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Menudo and Lucky Charms

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MENUDO AND LUCKY CHARMS

by

FELICIA ANN CASTRO

Under the Direction of Craig Dongoski, MFA

ABSTRACT

Menudo and Lucky Charms is an exhibition of videos and paintings that explores assimilation and identity within Mexican and American cultures. This body of work is rooted in my experiences growing up in a Mexican household within a predominantly white community. I have been assimilated to American culture, a fact that becomes clear when I am among people of Mexican heritage, my heritage. *Menudo and Lucky Charms* is an investigation and reclamation of self. Throughout the exhibition, I seek out moments of connection and contradiction between my family history and the evolution of my identity.

INDEX WORDS: Mexican-American, Assimilation, Identity, Mestizaje, Mestizo, Painting, Video

MENUDO AND LUCKY CHARMS

by

FELICIA ANN CASTRO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Drawing and Painting

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2022

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2022

MENUDO AND LUCKY CHARMS

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my Mom and Dad, Mary D and Maurilio Castro. They have loved encouraged and supported me in countless ways. For my big fat Mexican family, my friends, classmates, mentors and fellow artists who gave given me love and inspired me. It is also in dedication to my fellow Mestizos, mi gente, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans, for those who know the power of a chankla and the love of a fresh home-made tortilla.

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I am grateful to my mentors from New Mexico State University Craig Cully, Wes Kline who were instrumental in helping me to develop my voice and practice. Thank you, professor Cully, for taking time to continue to mentor me past my time at NMSU. I would also like to thank my Georgia State University professors Jeremy Bolen, Pamela Longobardi, Craig Drennen, Jill Frank and Craig Dongoski as well as Cynthia Farnell who encouraged me and provided me with insights and advice. Professor Bolen you helped me to develop my video to the place it is today. Thank you to Professor Jennifer Siegler for your course on Mexican Art History, your enthusiasm and expertise were integral to the shift in my work. Thank you especially for introducing me to contemporary Mexican American artists. To Nedda Ahmed who was pivotal in helping me write this paper. Gracias to Saul Ramirez and Monica Martinez Diaz: Me ayudaste a reconectarme con mi cultura y tus comentarios y consejos fueron los más esenciales para este cuerpo de trabajo. Ambos me inspiran y respeto mucho sus opiniones. Tora O'Brien, my true north, BFF for life who told me I could do it. Your friendship and honesty has been a gift and I would not have come this far without your words of encouragement. For Claude DeCarish, my muse and whose love has been unwavering and supportive. Gracias a mis padres, me enseñaron a amar y apreciar nuestra cultura y su amor y apoyo me han permitido seguir mis sueños.

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1 INTRODUCTION

I was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico, a smallish town next to the Rio Grande River surrounded by desert and nestled next to the blazing Organ Mountains, a place where roads only lead to more roads. Las Cruces is located 45 minutes away from El Paso, Texas and the border to Juarez, Mexico. Our blended family of nine was part of an even larger extended family whose lineage hailed from Durango and Michoacán in Mexico, New Mexico, and Spain. (In a DNA test we found roots of indigenous peoples of the Southwest and Mesoamerica, but those links have been lost.) I recall manicured lawns, large family dinners, picnics in the park with my cousins and spending most of the day following my grandmother around her house as she cleaned and cooked meals. Every aspect of life revolved around family. It was a rich and loving atmosphere, but shortly after my fifth birthday we abruptly moved to Albuquerque.

The modern suburban neighborhood where I grew up was part of the freshly developed west side of Albuquerque, the area of town that had been settled mostly by an influx of Anglo people from places like Minnesota, New York, and Massachusetts who wanted a lower cost of living and warmer weather. Given this influx of Anglo resettlement, Albuquerque became more “Americanized” than any other city or town in New Mexico. There were new accents and brash people who would rather shove their way in front of a line than wait an extra five minutes. Mainly, I remember they were austere, rigid, and shockingly different.

I chose to blend in, to forget the Spanish language, and to spend time with my new Americanized friends. I had two selves: one for family, and one for the outside world. Eventually, my outside-self became dominant. I never took stock of that change until Covid-19 locked us up. In 2020, I struggled with illness, thought about my own mortality, and watched Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor die at the hands of the police. That year’s

experiences refocused my art away from meditation and the philosophy of enlightenment and turned my attention toward my own experiences of cultural erasure and identity. 2020 made me confront, reconnoiter, and re-engage with my heritage.

I realized in this most racially charged and politically important election year, that as a Mexican American person I was doing my culture a disservice by not addressing my Mexican-ness in my work. Prior to that year, I had not wanted to capitalize on the ‘identity politics’ trend I noticed in academia. I saw myself as a global citizen, connecting with people from all walks, cultures, races in life, and I saw my work as universally accessible. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the entire world to shut down, family was the only thing that seemed important; not my work, not my wants, but the safety and well-being of those I loved. Living thousands of miles away, I found myself listening to *corridos*¹ and mariachi music to feel connected to my parents. I began to notice the absence of my culture, and I began to examine and reconnect with my heritage in my daily life and then in my art.

¹ A corrido is a narrative song about the deeds of heroes, daily life, and criminals in Mexico.



Figure 1. *Monk Knee* 2020, 24x24", oil, acrylic, resin on wood panel.

Two pieces from 2020 that illustrate this conceptual shift are *Monk Knee* and *Corrido de Santanon*. *Monk Knee* is an oil painting inspired by my inner recluse and harsh meditation practice. The turquoise to yellow gradient represents the void which is everything and nothing, the eternal zone or space of possibility. My gradients are like a cloudless sunset or sunrise, colors lighting up a limitless sky that is physically inaccessible. I think of them as a place of serenity in

my mind, and painting them is equally meditative. The red flat resin rectangle bench disrupts the background in a manner that is meant to be both aesthetically pleasing and artificial. The life-like leg appears to rest on this object that has no three dimensionality. There is a tension between real and unreal, which echoes tension I face in meditation.

The conceptual shift from meditation and contemplation to assimilation and Mestizaje happened unexpectedly. While scrolling through Instagram stories I came across a post by @themexicanr3volution, a page dedicated to Mexican history with the moniker “know your roots.” The post was of an old song my father used to listen to when I was a child. When I heard it play on my phone, I became captivated. As a child I had vehemently rejected my father’s Mexican music. It was like torture having to listen to it in the car on long road trips and it embarrassed me. It was a blaring reminder that my culture that was not accepted as part of American taste. Back in the 1980s, Motley Crüe and Van Halen were cool. Ranchero music was not, so hearing this song now, as an adult, was a novel and joyous experience. At the time, I was working on a video about spirituality in the quotidian, but suddenly I felt compelled to make my video about the song.

Corrido de Santanon is a Yasujiro Ozu² inspired video with a static direct camera, using the straight lines and geometric shapes of an interior domestic space, with the subject (me) adding movement as I dance (see figures 2 and 3). The video begins with a long shot taken inside of a townhouse with a living room, dining room and kitchen area and, at the back, a stairwell where I sit apathetically looking at my phone. The song disrupts the silence and I start dancing around the house to an old Mexican ballad. This video was the first time I had ever made art about my culture or its absence in my daily life. At this moment I began to look at what I had lost

² Yasujiro Ozu is a famous Japanese director, (1903-1963) known for his precise compositions contemplative pacing, and low camera angles.

as an assimilated Mestizo and to go back to my family histories: histories that were steeped in a rich culture, but that had nearly evaporated in my quest for individuality and my pursuit of happiness.



Figure 2. Yasujiro Ozu, Still image from *Tokyo Story*, 1953.
<https://www.janusfilms.com/films/1755>

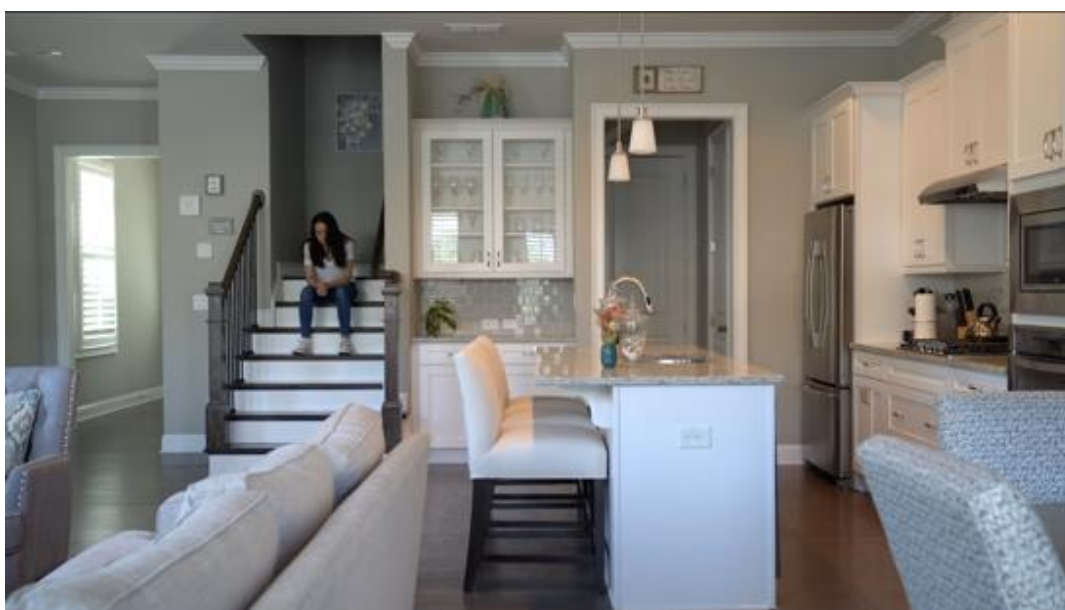


Figure 3. Felicia Castro, Still image from *Corrido de Santanon*, 2020.

2 ASSIMILATION/MESTIZAJE

The reclamation of a lost culture requires a look at history. Mexican culture is a story of assimilation, an amalgamation of varied hierarchies and localized cultures separated somewhat by economics. The term *mestizo* is used to label people of mixed indigenous and Spanish heritage.³ Mestizaje was created by the clashing of cultures and is synonymous with assimilation. My family history and memories of this process are integral to my artwork; this intersection is the point at which theory and lived experience meet. Assimilation occurs almost imperceptibly at first, and mine began when I was four years old.

Maria Epifania Castro, my paternal grandmother, was brought to the United States at the age of nine to work as a nanny and maid after her parents died in a fire. She was a warm, loving, devoted mother and dutiful Catholic with dark wrinkled skin, black hair, and mysterious strength. She was generous to strangers and exuded love. We visited her every Sunday in El Paso, when she would bring the entire family together for her weekly batch of menudo. She did not speak English and my earliest memories of her were of hot Sundays spent in her one-bedroom casita next to the train tracks. Her tiny kitchen was always packed with aunts, uncles and cousins crowded around a small table. We overflowed into the living area and outside porch just to eat her famous menudo. I was the exception. Instead of eating grandma's menudo, I always asked for Lucky Charms. By the age of four, I had been seduced by sugar-coated oats and marshmallows, lured away from the Mexican delicacy of tripe, red chili, and a broth so rich and flavorful, it rivaled ambrosia. Looking back, it seems a blasphemy to have rejected my grandma's culinary wizardry.

³ Robert Con Davis, *Mestizos come home! : making and claiming Mexican American identity*, Chicana & Chicano visions of the Americas series, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), xx.

This memory inspired the title of my thesis show, *Menudo and Lucky Charms*, as well as my painting *Breakfast with Champions*. The painting features a faithfully replicated box of Lucky Charms cereal, with one notable difference: I have replaced the bowl of sugary cereal with a bowl of my grandmother's cooking. Juxtaposing the cereal's lurid packaging with the rather homely-looking bowl of menudo encapsulates the two starkly different cultures in which I grew up. Lucky Charms is the paragon of seductive American culture: it's a mass-produced, consumerist product that ensnares people with sugar and artificial color. It's just as addictive as fast food, in that it offers a moment of sweet bliss with very little effort and instant, if unhealthy, gratification. In contrast, menudo is considered a cure for colds and hangovers and is packed with vitamin C, zinc and selenium. It is made from a combination of ingredients from precolonial Mexico and Spain: hominy corn, chili, and cow's stomach. I chose Lucky Charms for immediate satisfaction, but other experiences of assimilation came from popular media, peer pressure and academic institutions.



Figure 4. Felicia Castro, *Breakfast of Champions*, 16x12", 2022, oil, acrylic on wood panel.

I remember watching educational films about the history of the Southwest in elementary school: pioneers, early settlers, and the white idealized formation of a nation. In these films,

people of color were servants, and it was made clear who was at the top of the food chain. These memories are the foundation for my video *Chingadas⁴ en Elementary School*. I created this video by editing together clips taken from American mid-20th century educational films. I harvested the Prelinger Archives using search words such as southwest, New Mexico, pioneer, immigration, native American, Indian, cowboys, Mexican, indigenous, Old West and other racial signifiers. I spliced the narration from these old, problematic films to highlight the US's historically racist attitudes towards immigrants of color and native peoples. The narrators' voices repeat messages about American supremacy that are forever stuck in my memory

The ideas disseminated in those old educational films served a purpose and were guided by assimilation theories of their time. Assimilation theory has an imperialist origin with racial superiority at its core and has many variations. Sebahattin Ziyanak's article "Critically Assessing Classic Assimilation Theory and Alternative Perspectives for Immigrants and the Second Generation in the United States⁵" summarizes three main types of assimilation:

- Straight line theory⁶ by Warner and Srole (1945) proposes that second generation immigrants make improvements with class mobility when compared to the first generation and have an increased standard of living and experience less conflict with rapid acculturation.
- Anglo-Conformity Perspective assimilation theory⁷ by Milton Gordon (1961) purports that immigrants are completely consumed by the dominant culture.

⁴ Spanish slang for "fucken things".

⁵ Sebahattin Ziyanak, "Critically Assessing Classic Assimilation Theory and Alternative Perspectives for Immigrants and the Second Generation in the United States," *Race, Gender and Class* 22, no. 1-2 (2014): 144, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26505330.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid 148

- Segmented assimilation⁸ by Alejandra Portes and Min Zhou (1993) contends that second generation immigrants do better economically but do not give up on their own culture, and posit that non-white immigrants have less opportunity for access to the middle class no matter how well they are acculturated.

Each theory comes from an Americanized, fully institutionalized perspective. It seems to measure success by economic prosperity and is seen as a “linear process of progressive improvement and adjustment to American society.”⁹ In addition, these earlier theories were made for and applied to Americanization programs. The Segmented Assimilation theory matches my family’s assimilation experience most closely; furthermore, it recognizes the fact that Mexicans still face discrimination. Mainstream US culture rejected Mexicans as “other” and treated them as inferior beings. Many Mexicans internalized these beliefs and developed a negative self-image.¹⁰ This internalized racism is rarely discussed amongst my Mestizo friends and family, but my father has told us stories of his own experiences. When he was seven years old my father tried to pass himself off as Anglo by saying his name was Tom instead of Maurilio. He had noticed the hierarchy in his segregated town and wanted to be seen as white. My father recounting this memory is featured in my *Assimilation sin Asimilación* video.

Most of my assimilation experiences happened at school. School was the main vehicle for “Americanization” programs that were employed by educational institutions through repeated contact with the dominant culture.¹¹ Historian Frank Van Nuys explores the development of these programs in the early West in his book, *Americanizing the West: Race, Immigrants, and*

⁸ Ibid 146

⁹ Barry Edmonston, *Statistics on U.S. immigration : an assessment of data needs for future research* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1996), 28.

¹⁰ James Diego Vigil, *From Indians to Chicanos : the dynamics of Mexican-American culture*, 3rd ed. (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, 2012), 223.

¹¹ Vigil, *From Indians to Chicanos : the dynamics of Mexican-American culture*, 191.

Citizenship, 1890-1930. He explains that the early American West contained a robust and diverse population of Indigenous tribes, Mexicans, Spanish and Asians. The Anglo-Americans sought to achieve dominance over the inhabitants¹² through bureaucratization, centralization and standardization, all with the aim of making the Mexican population subservient and eradicating those unwilling to assimilate.

Most of my teachers were white, the principals were white, and the majority of students were white. My mother recalls that she never wanted to take a burrito to school for fear of being teased. I have spoken with many Mexican Americans who at one time or another felt shame about their heritage while at school. White kids teased Mexican kids who had brown skin and accents (even if we didn't speak our mother tongue). An Anglo schoolmate called me "Mexican" as if it was a bad word. I was made to feel unworthy. I just wanted to fit in. I had learned the words used to describe me: mestizo, Mexica, Chicano, half-breed, greaser, and spic.

What my third-grade persecutor didn't know is that my family and I are actually Mestizo. Mestizo or Mestizaje and assimilation are synonymous. Conceived from a clash of two cultures, Mestizo is the aftereffect of assimilation that happened after Spain conquered the native Mexican people; to be Mestizaje is to be considered a hybrid of mixed race and culture. The term is used to describe our complex identity and has a somewhat sinister origin. By marriage or rape, Spanish Colonizers and indigenous peoples bore offspring that were referred to as 'mestizo' or mixed race. Latino Studies scholar Rafael Perez-Torres contextualizes the Chicano discourse thoroughly in his book *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture*. Mestizo or

¹² Frank Van Nuys, *Americanizing the West : race, immigrants, and citizenship, 1890-1930* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 19.

Mestizaje originates from a troublesome history which has “enforced dominant and disabling colonial racial hierarchies.”¹³

The term was used in Mexico to create a homogeneous national identity from a heterogeneous population, and was adopted by Jose Vasconcelos, a minister of education in post-revolutionary Mexico. Vasconcelos sought to rebrand Mexicans as a “cosmic race” to propagate a pride in mestizo heritage for a new national identity. For Perez-Torres, this classification as a racial mixture concealed the “primitive” native and foregrounded the “civilized” European:

Mestizaje thus evokes and erases and indigenous ancestry that is at once a point of pride and source of shame. Chicanos and Chicanas receive this complex legacy of Mestizaje and forge of it a nuanced strategy of self-identification...The racialization of the mestizo body served to make it a body under erasure and, more significantly, a body subject to the violence inherent in imperial expansion.¹⁴

Previous generations of my family were subjected to this discrimination and violence that sought to hide the native, “savage” side of our Mestizaje heritage. When New Mexico was annexed into the United States after the War of Independence from Mexico in 1848, it was so heavily populated by Mexicans and Native Americans that it stayed a territory for over 60 years. This period of time was meant to acculturate the land; essentially, to give time for enough white settlers to come in, seize lands and assume political power. In the US and Mexican War, the US came in as squatters and united with residents of the territory to fight against Mexico for independence. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo brought an end to the Mexican American War

¹³ Rafael Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje : critical uses of race in Chicano culture*, Critical American studies series, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

(1846 to 1848), and guaranteed protection of property and civil rights of Mexican nationals living in the new boundaries of the United States. 100,000 Mexican citizens remained, and the treaty was not honored. Lands were stolen by notions of white superiority as the Anglos seized political power. Mexicans became foreigners in their own country, subjected to cruel violence and racism. This history was not taught in schools when I was growing up, so I did not know what we had lost or why I felt like an immigrant in a country where ancestors had lived before the conquest.

As Perez-Torres points out, “The newly forged Mexican American citizen became the object of discrimination and violence.”¹⁵ My great grandfather lost acres of farmland to eminent domain in the early 1900s. My father grew up in a segregated mining town where only white people were allowed managerial positions, and where all the businesses excluded Mexicans except for special days of the week. Mexicans could only go to the movies on Tuesdays and could only eat at certain restaurants. Subjected to land loss and discrimination, my family adapted to this changing landscape as a matter of survival. My maternal grandfather changed his name from Filadelfio to Felix to get jobs as a carpenter. To fit in at his job, my father went from Maurilio to Maury. The kids in my generation were mostly given English names like Steve, John, and Julie. In public, people pronounce my name “fuh-LEE-shuh”, but at home it is pronounced “FAY-lees-yah.”

These prejudices entered our homes and became internalized. My grandfather scolded me for playing out in the sun, because he was concerned about my skin tone and how being brown-skinned would lower my placement in the world. Colorism was ingrained within our community: people with European Spanish origins were prized over people from indigenous groups. This

¹⁵ Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje : critical uses of race in Chicano culture*, 8.

prejudice was propagated by casta paintings that depicted the social hierarchy: white Europeans at the top, and indigenous people, whose skin was tanned by the sun, down at the bottom.¹⁶



Figure 5. An 18th century casta painting via Wikimedia. Source: <https://daily.jstor.org/the-paintings-that-tried-and-failed-to-codify-race/>

The culmination of the external discrimination and bigotry combined with internalized racism generated psychological issues for many Mexican Americans, myself included. Searching for a place in the world, lack of social acceptance causes poor self-esteem, self-hatred and marginalization.¹⁷ I recall the culture shock I had in first grade. During recess, when all the kids in class went out to play on swings, slides and monkey bars, I sat on the asphalt near the closest

¹⁶ Diana DiPaolo, "Corporeal Concerns: Eighteenth-Century Casta Paintings and Colonial Bodies in Spanish Texas," *Historical Archaeology* 41, no. 1 (2007): Page 23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25617423>.

¹⁷ Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje: critical uses of race in Chicano culture*, 223.

school doorway waiting for playtime to end so I could go back inside. I did not know anyone or have any friends; I felt like an outsider. Even then, believed I was inferior; this feeling rooted itself in my psyche and popped up like an annoying weed throughout my life, despite my attempts to rationally stamp it out. Even now, my desire to be a professional artist is tainted with the same self-doubt and fear of not being accepted or good enough. I never questioned the origins of this mindset. It does not absolve me from the responsibility of overcoming my own negative self-talk, but it is somewhat a relief to know that much of my experience can be attributed to the generational pain of a minority living in Anglo-American society.

One question asked of me countless times by many Anglos expresses everything: “What are you?” I have been asked this question everywhere, from Hawaii to New York City, while walking the streets in Cairo, and trying to get a job in Australia. What are you? It appears to be a benign, neutral question, but I have always seen it as an attempt to categorize, marginalize, and caricature-ize me. The question casts me as sub-human; a “what,” an “it,” not a “who.” Whenever I have answered this question, my questioner typically responds, “You don’t look like a Mexican,” which I interpret as them not seeing in me any of the negative stereotypes associated with Mexicans. I then see my inquisitor as a racist, and it changes the dynamic in a silent way that stains the seemingly friendly encounter without further discussion.

I address these issues in my painting *Orgullo y Verguenza*¹⁸. This painting has a turquoise gradient background with Hatch red chili pepper sewn in the canvas’ center. New Mexico is famous for the Hatch chili, and the pepper is tied to the painting using organic yarn from Teotitlan Del Valle in Oaxaca, Mexico. The color turquoise represents strength and healing for

¹⁸ “Pride and Shame translated.”

many tribes in New Mexico.¹⁹ The gradient from light to dark suggests submersion in deep water. By placing the chili in a prominent position in the center of the canvas, I'm expressing my cultural pride. This chili is a staple food for Mestizos in New Mexico. It is in most of the traditional dishes my mother cooks and is unlike chili made in other regions in the Southwest. By contrast, the frame is attached haphazardly using duct-tape. I cut the wood wrong for the frame, but instead of throwing it away, I fixed it with duct-tape. I associate this act of salvation with my father. If something in the house breaks, instead of buying a new item or getting it fixed professionally, my dad fixes things himself with whatever he has on hand. I used to find his habit embarrassing, but now I see that he is simply frugal. I no longer attach social shame to his "upcycling" efforts.

¹⁹ This information comes from growing up with Navajo, Zuni and other tribal people in New Mexico. My first percious earrings were made from the gemstone and the signficance is widely shared in the Southwest.



Figure 6. Felicia Castro, *Orgullo y Verguenza*, 2021, 11x14", oil, Hatch red chile, pine, duct-tape on wood.

Orgullo y Verguena is the first painting I made in which I attached an object to the canvas rather than painting an image of it. I had recently read art critic Leo Steinberg's essay²⁰ about his experience viewing Jasper Johns first one-man show. In the essay, Steinberg gives a detailed description of *Target With Four Faces*, and states that Johns' painting ended the magic of paint. This article made me a fan of Jasper Johns helped me think differently about what paintings can be. I became intrigued with what else I could do on a canvas.

²⁰ Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public," in *The New Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1966), 40.



Figure 7. Jasper Johns *Target With Four Faces*, 1955, 33x26x3", Encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78393>

3 IDENTITY/AUDIENCE

One of the primary contemporary concerns in the art world, as well as in politics and in institutions, is identity. The concept of identity seeks to explain how we socially categorize, organize, express, cultivate and assert ourselves into the world. It plays a key role in social processes and relations. There is an old Zen saying, “trying to identify yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth.” In a meditation practice, one of the main goals is to let go of identity, to detach and experience connection. The paradox is that identity is part of the current zeitgeist; it includes sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, class status, nationality, religious affiliation (and many more) and these alliances give one a place in the world.

According to the Critical Media Project,²¹ identity is a construct learned through interactions with family, peers, organizations and the media.²² These constructs play significant roles in how people experience the world, and they shape the types of opportunities and challenges that people of various ethnicities have. For this reason, identity is crucial to understand, even for the Zen monk, as identity is part of our lived experience. Social and cultural identity are linked to issues of power, opportunity, oppression and freedom and where these intersect brings questions as to how Mexican-American art is received, who it is for, and what it will do in the spaces it inhabits.

The social constructs and the definitions of identity come from the dominant culture, which is Eurocentric.²³ When I first entered academia as an artist, I was required to take two

²¹ “Critical Media Project (CMP) is a free media literacy web resource for educators and students (ages 8-21) that enhances young people’s critical thinking and empathy, and builds on their capacities to advocate for change around questions of identity.”

²² Alison Trope, "Why Identity Matters," in *The Critical Media Project* (11/20/21 2013).
<https://criticalmediaproject.org/why-identity-matters/>.

²³ Eurocentric is “focusing on European culture or history to the exclusion of a wider view of the world; implicitly regarding European culture as preeminent.” Oxford dictionary definition.

semesters of general art history. The curriculum began with the Venus of Willendorf, the caves at Lascaux, the Greeks, the Romans, the Middle Ages, and on to the great Renaissance and ended with Post-Modernism. There was a brief mention of Asian and African art but the art of pre-Columbian cultures that existed in the Americas was excluded completely. I asked the professor why Native Americans and Mesoamerican indigenous cultures were left out and was told that I would have to take a class that specialized in those histories, since the curriculum in general art history classes was based on the Western Art Canon. This experience is an example of the Eurocentric curriculum in US higher education and cultural institutions.

In a recent study, researchers surveyed 18 major US museums using online catalogues. The study looked at a sample of 10,000 artist records and analyzed the metadata to extrapolate artist genders, ethnicities, and geographic origins.²⁴ This study showed that 85.4% of the works were from white artists and 87.4% were men. Hispanic and Latino artists accounted for 2.8% and women of color were 1%, even though women of color are currently 20% of the US population.²⁵ These are issues I never noticed, as I had accepted the dominant culture or the western art canon. When I visited the MoMA in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago or even the Louvre, I began noticing that not only was the art mostly by white artists, but that the audience was mostly white as well. Who is art for and who is looking?

The answer to that question is one of the main reasons I never sought to make art about my culture. I wondered if making art about being Mexican American for a primarily white audience was performative and capitalized on my culture through tokenism. However, minorities struggle for exposure, to have a place on the stage, to be seen, and to uplift their communities by

²⁴ Hakim Bishara, "Artists in 18 Major US Museums Are 85% White and 87% Male, Study Says," *Hyperallergic* (June 3, 2019 2019). <https://hyperallergic.com/501999/artists-in-18-major-us-museums-are-85-white-and-87-male-study-says/>

²⁵ Ibid.

breaking through the gates, instead of attempting to align with the mainstream. As a Mexican American, I feel a duty to people of my culture to use my voice, even though my artistic interests have previously pertained to universal connectivity, meditation, and in stripping myself of attachments.

Growing up in New Mexico, my family did not visit museums unless they showcased Mexican art. We went to see Ballet Folkorico, the Indian Art Market and the Spanish art markets in Santa Fe, but as we walked down Canyon Road²⁶ there was very little, or no, Mexican American artists' work on display. As a child who wanted to be an artist, I couldn't imagine a place for me in those spaces. I thought one had to be born with genius and have exceptional skills. Years later, I saw through this delusion, and while taking painting classes as an undergrad, I had an experience with two young Latina girls at a workshop that would remind me of the need for visibility.

My school had a weekend program for children that took place in the painting studio where I was working on a large 4 x 6' canvas that sat prominently in the back of the room. Two Spanish-speaking girls between the ages of 8 and 12 were in attendance and were mesmerized by the painting. Taking notice, I went to talk to them about the work. "Esto es tuyo?" or "Is this your work?" one asked, surprised and shocked. What was surprising to them, perhaps, was that they could see themselves in me. I told them it takes practice, but that they could also learn how to paint and make art. Would these girls grow up with the same assimilation issues? Will they someday be made to feel ashamed of where they come from, or can they feel proud? Will they retain their essence and become deft at balancing two cultures, or can the dominant culture shift to be more inclusive and respectful of our differences? These questions and the aforementioned

²⁶ A famous road in Santa Fe containing the highest concentration of galleries in the country.

issues on visibility are why I am making art about my experience as a Mexican American in a predominantly white hegemonic society.

Creating work about Mexican culture that speaks about identity and assimilation circles back to family and community. That I feel like a foreigner in Mexican spaces such as the Fiesta Market in Atlanta, or when asking for homemade tortillas at the nearby *carniceria*²⁷ has me longing for a connection to this rich culture I left behind. It is also a way to honor my family, where I come from, and hold it in reverence and dignity. In addition, sharing my experiences brings greater visibility to my community, potentially breaking down institutional barriers. In this way, I can help change the narrative for Mestizo, Mexica, Chicana, LatinX and Mexican Americans. Although my style of painting hasn't changed, I have radically altered the subject matter in my work. I still paint in a realistic manner, but in this series of work I'm shifting my attention to my cultural influences and markers of my heritage.

²⁷ A *carniceria* is a small Mexican owned grocery store that sells meat and other goods.

4 THESIS EXHIBITION: MENUDO AND LUCKY CHARMS

In the Navajo language there is no word for art, as art and life are one unified experience.²⁸ This body of work allowed me to explore assimilation as I reconnected to aspects of my Mexican culture. Through this process, my life and art became enmeshed. I learned about history from family, from the grand stories told in books, and from accounts of people left out of those books. I searched my memories, took a journey to Mexico, and connected with people who have complex ethnicities: Mexican, but also Zapotec and indigenous. It was cathartic, joyful, and sad. There were moments that made me cry, and realizations that forced me to confront aspects of my life that were seemingly lost or forgotten. Video was the best medium to capture the many facets of this process; it allowed me to communicate and show more than I am currently capable of doing as a painter. *Menudo and Lucky Charms* is a video installation with seven paintings and one sculpture inspired by stories and stills from the video.

In my undergrad work I began using video in tandem with painting to give greater context to the work as a whole. In *Deleuze Blue*, 2017, 4x6', oil on canvas, I painted the folds of an ordinary bed sheet, and created a video that played next to it (see figure 6 and 7). The sheet is animated and appears to expand and contract like lungs breathing. This project led me to consider how these two mediums could interact and I began to research other artists who used video as well. I looked at Mark Bradford who connected sculpture, painting, and video in his 2017 Venice Biennale installation *Tomorrow is Another Day*²⁹. I also looked at Mika

²⁸ Caroline Bower Olin, "Navajo Indian Sandpainting: The Construction of Symbols" (PhD diss. Stockholm University, 1972), 7.

²⁹ Riccardo Bianchini, "Mark Bradford: Tomorrow is Another Day: The Exhibition of the United States at the 2017 Venice Art Biennale," Click on link for review of Mark Bradford's Tomorrow is Another Day installation. <https://www.inexhibit.com/case-studies/mark-bradford-tomorrow-is-another-day-united-states-2017-venice-art-biennale/>.

Rottenberg's *Cosmic Generator* installation, in which she creates an actual store with many video elements that intensify the viewers' experience.



Figure 8. Felicia Castro, *Deleuze Blue*, 2017, 4x6', oil on canvas.



Figure 9. Felicia Castro, *Respiration*, 2017, film still.

The core video work in my thesis exhibition, *Assimilation sin Asimilación*, is just under twenty minutes long and is a montage of footage of my mother cooking, interviews with my father and uncle, music and found footage from the Prelinger Archives, and old photos, videos, and sound clips of my trips to Mexican markets in Atlanta, Oaxaca Mexico, and Las Cruces New Mexico. The video meanders through spaces, stories, sounds, and images. I inserted humor to reach into deeper issues such as racism, erasure, discrimination, self-loathing as well as connection, love, and family.

There are specific moments from the video that I chose to expand upon by creating paintings. These stills are moments of importance, such as the image of my grandmother, the tortilla, and my father. These represent what assimilation has taken from me and the ties that bring me back to my culture. By painting these symbols of my heritage, I render them hyper-

visible; I monumentalize them in the traditional western canon of painting. These paintings are an amalgamation of two cultures: acts of assimilation. Certain aspects of western culture govern my aesthetic, while subject matter and materiality draw me back into my culture.

In the paintings, I incorporated materials that carry special meaning and significance: black cotton velvet, brightly colored oilcloth tablecloth, cheap plastic shelving paper with a marble decoration, and hand-made organic yarn from Teotitlan Del Valle. The yarn was hand crafted by indigenous people who still speak their mother tongue and live by their ancient ancestral customs. It represents a tribute to the indigenous part of the Mestizaje, and a connection to my lost lineages. The cadmium yellow yarn was dyed with marigolds, an important and meaningful flower for the indigenous people of Mexico. It is said to symbolize the fragility of life and brings the spirits of the dead back to the living with its beauty. The red yarn was dyed with cochineal, a pre-Columbian dye used by the Aztecs and Maya and was used for royalty and ceremonies. These finely crafted materials tether me to my lost roots.

In sharp contrast to these hand-made fibers, the mass-manufactured vinyl-coated tablecloth used in three of the paintings references the modern-day Mexican home. Oilcloth table coverings with bold floral patterns are a household staple in many Mexican households and symbolize the domestic spaces where people gather and eat. The marble-patterned plastic shelving paper is a similar texture to the oilcloth, but with its more subdued colors and marbled pattern, it mimics the Carrera marble countertops that connote fancy houses, wealth, and success. I use the shelf paper as visual shorthand for “Americanization,” which I interpret as that piece of assimilation that is aspiring to fit in, even at the cost of papering over long-standing cultural traditions. The idea to use shelf paper in this way came to me in a dream: I was in my

grandmother's old casita and it had been completely remodeled. I attempted to peel back the fresh wallpaper to see if I could find evidence of her existence.

The choice to use black cotton velvet started with a memory. In the 1970s my parents had a triptych of velvet paintings from Mexico. One panel was of an indigenous boy dressed in white with a sombrero on his head. He pulled a rope that trickled off the canvas and continued onto the next canvas, where it was attached to a baby donkey. Velvet paintings were a common sight in the border area where I grew up and were considered a legitimate form of art in Mexican households. In my research I learned that these kitsch paintings originated in Juarez, Mexico. Although painting on velvet began in Kashmir and dates back to Marco Polo, it was in Juarez where the medium flourished in the 1970s and the paintings became mass produced. The style was appropriated by an American man from Georgia. He brought velvet painting to the United States and the medium's subjects changed from indigenous Mexican scenes to Elvis and other pop-culture icons. By using black velvet in my pieces, I'm reclaiming part of my artistic heritage and remixing it into a high art context.



Figure 10. Felicia Castro. *Menudo & Lucky Charms* installation view. 2022.

I divided the rectangular gallery space into two spaces: one space for the video which was projected against the back wall with seating provided, and one space in the front half of the gallery where three paintings hung on one side and four on the other. Unlike many painting exhibitions, my paintings were formally disparate and seemingly unrelated. The video acts as the unifying element; it provides context for all the works in the show. The paintings express a similar range of moods as seen in the video: humor, solemnity, sincerity, and irony. To live and be part of two different cultures is to bounce endlessly between ideologies, values, customs, and social norms. My aesthetic choices mirror this dance.



Figure 11. Felicia Castro. *Menudo & Lucky Charms* installation view. 2022.



Figure 12. Felicia Castro. *Menudo & Lucky Charms* installation view. 2022.



Figure 13. Felicia Castro. *Menudo & Lucky Charms* installation view. 2022.

In *Assimilation sin Asimilación* I use Deleuze’s “crystal image” theory³⁰ by depicting a present, wandering character, (me) entering Mexican spaces and clumsily attempting to speak Spanish. This story arc is intercut with retellings of stories from the recent and distant past. An omnipresent computer-generated voice narrates and speaks directly to the audience. It overlaps, runs in and out of different video clips, and addresses the present and the past in a non-linear fashion. At various points in the video, the narrator waxes poetic and offers lessons on pronouncing Spanish terms using English phonetics.

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze, Hugh Tomlinson, and Robert Galeta, *The time-image*, Paperback edition. ed., Cinema, (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

The use of the automated voice was inspired by the artist Hito Steyerl and her video *Liquidity and How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV file*. She employs text as well as an automated voice that speaks directly to the viewer. Using the generic machine voice allowed me to distance my own personality from the narration, making it more universal and familiar. The generic voice also links to this idea of becoming Americanized to the point of becoming a computerized “Karen.”³¹

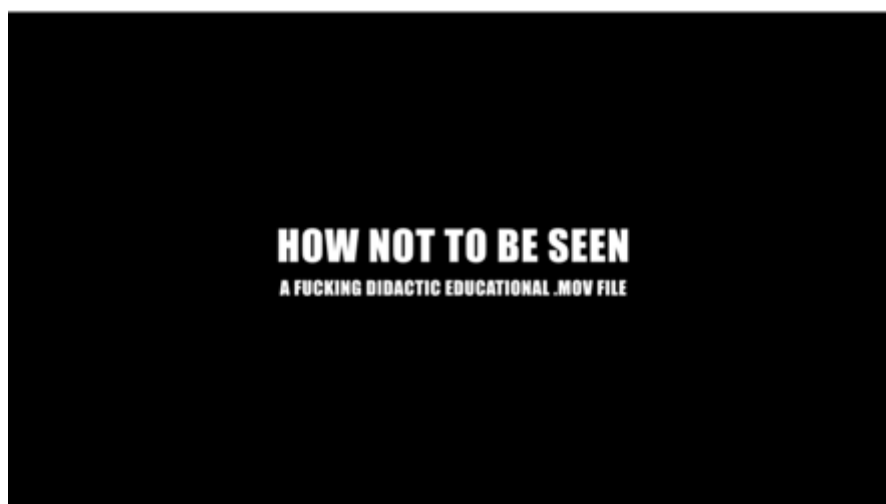


Figure 14. Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013
<https://www.artforum.com/video/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen-a-fucking-didactic-educational-mov-file-2013-51651>

The video contains three main stories, all filmed in 2015. In the first story, my father tells an anecdote about a time when he tried to pass himself off as a white person. This story exemplifies the internalized racism mentioned in my research. As a child, my father noticed the dominant culture and wanted to align himself with that identity by changing his name from Maurilio to Tom—the “Anglo conformity” aspect of assimilation. In the second story, he relates

³¹ “Karen” also happened to be the name of the voice I chose from the options given in the voice-to-text application. A happy coincidence. The rise of “Karen,” a stereotype that weaponizes white privilege against people of color, became part of the zeitgeist in the early 2020s, when a viral video showed a white woman calling the police on a Black man who had asked her to put her dog on a leash.

an anecdote about getting into a bar fight because he danced with an Anglo woman. Her husband assaulted him and yelled, “No damn Mexican is going to dance with my wife.”

The bar fight video sequence includes a photograph of my father from 1975. In the picture, he holds a sombrero as he smiles from behind his black mustache and glasses. It’s almost meta-parody, a stereotype of a stereotype: his gesture in the photo is that of a Mexican mimicking a Mexican. I included the picture for that very reason; the man who physically assaulted my father must have had this stereotype in his mind. I painted this same image of my father on a black velvet canvas as a way to reclaim the velvet, and to highlight the Mexican-ness of this material. I used the golden yarn to depict his hat, thus creating a bit of irony as well as humor. What might be considered kitsch is actually made with high-quality yarn that is as precious as gold.



Figure 15. Castro Family Photo, *Dad*, 1976.



Figure 16. Felicia Castro, *El Chingon*, 2022, 38x30", oil, yarn, on cotton velvet.

My uncle Rafael tells the third story in the video, which follows a short clip in which my mother talks about racism at the border and proudly declares that she is “A Mexican,” constituting an example of segmented assimilation (people do not give up on their culture). Rafael recounts the time his family’s home and business, Mary’s Café, was lost to a fire. As the building was ablaze, my father risked his life in a futile attempt to put the fire out with a small garden hose with no water pressure. This story is a testament to my father’s character, but it’s also a poignant metaphor for our fruitless attempts to effect change in a world that is systemically racist, bigoted, and cruel.

My grandmother, who was never Americanized, represents a tether back to my cultural heritage. It was imperative to include her in this body of work and to honor her memory. The show’s title is an homage to her, as are many of the food references. She features in the fire story as well as in other parts of the video and in the painting *Maria Epifania Castro y sus Niños*. The image referenced in this painting was taken shortly after her husband died in a mining accident. She stands resiliently, surrounded by 4 of her 5 children, with her eyes closed as though she is holding back tears. Each child seems grief stricken. Her body resembles the Venus of Willendorf and is sturdy like a pillar. I painted the figures with burnt umber, Indian red, yellow ochre and Indian yellow hues to mimic some of the ancient murals found in Mont Alban and Bonampak, Mexico. The photo itself was old and burned in many spots, so when I translated the image into the painting, I covered the burned spots with yarn to symbolically mend the lost parts of the image. Painting this image brought me to tears as I remembered my grandmother’s strength and love and imagined the struggles she faced with feeding, housing, and raising five children in a racist, misogynist town.



Figure 17. Family photo circa 1937.



Figure 19. Felicia Castro, *Maria Epifania Castro con sus Hijos*, 2022, 50x40", oil, yarn, on canvas.



Figure 20. Monte Albán, *Zapotec Mural*.
<https://www.salsaandsun.com/monte-alban/>

The Santuario de Chimayo is another important story mentioned in the video. I included this story to communicate my lost indigenous roots, the cycles of assimilation, and colonialism's aftereffects. Chimayo is a church in Northern New Mexico that I used to frequent as a child. The church claims to have miraculous healing dirt in a hole in the floor next to the sanctuary. Through research, I discovered that this church was built on a Native American sacred site. The Tiwa called it Tsi-Mayoh and believed it had healing powers. The Spanish invaders stole the land, built a church on top of it, and claimed the dirt for their own purposes. Interestingly, I found that the Pendleton company appropriated the "Tsi-Mayoh" name for one of the designs on its overpriced blankets and jackets. This story encapsulates the history of New Mexico, from Native to Mestizo to capitalism, and inspired the pieces *Pochita Preciosita* and *Tsi-Mayoh*.



Figure 18. Felicia Castro. Bottom left: *Tsi-Mayoh*, top right: *Pochita Preciosita*, installation shot. 2022.



Figure 19. Felicia Castro. *Tsi-Mayoh* installation shot. 2022.



Figure 20. Felicia Castro. *Tsi-Mayoh* detail shot. 2022.

Pochita Preciosita is a self-portrait from when I was 3 or 4 years old. *Pocha* is a derogatory term that Mexicans used to describe Mexican Americans who have been Americanized; it literally translates to “rotten fruit.” In the piece’s title, I use the diminutive form, “pochita,” to call myself a piece of little precious rotten fruit. By turning the derogatory term on myself, I both recognize the term’s accuracy (I am pretty Americanized) and remove some of its sting (I’m using it on myself). I connected long braids made out of Teotitlan Del Valle yarn to my painted braids and ended them in a hole containing dirt from Chimayo, which I purchased online directly from the church. I titled this piece *Tsi-Mayoh*, its original name from the Tiwa tribe of New Mexico. These two pieces reconnect me to the earth, to the place of lost ancestors, and function as an act of healing.



Figure 21. Felicia Castro. *Pochita Preciocita*, 2022, 24x24", oil, yarn on wood panel.



Figure 22. Felicia Castro. *Tortilla Sunrise*, 2022, 24x24", oil, shelving-paper, oilcloth on wood panel.

Interwoven throughout the video is a close up shot of a woman's hands making tortillas from scratch. This flat bread delicacy is not just a side but is an essential part of the main course and is cherished within the Mexican American community. It takes years of practice to make them perfectly. *Tortilla Sunrise* is a tribute to tortillas and tortilla makers. For this painting I combined materials in a collage to speak to assimilation. On a 24x24" wood panel I covered all but a 3" horizontal strip at the top with the marble shelving paper and painted the strip bright yellow as a nod to the sun. I cut out a flat outline of my hands and forearm in the act of pushing a

rolling pin from green oilcloth that has an Aztec design and glued it as though they were making an offering. In the center of the plastic marbled paper, I painted a life-like tortilla. The three vastly different layers speak to adaptation by sharply contrasting the elegant simplicity of a plain, homemade tortilla against the tacky, plastic veneer of faux marble shelf liner and mass-produced oilcloth. At times I feel like that tortilla, isolated from my heritage and surrounded with nothing but consumerist culture.



Figure 23. Felicia Castro. *El Huateche Dance Lesson*, 2022, 38x32", oil, oilcloth on canvas.

El Huateche Dance Lesson,³² was the only painting not directly inspired by my *Assimilation sin Asimilación* video. I had created three other videos that did not make it into my thesis show; one of these videos was of a dance lesson. As part of my research, I took a folklorico³³ dance lesson and filmed it. The teacher had been dancing since age 2. Compared to her masterful, graceful, and rhythmic dance, my clumsy and uncoordinated attempts were comical and spoke to an underlying theme in my efforts to reconnect with my culture. My dancing was as dreadful as my Spanish. This painting is a reference to that lesson and is taken from a video still. I used the oilcloth to signify Mexican-ness. My legs rendered half in oilcloth and half in realistically painted flesh represent my dual-culture existence. The background color gradient in blue and Indian-yellow hues of sun and sky and is a relic from my previous work on meditation. These gradients connote change through a shift in color; they have no location, no sense of place. I often feel this way deep-down, like I am in-between places, moving from one place to the next.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Connection and contradiction, Mexican and Americanized, serious and comical, canonical and kitsch, pride and shame, love and self-loathing: these are the dichotomies I explored while making this show. I leaned into the ironic and made aesthetic choices that reference and pay homage to my heritage. Mexicans do not need a lesson on how to pronounce “menudo” from an automated Karen, but do need to feel represented in the art world. We should feel pride in ourselves and our ability to survive a world that is full of bigotry, ignorance, and

³² El Huateche is a regional dance from Veracruz Mexico.

³³ Ballet Folklórico is a traditional dance of Mexico with roots in Spain, and North Africa.

racism. Making this work gave me a sense of pride and has caused me to question some of the American values that have been instilled in me. Working on this show also brought up other questions related to my identity that I plan to explore in future work. I hope my show was uplifting, thoughtful, and informative and that it will have a life past graduate school, perhaps traveling to places where Mexican Americans can have access to it.

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