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La Cultura Que No Cambia

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La Cultura Que No Cambia
by
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A thesis presented to the
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*I dedicate this thesis in memory of my grandfather,
José Gutiérrez Magdaleno
I also want to thank those who believed in me.*

Abstract

In the text of *La Cultura Que No Cambia*, I mention how my work has been influenced by becoming more aware of generations of altar making that occur in my family. By collecting stories and photographs of altars, I can observe and create work based on how the legacies can change through generations or stay the same. The memory of my ancestors and family traditions is strengthened. Growing up seeing discrimination towards others has influenced me to highlight my Mexican heritage of traditions, culture, and language through several different methods. I can create work informing audiences about how political and social issues affect the Latino community using these elements. My work aims to create a voice for those affected by injustice while simultaneously celebrating cultural family traditions.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	3
INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER 1:.....	7
ALTAR, HACIENDO ALTARES EN FAMILIA Y PRÁCTICA ARTÍSTICA.....	7
BORDANDO ENTRE FAMILIA Y POR LA COMUNIDAD.....	18
LUCHANDO LA LUCHA Y DACA	21
CHAPTER 2:.....	25
POR MI FAMILIA Y COMUNIDAD LATINA	25
CHAPTER 3:.....	31
ACTUACIÓN Y DOCUMENTACIÓN	31
CHAPTER 4.....	38
EL AMOR DE MI FAMILIA	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	48
NOTES	50

Introduction

As an artist of Mexican heritage living in the U.S, I am influenced by my family's heritage and traditions. Generational knowledge has not been lost in my family, even though we are separated from our family's original homeland. I can learn what has made my family strong over the last century, which is essential to my identity.

Even though there are centuries between us, I can spiritually connect with my family's ancestors. I follow their same beliefs, faith, and devotion to create and make my art.

The symbolism and prayers I use are centuries old. My art practice is contemporary because my subject matter focuses on current events.

My studio practice is in conversation with multiple themes. The first chapter of this thesis centers on altars and my family's traditions of altar making. I am bringing altar making into the gallery, shifting both the public and private aspects of altar making. The installations are not blessed as sacred space, but they have the potential for prayer and meditation.

In the second chapter, I speak about the political context that has informed and shaped artworks. Specifically, how language shapes me as a person and artist. The unfair US migration and immigration laws are the subject matter of multiple works. I am part of this issue, so I use my artistic voice to advocate for those who may not have the advantages I hold.

In third chapter consists of the role of performance and video documentation in my studio practice. I address why I need to communicate my relationship to fundamental problems in the nation and the world through my creations and body. Performance speaks louder than a written explanation. Immersing myself and projecting my voice through my art provides an experience that can invoke empathy and healing.

My thesis project *El Amor de Mi Familia* installation that is in the Kemper Museum is addressed in the fourth chapter. This installation is a result of my experimenting, research and learning, at Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts. Taking into account, these elements my studio practice has evolved. I have changed as an artist. It has brought me some confidence by looking at what I have done in this program.

Chapter 1:

Altar, Haciendo Altares en Familia y Práctica Artística

Altars are art:

Where the sacredness of creation and its life-changing potential are given shape and expression in material form, the altar is a made thing and a process of making. It is an intentional gathering of symbolic objects, each having its purpose, but each combining with others to elicit a visually compelling whole. Like any artwork, an altar is a product of choice and strategy, an attempt to transpose contradictory materials through arrangement, embellishment, and so on in the endeavor to create meaning.¹

In the historical collection of stories and illustrations in *Beautiful Necessity* by Kay Turner, nationally known German American artist Erika Wanenmacher describes the link between altars and art. For me, both altars and art are a process of bringing objects to a sacred place and as a remembrance.

Altars can either be private or public. Altars are places of strength and hope that connect us to God and the higher power. Personally, altars help me connect with my inner being, beliefs, and spirituality through prayer or meditation. My family's tradition of altar making has been passed down since my great-grandmother's time.

In my research and experiences, I found that altars and the altar-making process consist of five components.² The first component is the intention. When making altars, I need to think about the purpose behind my altar. Is it a place to pray? Is it a place intended to bring awareness to the one who made the altar? The second component is location; where do I want to place the altar? The third component is to elevate the altar so that the objects are not directly placed on the floor.

The fourth component is the type of objects placed on or around the altar and what those objects represent. The final component is candles, visual representations of prayer, and meditation.

In *Las Flores de Histerctomia 2020*, I employed these five components to bring awareness to the public about terrible events occurring in the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers (Figure 1). In 2020 Nurse Dawn Wooten accused Dr. Manhendra Amin of performing multiple hysterectomies without the consent of women detained in ICE detention centers.³ These women were awaiting trial and removal orders because they did not possess the correct paperwork to “legally” cross the border. Dr. Manhendra Amin’s actions were ruthless and dehumanizing. There were multiple cases where women received unnecessary surgical procedures. The women came from Spanish-speaking countries, and due to the language barrier, they didn’t even understand what was being done to them.⁴



Figure 1. Karina Arreola-Gutierrez, *Las Flores de Histerectomia* (centurial detail), 2020, linocut print, muslin fabric, candles, thread, and crochet fabric, 31 3/8 x 77 3/4 x 59 1/2 inches, Photographed by artist

This work questions how women in some detention centers get hysterectomies without their consent. Hopefully, the altar can bring feelings of peace, hope, and inner well-being. Personally, when I was creating *Las Flores de Histerctomía*, those very contradictory feelings of pain and helplessness were followed by a healing process. It reminded me of my mom, who had a hysterectomy done with her consent—as opposed to the women in the detention centers who had the rights over their bodies taken away.

The altar *Las Flores de Histerectomía* is made of white muslin lying on top of a piece of thin wood placed on the floor. On the cloth are flower petals and leaves that I embroidered by hand. The fabric also has a white premade crochet border. Inside the flower petals is an ink design. I surrounded the altar cloth with candles when displaying and performing the work.

In *Las Flores de Histerectomía*, the ink design of the flower petals is a representation of the female reproductive system. The colors of the embroidery – pink, red, purple, yellow, and green – are found in nature and many traditional Mexican embroideries. Red explicitly represents blood. The cloth with ink residue symbolizes the mistreatment and dehumanization of women receiving the unauthorized hysterectomy procedure. The symbolism of the candles and the lighting of candles stands for hope, healing, and remembrance of the women that suffered at the hands of the government and society. Specifically, the one candle in the center of the altar cloth highlights the importance of the uterus in the female body. These women were robbed of their ability to reproduce and pass along their legacy. With families in the Mexican diaspora, the passing of traditions from one generation to the next is an essential part of life. In other words, the doctor’s abuse marked an end to the passing of traditions between ancestors and their children.

The work of artist Doris Salcedo, a Colombian artist, fascinated me because of the history of violence, trauma, and the brutal civil war in Columbia.⁵ I was most interested in her work called *A Flor de Piel* 2012, which includes hundreds of rose petals hemmed together with thread (Figure 2). The color of the rose petals is a dyed red that represents dried blood.⁶ The fragility of the petals means the thin borders that separate life from death. This work is about a female nurse kidnapped and tortured to death in Columbia after aiding those injured on both sides of the Colombian civil war.⁷



Figure 2. Doris Salcedo, *Flor de Piel*, Rose petals and thread, 445 × 252 in. (1130 × 640 cm), Installation view, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014, Courtesy of the artist, Photographed by Kazuhiro Uchida

This work speaks to me because of the roses' fragility. Interestingly, a complicated way of making the piece, the conservation, and its reparation. This made me think of how my mother and I repaired our altar of Guadalupe; how we patched up the holes and dents with spackle, re-painted her (the Virgin of Guadalupe porcelain figure), and took her inside to protect her from the elements

in the weather (Figure 3). However, I was unable to repair her halo. This made me realize that certain things cannot be “fixed” or “repaired” to replicate the original. Instead of throwing these “broken” objects away, my mother insisted that we fix them to the best of our abilities. She stressed that they do not lose their meaning or sacred aura by saying, “Even though some parts may be broken, their usage for prayer and remembrance remain.”⁸



Figure 3. Rosa Arreola de Gutierrez, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, 2015, Photographed by Karina Arreola-Gutierrez

I also enjoyed another piece by Doris Salcedo called *Acción de Duelo*, 2007, which responded to the death of Columbia's Valla del Cauca Deputies (Figure 4). There were nearly 24,000 lit candles in the Plaza de Bolívar, Bogota.⁹ Seeing the candles made me think of vigils held in memory of the dead. I wanted to include this in *Las Flores de Histerectomía* to memorialize the women's sacrifice and the children they could have had.



Figure 4. Doris Salcedo, *Acción de Duelo*, 2007, candles.
Site-specific work, Plaza de Bolívar, Bogotá, 2007, approximately 267 × 350
feet, Photo by Juan Fernando Castro

I have been surrounded by women who make their own altars all my life. Growing up, my grandmother, who lives in Mexico, always had personal altars that changed through the years. At present, my grandmother has three altars. The first two she created are located outdoors. The first one has a statue of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* sitting on top of rocks representing a hill (Figure 5). Also sitting on the stones are multiple figurines of animals, plants, and artificial flowers. She decided to make this altar because many people in Mexico believe in the Virgen de Guadalupe. She is also considered the *La Reina de Mexico*. The meaning of *La Reina de* is the Queen of Mexico. She first appeared in Mexico in December 1531 and represents an indigenous Virgin figure similar to that of the biblical Virgin Mary.¹⁰ My grandmother decorates this altar to celebrate

Dia de La Virgen de Guadalupe on December 12th and prays the *novena*, a consecutive nine-day ritual of prayer. At these celebrations, she opens the altar for others to use.



Figure 5. Maria Silvestra Vega Caldera, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, 2021, Photographed by Rosa Arreola de Gutierrez

Her second outdoor altar is located beside *La Virgen de Guadalupe* Altar. A large cross is situated on the roof, while inside the altar, there are multiple vases of artificial flowers and candles. My (now deceased) grandfather and uncles helped her construct this altar in devotion to *San Judas* (Figure 6). She made the *San Judas Altar* as a *manda* or something she offered when a waterhole or well was made for the family's property. Seasonally, she continues to change and make offerings to the *San Judas Altar*. Each year on the 28th of October, she celebrates the *Dia de San Judas* by offering a meal to the altar and inviting people to join her to eat and pray the *Rosario* and *novena*.¹¹ On this altar, the statue of *San Judas* is placed inside small *capillitia* made of concrete, tiles, and glass doors.



Figure 6. Maria Silvestra Vega Caldera, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, Photographed by Rosa Arreola de Gutierrez

My grandmother's private altar is placed on a dresser beside her bed. She uses this altar to pray daily. This altar consists of multiple objects, including statues of *Santo Niño de Atocha*, *Sagrado Corazón de Jesús*; photographs of *Jesús*, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, the Pope, *María y el Niño Jesús*, and family members (Figure 7).¹² My grandmother selected these objects because her parents believed in the Catholic Church, and these beliefs were passed to her, and she continues to pass them to her children.



Figure 7. Maria Silvestra Vega Caldera, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, 2021, Photographed by Rosa Arreola de Gutierrez

My mother, who lives in Washington State, created an outdoor *Virgen de Guadalupe*. A ceramic statue of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* sits on rocks surrounded by artificial flowers and candles. Last year, my mother decided to move the altar indoors to the family living room because of some damage from the outdoor elements (Figure 8). I helped to restore the statue of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, where she uses the altar daily for prayer and adds fresh flowers often.



Figure 8. Rosa Arreola de Gutierrez, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, 2015, Photographed by Karina Arreola-Gutierrez

There are stories behind my family's generational passing of altar-making traditions. For instance, the first altar was made by my great-grandmother, who made an altar to *Santo Niño de Atocha*. She lived in the desert region of Chihuahua, Mexico, so she made freshwater offerings in the summertime. Her intention when she prayed was to pray for rain to have water in the canals to grow crops. As a result, my grandmother's *San Judas* Altar is not only meant for rain but also in honor of her mother.

The passing of altars' traditions through generations has differences based on the immediate needs of the maker. My grandmother's and mother's private and community altars include a candle until they burn out. Since my altars are often in public spaces or part of exhibitions, I can only keep the candle lit for some time due to building regulations.

My art practice has a focus on altars. My research of altars led me to the book *Beautiful Necessity* by Kay Turner, specifically the text in a conversation with Sra.Consuelo “ Chelo” Gonzalez.

This Guadalupe was given to me by my mother, Maria Luisa Cruz, shortly before she died. She gave it to me because I was the eldest daughter... My mother had great faith in Our Lady of Guadalupe. And from her, I learned to love the Virgin and to depend upon Her for guidance and help in time of need. I learned from her the splendid beauty of Our Lady. The mother is the one who shapes the values of her children... Just as my mother did, I bring my children here to pray with me. I have seven boys and one girl, named after my mother. I will give her the Virgin so that she may have an altar. ¹³

After reading the book, I realized that my own family made these types of altars. Until then, I did not know the extent to which people worldwide made altars for daily ritual purposes. My grandmother learned how to make altars from her mother, who, in turn, has also passed those traditions and beliefs to her children. Of course, there have been some changes between the generations as each mother and daughter have built some altars. In my case, the figure of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has played a particularly prominent role. She was an important figure not only in the form of an altar, but I always wore a necklace with a pendant of her.

To ensure that the altars of my ancestors were not forgotten by time, I started collecting stories and photographs of my own family’s altars to preserve them. Further, my research includes photos of Mexican churches and other altars by practitioners and artists. I am particularly interested in Christian altars but have recently started looking into the role of altars and shrines in different religions and traditions. I want to learn more about altars found in both private and public spaces. I foresee future projects where I also include audio where altar-makers comment on the meaning behind their altars. For example, I have talked to my grandmother about her altars, who emphasizes the importance of ensuring that her altars look well taken care of. Clearly, in her mind, altars have no expiration date.

Bordando Entre Familia y Por La Comunidad

In my studio practice, I started experimenting with embroidery in 2020 on different fabrics, such as the traditional Mexican *manta* cloth, muslin, and sheer voile fabric. I came to the graduate program with a background in printmaking. I like how embroidery can highlight the details on prints, such as geometric patterns or facial features.

The influences in my work are created by the past and present history of Mexican culture. My interest in Mexican textiles and embroidery started at a young age. The skills that I learned from my mother and those I taught myself helped me with my work.

Another aspect that brought me to embroidery is the family connection. Much like altars, embroidery has always been present in my family. Growing up at age 9, I remember seeing pieces of cloth with handmade embroidery used daily around my grandmother's and my childhood home. I also remember sitting on the floor doing embroidery on *manta* at that age. I would fill the cloth with colorful flowers and leaves that my mom had taught me. Recently, I realized that my mother must have done the same thing when she was young, living in Mexico. I recently learned that many women and men in my life learned to do embroidery from school at a young age because it is common to teach in Mexico and Latin American schools. On the practical side, it was cheaper for the schools to provide materials and for the students to give as Mother's Day gifts. My uncles and father also learned from their grandmother because she wanted them to hem their clothes. My male friends also learned because they had to take a taught class. My mother learned from her mother, so my mother wanted us to know how to do embroidery. Educationally, a child learning embroidery has many advantages; it teaches young children to focus, hand-eye coordination, patience, self-sufficiency, and the skill of creating and completing a unique handmade object.¹⁴

Mexican embroidery is called *Otomí* or *Tenangos*. They are made by the indigenous *Otomí* community in the surrounding mountain villages of San Nicolás, Mexico, and Tenango de Doria

in Hidalgo, Mexico.¹⁵ The imagery in the designs are symbols of native flora and fauna, local beliefs, and cave drawings found in the Hidalgo regions. Embroidered clothing plays a central role in celebrations, holidays, ceremonies, and festivals. My mother and grandmother primarily use embroidery for households, such as tablecloths, tortilla covers, and clothing. My embroidery, by contrast, aims to bring awareness to and engage with political issues plaguing the Mexican community in the U.S.

In my mind, the process and traditions surrounding embroidery echo the journey of border crossing, as migrants leave everything behind with only a rough sketch—or pattern—of what they might encounter, uncertain of what their journey’s destination might encompass. As mentioned in the 2022 article *Waiting at the Border, Migrants Lean on Tradition* as a way for a group of people to rely on each other while withstanding traumatic events,

Migrant advocates in Nogales say stitching pleasant memories onto fabric can soothe emotional wounds sustained before or during often-arduous migration journeys northward. For Vázquez, a mother of two, the needlework keeps her mind off her cousin’s killing, the threatening extortionists back in Guerrero who demanded a fee if she wanted to keep her market stall open.¹⁶

Even when leaving behind everything, these migrants maintain a close relationship with their home traditions, even as they transition to a new place. My work, *Renuir Familias*, 2021, represents the 2018 “zero tolerance” policy that the government made when Donald Trump was president to stop crossing borders (Figure 10).¹⁷ This policy caused the separated children from their parents at the U.S. / Mexican border. *Renuir Familias* is made from white muslin fabric with the words “*renuir familias*” embroidered with a vertical cut-out going through the words, leaving the material in “shreds.” There is also an embroidered border around the text. This border represents a national border crossing and the journey into the unknown world that lies beyond the border of what is familiar. The comments are common phrases used by activists, news outlets, and writers. The cut-

outs symbolize SKU number/ cell bars. The no longer intact cloth is symbolic of how the separation of families at the border and in ICE detention centers has dehumanized these families by referring to each person not by their name but as an SKU number. The choice of embroidery symbolizes trying to bring families back together after being separated.



Figure 10. Karina Arreola-Gutierrez, *Renuir Familias*, 2021 muslin, thread, 17 ½ x 12 ½ inches, Photographed by artist

Luchando La Lucha y DACA

In 2017, the Trump administration wanted to terminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program for many undocumented children living in the United States.¹⁸ I responded by making a piñata in the shape of the female symbol and power fist as an illustration of the complex situation that the political and legal system puts women and children in. In many ways, when I created the piñata *Lucha* 2020, I drew inspiration from the same issues that informed *Las Flores de Histerctomía*, but I wanted this piece to focus more explicitly on children (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Karina Arreola-Gutierrez, *Lucha*, 2020, cardboard, newspaper, print paper, artist tape, water, glue, tissue paper, flour, and construction paper, 52 ¼ x 21 ¾ x 3 5/8 inches, Photographed by artist

A pinata is a container made from either cardboard or clay covered in decorative paper. The form of a piñata is traditionally in the shape of a star, animal, or object.¹⁹ The colors of the *Lucha* are made of black, orange, and white tissue paper that was cut into fringes. The orange and black represent the monarch butterfly used nationwide as a symbol for DACA.²⁰ White streamers hang from the bottom of the pinata with written phrases that I often heard growing up: “don’t speak Spanish,” “come the right way,” and “go back to your country.”²¹

The piñata acknowledges the effects of terminating this program on those who arrived in the United States as children. The benefits for youth in this program are numerous, including authorization to work and protection from deportation.²² The piñata *Lucha* is a representation of the fragility of the DACA program. its current continuation is temporary, and not everyone eligible receives help. People also can lose these benefits at any given time.

In Mexican culture, the piñatas were initially used in Christian celebrations like Posadas at Christmas time and had religious meanings. There are multiple theories about piñatas; one of them is that Aztecs used them to celebrate the birth of the god Huitzilopochtli and used a container that resembles a piñata²³. In the book *Drink Cultura: Chinanismo* by author Jose Antonio, he describes how piñatas were used in ancient ceremonies. “During ceremonies, a feather-covered pot filled with small treasures was hit with a stick so that its contents spilled at the feet of the idol.”²⁴

A seven-pointed star was the traditional style of piñatas, and each point represents the seven deadly sins. The seven sins are lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride.²⁵ The meaning behind the bright colors was to symbolize the temptation to fall into sins. Piñatas are currently used to celebrate birthdays. When it is the participant’s turn, they can get blindfolded, which signifies faith.²⁶ After being blindfolded, they get spun and given the stick. The stick symbolized the will to overcome sin and evil.²⁷ When the pinata is hit, toys and candies fall from it,

representing the prizes as the riches of the kingdom of heaven. The pinata is broken as a symbol of how temptation is defeated by faith and purity.²⁸ *Lucha* was meant as an unbreakable or unfilled piñata because the DACA program was not terminated. However, if it were broken, it would indicate that the result of the Trump administration had terminated the DACA program.

Growing up, I remember my own experiences with pinatas. As a child, I did not particularly like hitting the pinata, and even now, as an adult, I will not hit a pinata. However, I participate in singing the song everybody sings while participants take turns hitting the *piñata*.

Dale, dale dale
No pierdas el tino
Por que si lo pierdes,
Pierdes el camino.

Ya le disté una,
Ya le disté dos,
Ya le disté tres
Y tu tiempo se acabo. ²⁹

When the song is over, it indicates the next child's turn. Turns are determined by first having the birthday person hit it. Then turns are determined by height to be the shortest to the tallest. As soon as the pinata is broken, everyone runs to get the toys, candies, or fruits falling from the *piñata*. There are times when the person filling the piñata puts flour, confetti, or water as a prank.³⁰ Therefore, if *Lucha* were a broken piñata, it would refer to it as a celebration when in reality, the DACA is a program that hasn't been terminated and still grants benefits to those eligible to receive them. In contrast, the original meaning of prizes of candies and toys after breaking represents faithfulness.³¹

My knowledge of *piñata* making does not come from my mother's family but my aunt, my father's sister-in-law. I remember going to her home and seeing her spend hours making them from beginning to end at a young age. She not only made some for her children but others as a

hobby. The pinatas she made would vary in size and shape. She inspired me to make piñatas in new, creative forms. By creating piñatas in unique shapes and sizes, they stand out by their otherness. I want my audience to look at *Lucha* and ponder what's different from traditional piñatas and what the unique shape might symbolize.

Chapter 2:

Por Mi Familia y Comunidad Latina

My artistic work draws not only on the Mexican traditions that have been passed down to me from my ancestors, but it is also strongly influenced by the socio-political realities that affect Latino communities in the U.S.³² In many ways, as the child of a “successful” immigrant family, I recognize that I have been lucky. At the same time, I also feel a strong sense of responsibility to represent displaced people: those stuck in the borderlands, without rights and voices of their own.

The crossing of borders is a precarious and life-changing process. Born in Santa Ana, Chihuahua, Mexico, my father, as an “undocumented,” migrated to Washington for the first time at age 20. He decided to go to Washington state because one of his brothers already lived there. My mother came to the United States with my father after getting married. They decided to live in Washington because my father had a job. Since then, my parents have made their lives here with my siblings and me. In other situations, some people are not lucky in crossing the border from Mexico into the United States because of the river and desert conditions.

Growing up, I was confronted with the discrimination I can understand those described in the book by author Nilda Flores- González. Their exploration of race, self-identification, language, and culture can shape their belonging in U.S. society.

Being othered as noncitizens and non-Americans, these youths develop an awareness and an understanding of the limits of citizenship and Americanness. Although they are citizens by birth, they are aware that they are seen by non-Latinos as noncitizens because their Latin American ancestry -disclosed by their looks, cultural manners, and/ or surname- points to their immigrant background... as others assume that anyone who is “Latino” must be undocumented.³³

This is an example of how different perspectives in the Latino community feel being raised and born in the U.S. Being part of the community, I also think about my family and me in the U.S.

society. That has influenced how I create work in the present and motivates me to complete work for those who have experienced it. I have seen discrimination on multiple occasions towards my family and my community. Witnessing this lack of respect has made me want to advocate for the Latino community. My work's titles and video and voice recordings have been in Spanish because the people I'm trying to support speak Spanish, and they are my audiences.

In 2021, I made a work called *Viviendo en Los Estados Unidos o Vidas Perdidas* (Figure 12, 13). I wanted to illustrate the connections and differences between Mexican migrants living in the United States and those who don't make it across the border. I presented repetitive screen-printed images of my father's portrait on manta and muslin fabric. One of the prints is embroidered with a blue border, a table in the front, and brick archways in the background. The rest of the prints are spread out on the ground in piles to represent the remains of those who lost their lives trying to cross the border.



Figure 12. Karina Arreola-Gutierrez, *Viviendo en Los Estados Unidos o Vidas Perdidas*, 2021, manta fabric, thread, 15 x 13 inches, Photographed by artist



Figure 13. Karina Arreola-Gutierrez, *Viviendo en Los Estados Unidos o Vidas Perdidas*, 2021, Print, manta fabric, muslin fabric, thread, 15 x 13 inches, Photographed by artist

My background and upbringing as a first-generation college graduate and second-generation Mexican immigrant have significantly influenced how I think about the social and political injustices that my community is facing. Some issues we share, for example, I spoke exclusively Spanish until I started school at age 6. It was a difficult transition which I can only imagine being even more difficult for adults that arrive with little to no knowledge of the English

language and U.S society. As a result, there's a split between the two languages and cultures that still affect my identity until the present day. In different situations, I identify differently, a phenomenon that I want to draw attention to in my art. One might say that I have no experience or immediate family that has gone through the detention center process. However, that does not mean that my family did not have to make any sacrifices.

Several artists draw attention to the precarity of border crossing. The work from Consuelo Jimenez Underwood called *LA Borderline*, 2014 from the *Borderline Series* is interesting to me because of how she uses bright colors and different kinds of iconography that are not typically used to speak about the themes she's talking about (Figure 14). Like border crossing and border walls affecting the surrounding environment. ³⁴



Figure 14. Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, *LA Borderline*, California State University, 2014, Installation, Photographed by Rebecca Garibay

This work has a similar relationship to the political and social issues that I'm speaking about in my thesis and my work, as we address border crossing and immigration. Moreover, we use similar fiber materials and bright colors in our artistic representation of these issues.

Chapter 3:

Actuación y Documentación

In my practice, there are two types of documentaries that I make. The first kind aims to bring attention to the cultural implications of the process of making that goes into the creation of an art piece. This usually involves embroidering. This video is the artwork and becomes part of the final work. Much of my work highlights rituals and objects central to my Mexican heritage, such as prayer, altars, and piñatas. More so than simply depicting what these objects or practices look like, I include movement and sound to activate multiple senses in my audience. The second type of video I make is works as an art documentation

My installation work for my thesis, *El Amor de Mi Familia 2022*, is made of multiple components (Figure 15). The first element is a documentation component called *Generación en Generación* (Figures 16, 17). The documentation shows the generational passing of embroidery from the women in my family. The footage consists of my grandmother, mother, and myself doing embroidery. The documentaries let the audience hear and see the process of embroidery. At the same time, doing this also allows me to record the history and traditions that I learned from my family.



Figure 15. Karina Arreola-Gutierrez, *El Amor de Mi Familia*, 2022, Installation, film, prints, thread, voile fabric, manta fabric, wooden chair, candles, wax, paint, dimensions vary, Photographed by Richard Sprengeler



Figure 16. Karina Arreola-Gutierrez, *Las Flores de Histerectomía*, 2022, *Film still*



Figure 17. Karina Arreola-Gutierrez, *Las Flores de Histerectomía*, 2021, Film still

Documentary video materials show the performance. Examples: praying during the ritual of lighting candles or the sound of thread going through the fabric. Hearing this video audio brings memories of myself doing embroidery on the floor next to my mother. I want those who look at my documentaries to invoke a sense of home, comfort, and safety.

After making the cloth for *Las Flores de Histerectomía*, 2021, I made a performance (Figure 17). This was my first performance. After setting up the candles, I recognized that I was automatically doing certain things because I'd been doing them most of my life. I noticed that I was placing and lighting the candles slowly and with care, in complete silence. Watching myself doing it, I realized that the candle lighting ritual helped me exist in the present moment.



Figure 18. Karina Arreola-Gutierrez, *Las Flores de Histerectomía*, 2021, Film still

I wanted the filmed performance to show me lighting the candles and praying on my knees. The performance consists of ‘going into’ myself, and the video reveals a meditation of my body while lighting candles. By integrating myself into my work, I want to draw attention to the human body - specifically the female body. I'm interested in the movements and emotions that I show while performing in my film. At the same time, I'm also interested in the reaction and interpretation of the audience. While performing *Las Flores de Histerctomia*, I made documentation. After making the document, I realized what I had. Only then did it become the artwork (Since this was my first video work, I was much more aware of the process.). I wanted to add a personal aspect to this performance by adding my mother speaking to me in Spanish. In the recording, she answers some of the questions that I asked her about motherhood and growing up with her mother. I included this conversation with my mother because the subject was the female body, maternity, female rights, and the dentation center’s unauthorized hysterectomies.

Also, there is a recording of myself praying different kinds of prayers in Spanish. The prayers are *Padre Nuestro*, *Dio Te Salve*, *Gloria*, and a prayer to protect my mother.

Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta has inspired some of my work, especially creating performances. I'm interested in how she made earth-body sculptures.³⁵ The work that I was influenced by is *Untitled, Silueta Series* 1973, a series that she began in 1973 and continued until she died in 1986 (Figure 19). The piece shows images of her silhouette on the sand by the water. The shape comes from the imprinting of her own body. The inside of the outlines is filled with animal blood, which symbolizes rebirth. "This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but more towards a personal will to continue being the 'other'"³⁶



Figure 19. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled: Silueta Series*, Mexico, 1976 Photograph © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC, Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

Untitled, Silueta Series, and many others are important because some of the themes Mendieta uses are violence against women, the female body, death, cultural displacement, and transformation. She is essential to use materials because I get emotional by seeing the blood and questioning it. Many questions come to me when I see the blood. Does it represent violence? Does it symbolize life and death? Did an event happen for this to be created? What was the reason behind the use of blood? I am interested in getting my viewers to question their views about violence toward women. The mistreatment of marginalized communities. The assumption is that all Latinos are the same and “undocumented.” In the same way, altars in various Latino communities are made for different reasons and none look the same.

Chapter 4

El Amor de Mi Familia

El Amor de Familia, in the Kemper Museum is an altar installation that consists of *Mis Memorias y Extrañándote*, the video *Generación en Generación*, and multiple relief prints of evergreen trees hanging on the wall. There are three intentions for this altar: to thank my family for the sacrifices that they made when they migrated from Mexico to the United States for a better life. The second, is *Que Dios te bendiga*, a traditional saying meaning, ‘May God bless you’ for the future. And lastly, a prayer that the family remains connected.

The *Mis Memorias y Extrañándote* altar is enclosed by gallery walls. At the front is a blue chair. It is the pedestal of the altar (Figure 20). I wanted to use a chair the same way my mother uses a chair in her most recent altar. My intention with the chair is to honor my (deceased) grandfather, who enjoyed eating tortillas. His favorite color was blue. On it, I’ve placed four *tortilla servilleteros* and spent candles. *Tortilla servilleteros* are tortilla covers used to keep tortillas warm. I remember my grandfather telling us stories while eating on our yearly visits to Mexico.



Figure 20. Karina Arreola, *Mis Memorias y Extrañádot*, 2022, Installation, manta fabric, wooden chair, candles, wax, Paint, dimensions vary, Photographed by Richard Sprengeler

Three out of four *tortilla servilleteros* have my grandfather's name embroidered at the bottom and song lyrics on the back (Figure 21).³⁷ I embroidered on the same kind of pre-printed designs that I knew as a child.. They are sewn shut because there are handwritten notes of memories and stories inside as a type of prayer. They are written by my class cohorts and myself. These memories and stories are of people we have lost. The notes remain private. This was done

as a process of healing (Figure 22). The candles surrounding the chair each individually represent a prayer.



Figure 21. Karina Arreola, *Mis Memorias y Extrañándot*, 2022, Installation, manta fabric, wooden chair, candles, wax, Paint, dimensions vary, Photographed by Richard Sprengeler



Figure 22. Top Left: *Las Flores Amarillas*, Top Right: *Las Tres Flores*, Bottom Left: *Cactus con Flores*, and Bottom Right: *Las Flores Rosas*, Karina Arreola, 2022, Manta fabric, thread, 11 ¼ x 11 ¼ inches, Photographed by artist

Behind the altar-chair, are three panels of fabric hanging in three tiers (Figure 23). Each have black and green embroidery done by my grandmother, my mother, and myself. I instructed them to embroider two black strands of thread and then use one strand of green. Aesthetically, I decided to create a random effect to disrupt the cohesiveness of the design. I wanted to make my individual version of communal embroidery. By doing so, I'm changing how I was taught to do embroidery with lots of colors. I used black thread because of Western art ideas and green as a contrast color to represent traditional Mexican embroidery.



Figure 23. Karina Arreola, *Mis Memorias y Extrañándot*, 2022, Installation, voile, thread, metal rod, dimensions vary, Photographed by Richard Sprengeler

Conceptually switching colors of the threads are tied to the idea of ritual in traditional Mexican embroidery. Usually, the color of the thread is changed when doing different parts of the design. The contemporary part of my design is the disruption. On like traditional designs that are simple and stylized. I choose a photograph as my inspiration. In traditional Mexican motifs, the perspective view is rarely used.

I felt happy and joyful having the opportunity as the youngest generation to teach the older generations. It was the first experience that we embroidered together. As we were embroidering in the same room, stories came pouring out about my family. It was a life-changing experience. I learned from my grandmother how to take care of the embroidery that she gives to her daughters and granddaughters. I know how precious they are.

In the embroidery of *Mis Memorias y Extrañándote* I am not using a traditional design. The image in the three panels is of a cherry orchard that my family has had for more than 30 years (Figure 24). The trees were dormant during the winter when this image was taken. I grew up playing and working in this orchard.



Figure. Karina Arreola, *Arreola Orchard*, 2020, Photograph, Photographed by artist

The orchard takes many hands to grow. Embroidering reflects time and labor-intensiveness. Like growing an orchard, this embroidering took multiple people and is large in scale. I made it into three panels to symbolize three generations to represent three living generations in my family.

I choose voile fabric that is semitransparent to reveal the paper prints hanging on the wall. The prints are images of evergreen trees, the Washington State Tree; therefore, they also represent my home and family.

The prints are hung randomly, and most overlap each other as a visual representation of the wild. In this case, I felt an unpredictability after hearing about my grandfather's illness. I

was feeling unsettled and wanted to be by his side. The semitransparent fabric in front of the evergreen tree prints is a veil to hide the sadness and frustration of learning about my grandfather's his event shall death. The wild trees contradict the feeling of calmness of an altar.

When someone is making an altar, it can be made after a loss and as a grieving process. Altars are a way for a person to find relief. The front of the *Mis Memorias y Extrañándote* altar is a representation of the future and wholeness. Behind the voile fabric is the past where those feelings of sadness had to be processed.

On the left side of the *Mis Memorias y Extrañándote* altar is a monitor playing the video *Generación en Generación* showing close-up scenes of three generations, my grandmother, my mother, and myself embroidering. We are doing the same stitching with different floral designs.

I wanted to show the process of embroidery in real-time. Now there is a record comparing the similarities and differences in how we embroider. The most outstanding part of this video is the audio. You can hear thread going through the fabric. The sound is calming, soft, and quiet. It is similar to the praying found in the video of *Las Flores de Histerctomía*. The audio of each of these altars is intended to bring hope and peace.

Conclusion

The experiences that I have lived have influenced my practice. *El Amor de Mi Familia* installation in the Kemper Museum is an example of the culmination of my studio practice at Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts.. I wanted to show how traditions like embroidery can remain similar through distance and generations. The altar consisted of a blue-painted chair with four embroidered tortilla servilleteros and candles called *Mis Memorias y Extrañandote*.

It was after I made *Las Flores de Histerctomía* and read the book *Beautiful Necessity*, that I realized that women in my family had been making altars for generations before me. I also recognized that altars are everywhere worldwide and can have different meanings for different individuals or communities. Through the knowledge of my mother and grandmother, I can see that altars are made differently depending on the intention, materials used, and the location they are made. The women in my family and the traditions they carry through generations have inspired me to continue a similar path of participating in these traditions in a modern and thoughtful way. My art is a representation of my family, culture, and beliefs. It allows me to combine traditions with social justice issues and create a voice for others in the communities I identify with.

In my studio practice, I am interested in how traditions can either change or remain the same through generations and different geographic locations. I am using embroidery, one of many traditions from my Mexican heritage, to display and reflect on many social and political issues that I feel passionate about. For example, the DACA program is in a fragile state, and I used my work to bring attention to the issue in the best way that I could. In the Latino community, I have always wanted to be an advocate for my community I grew up in. My inspiration also

comes from other artists like Doris Salcedo and Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, who also do work that speaks of injustices and violence.

Performance is now a part of a practice where I perform a ritual, like lighting the candles and praying. In performance, I can put myself 'out there' to create work and be a voice for myself and others like me. Doing so also allows me to see the audience's reaction to my work's political and social issues using different methods and styles. Also, it led me to document the performance and the process of making it so I can have a physical record of my family's traditions.

All these elements represent my main passion for my family and traditions, even though some of my processes may sometimes be unconventional in Western art practices and Latino customs. It is my intention to merge both Western art and Latino arts to create a space for the Latino community. I belong in both of these communities. It is my desire for the Latino community to feel included and respected. As I move forward with my practice I will continue experimenting, researching, and learning.

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Don't lose your aim
Because if you lose it
You will lose your way
You hit it once
You hit it twice
You hit it three times
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