the time and forget about the in-between spaces,” says Do Ho Suh\textsuperscript{10}

This ‘in-between’ zone created by Gego and Suh through space, light, and shadow is my main visual reference to engage Ingold’s idea of “in between nowhere at all.”

This empty space that Ingold calls “in between nowhere at all” and Ramirez calls the “in-between zone” there is a space used for transport; this space in my work takes the shape of a corridor between the transparent wall and the shadow on the gallery wall.

4 ASSIMILATION

4.1 Displacement and micro-displacements

If wayfaring is winding and irregular, transport is a series of dots in a grid system. Ingold explains: “A wayfaring line goes along, from place to place, the fragmented, postmodern line goes across: not however stage by stage, from one destination to the next, but from on point of rupture to another. These points are not locations but dislocations, segments out of joint.”\textsuperscript{11}

According to Ingold, a wayfaring line has places all along with it. In contrast, a fragmented line is a series of straight lines that are connected by dislocations rather than locations. The fragmented line can be understood as transport. Just like air travel, sometimes there are connecting flights in airports. This means that the traveler is stopping at an airport to catch another flight. The traveler never makes it to the connecting city because that is not the destination.

Even though the immigrant arrives at his or her destination, the feeling of displacement does not go away. As an immigrant, I always feel like an outsider, and the place I occupy is not


\textsuperscript{11} Ingold.p172
my destination. Do Ho Suh believes that everyone experiences displacement in some way. He says: “Getting up, entering the shower, leaving your room and then your home—these are micro displacements within the everyday. Leaving Korea for the US was my most significant experience of displacement, but I realize it happens to us constantly.”

I identify with the idea of micro-displacements being an experience every day. The little moments in our everyday life take us from place to place. From the moment we get out of bed in our bedroom to the shower inside the bathroom, the bathroom inside the bedroom, the bedroom inside the apartment, the apartment inside the building. The moment we leave a place we step to another. Our bodies are continually moving from place-to-place, never reaching a destination for long before moving along, till you move to another place again.

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Figure 7 Ana Carolina Meza, Tiny Ladder, 2019, Paper, 1"x.25".

Tiny ladder is a miniature ladder measuring 1”x.25”. This work is a celebration of the small tasks we perform every day. The ladder is a symbol of a tool that people use to perform a task. Tiny ladder is also conveys imaginary displacement as the viewer’s eyes moves from the bottom of the ladder to the top.
4.2 Dwelling and inhabiting

As an immigrant I find myself performing small acts to remind me of my childhood in Colombia, like eating plantain, speaking Spanish, dancing some salsa and sleeping in a hammock. These small acts change my environment to become more familiar like home.

In the book *Building the Unfinished*, Lars Lerup describes a similar situation. “When he enters a motel room on a business trip: opens his bags, spreads his clothes around on chairs, puts up his family photographs, and thus takes over the space and dissolves some of its anonymity. Such attempts of dwellers to dissolve anonymity and achieve familiarity-to personalize their environment-are often considered delinquent and are always counteracted or made difficult by the manager, whose desire is to maintain status quo.”

Just like businesspeople, immigrants are trying to make their environment more familiar. The main danger to dwelling is what Lerup calls “the manager.” This person is an authority figure that makes sure people are following the rules. Alternatively, in Lerup’s words “to maintain the status quo.”

Immigrants are expected to assimilate by inhabiting rather than disrupting their new environment. We must learn the customs and rituals of our new environment and make them our own. Finding a balance between dwelling and inhabiting can be difficult at first, but as time goes on, one becomes aware of how society works. One thing I have learned is keeping dwelling in my private personal life and inhabiting in my public life. This can create two identities, the public and the private. Just like the businessmen on a trip as long as he spreads his belongings in the hotel room and it not spilling out in the public areas of the hotel the manager can still maintain the status quo as long as the dwelling is done in the private space.

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5 CONCLUSIONS

*I know now... I am here* is an exhibition that represents the journey of immigrating to a country. Immigration bureaucracy requires immigrants to be patient to accomplish every step. Time becomes an important aspect in this step because there is a lot of waiting for immigration offices to respond. The immigrant’s life is put on hold while waiting to hear back from consulate and immigration offices.

Traveling is another key element of immigration. Moving from country to country can be a big change and brings out feelings of alienation. Everybody can sympathize with this because we all at some point have moved from one place to another or experienced micro-displacements. The immigration experience is much more drastic, but people can still get a sense of how displacement feels.

Assimilating can be a hard process for immigrants because they need to create a balance between dwelling and inhabiting. This balance can be achieved by separating the self into a private self which is dwelling and a public self which is inhabiting. We can all understand an immigrant sense of self because in everyday life we create a different identity when we are in different places. For example, a person can behave completely different at work versus at home.

In conclusion *I Know now... I am here* is an exhibition about the immigration process, and serves an attempt to create an experience that everyone can relate to. Even though some people haven’t gone through the process of immigration they can still empathize with it.
6 REFERENCES


