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Tracing the Cultural Memory in the Rio Grande Valley: Mexican-American *dichos*, Proverbs Interpreted Through Art

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TRACING THE CULTURAL MEMORY IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY:
MEXICAN-AMERICAN *DICHOS*, PROVERBS
INTERPRETED THROUGH ART

An Exhibition Paper

by

JENNIFER MICHELE RODRIGUEZ

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2001

Major Subject: Studio Art

TRACING THE CULTURAL MEMORY IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY:

MEXICAN-AMERICAN *DICHOS*, PROVERBS

INTERPRETED THROUGH ART

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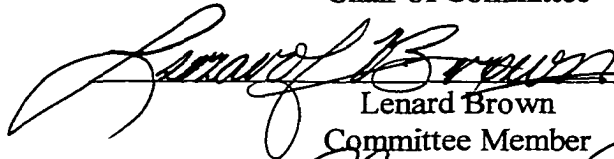
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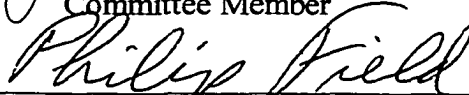
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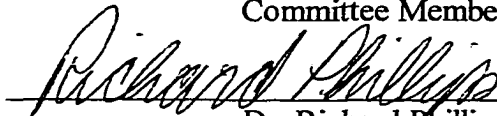
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Conversational phrases, *dichos* are verbal hallmarks from Mexican-Americans and familiar to the Hispanic culture through different versions. This folk wisdom is exposed through communication, tracing historical accounts of life, love, struggle, and ultimately survival among Mexican-Americans. I have started a series of paintings and collective art pieces focusing on Mexican-American *dichos* unique and familiar to the Rio Grande Valley. They are a cultural representation of life unique to this area, and combine the recollective spirit from not only myself, but from my family's accounts of these spontaneous conversational phrases.

With influences stemming from the Pop Art period, specifically Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, I have found a comparable reference to cultural mores and confrontational sarcasm. This connection allows me to construct images and use iconography while exploring abstraction and representation through the use of literal Mexican-American conversational phrases, or *dichos*. My artistic expression is my vehicle for change, as I strive to document positive contributions by Mexican-Americans and preserve these pieces of folk wisdom through my art. My creative process further explains how I organize and construct my work. The results provide communicative and cultural satire, verbally familiar to the Rio Grande Valley, personally translated through my Art.

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INTRODUCTION: ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Conversational phrases, *dichos* are verbal hallmarks from Mexican-Americans and familiar to the Hispanic culture through different versions. This folk wisdom is exposed through communication, tracing historical accounts of life, love, struggle, and ultimately survival among Mexican-Americans. My series of paintings and collective art pieces focus on Mexican-American *dichos*, proverbs that are unique and familiar to the people of the Rio Grande Valley. A cultural representation of life unique to this area, they combine the recollective spirit from not only myself, but from my family's accounts of these spontaneous conversational phrases.

I construct images and iconography based on my interpretations of these phrases; my work is a presentation of life and imagination. I want the visual to engage people familiar and foreign to my culture to understand these pieces of folk wisdom, and to relate to each other as human beings. These *dichos* have survived generations, having been reinvented, redefined, elaborated on, but never forgotten. The conversational phrases are expressed in Spanish, but I believe when translated they have a humane and universal connection and relatedness.

The purpose of my art is a two-part vehicle for change. My work is a means of documenting these verbal hallmarks and preserving these proverbs in visual form. In a society that views bilingualism negatively, these *dichos* could be on the brink of

extinction. Preserving these conversational phrases is in fact drawing from the recollective mind of people from the Rio Grande Valley. I have taken this subject as a concentration within my own art work in order to document these historical accounts of conversation and prove that these words have educational significance. There is a complex nature to these proverbs themselves, usually personifying a subject, object, or animal. These comparisons appear to be subtle, when in actuality they are making a rather 'blunt' declaration. These *dichos* very much act as behavioral models as to what to do or not to do in life.

The second vehicle for change lies in my stylization of art. There is a high degree of drama unfolding within these proverbs. There is usually a personal relatedness with the imparting of *dichos* and one can always picture a particular event or facial expression when first hearing or remembering one. It is from this same frame of mind that I take my stylization of the figure and add that extra drama to capture the issue at hand. I want my viewing audience to visually engage with my paintings and piece every element together like a puzzle. The painted *dicho* may act as a catalyst for interpreting several pieces.

If viewers do not understand why or how these *dichos* are used, there are enough integrated elements to enable interpretation. My abstract and stylized imagery is executed with intentional humor and satire, which reflect the symbolic element within each *dicho*. I want the image to resonate with the viewer and stir up a sense of recognition, of personal and emotional understanding. I want my art to initiate conversation among people and for viewers to witness the power of the recollective mind.

SECTION I: UNDERSTANDING PROVERBS

The proverbs unique to the Rio Grande Valley have survived for generations. Their creation could be an example of a people who found common identity through the use of the Spanish language. According to Werner Enninger, “the specific design features of human language...make linguistic performance the prime medium (also) for the projection of ethnicity” (24). The close proximity to Mexico, as well as the influence of older generations of Mexican-Americans, maintains the continual use of the Spanish language. As David E. Lopez explains,

central to the functional approach to language diversity is the importance of symbols: language is much more than an objective means of communication, it is a set of symbols that have meaning beyond the mundane level of communication. Language is the central symbol of social solidarity, one of the few similarities that we all have in common in societies that are increasingly based on the division of labor. (135)

The proverbs or *dichos* I have focused on embody this sense of survival, and reveal Mexican-American social issues. This is done through proverbs that use unique symbolism and personification. Werner Enninger mentions a quote by Robert LePage and Andree Tabouret-Keller which expresses this view thoroughly:

In language however we are offered, by the society we enter, and we offer to others, a very overt symbolization of ourselves and our universe, not only in the various grammars and lexicons and prosodies we can create for various domains of that universe, but also through the social marking which each occasion of use carries. Language is not only the focal centre of our acts of identity; it also consists of metaphors, and our focusing of it is around such metaphors or symbols. The notion that words refer to or denote ‘things’ in ‘the real world’ is very widely upheld, but quite misplaced; they are used with reference to concepts in the mind of the user; these symbols are the means by which we define ourselves and others. (Enninger et al. 24)

There is tremendous folk wisdom incorporated within each proverb, demonstrating a transmission of values within the Mexican-American culture. Dr. Mark Glazer, Professor of Anthropology at The University of Texas-Pan American, has done extensive research on the subject of Mexican-American *dichos*:

Proverbs are traditional sayings with roots in oral tradition and folklore. Since they are appropriate comments on or solutions to “common” human situations, they have often been called “the wisdom of the folk.” This, it may be speculated, may also be why so many people dislike proverbs in today’s society, which emphasizes individuality, and in which “common” human situations are not supposed to exist. Such situations are, however, quite numerous in traditional settings and of course remain so in contemporary culture. (xi)

Proverbs express long-standing values, in common and usually difficult human situations.

To be recognized as a proverb, Dr. Glazer clarifies that the saying has to be used in its fixed form, always using the same set of words and structure. (xii) This transmission of values is the result of bridging a family's history of the past within the lives of families. As a result, these *dichos* have survived generations in the Rio Grande Valley, having been reinvented and elaborated on, but never forgotten. As Vera R. Jackson (DSW, ACSW) specialist in Sociology and Gerontology, illustrates:

Family proverbs are adages, stories (Stone, 1988; Page & Washington, 1987), words of wisdom (Pasteur & Toldson, 1982) or religious instruction reflecting a family's attitudinal or belief structure. Proverbs provide images of physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual beliefs. Often poetic, prosaic, and emotionally powerful, they allow for free expression with a natural rhythm. They have a meaning and simplicity that transcends words, but are understood by the speaker. (6)

Preserving these proverbs through verbal transmission is in fact giving advice in short, terse phrases. Dr. Glazer noted that these proverbs could be grouped into categories such as "social issues, making a living, and getting into trouble" (Glazer xiv). Vera R. Jackson also notes that "through the sharing of proverbs, people provide strategies for self-preservation, influence decisions and judgment making, even affect educational, career, and marital pursuits and transmit values from generation to generation" (Jackson 6).

The sharing of proverbs or *dichos* occurs within families and is reinforced within different groups or neighborhoods. Harriette P. McAdoo and Linda A. McWright, specialists in Family and Child Ecology, point out the role of grandparents as significant “transmitters” of values through the use of proverbs. They stress how the transmission of values is essential to maintain culture within families, and regard the use of proverbs as an important process. (28)

My work is a means of documenting these verbal hallmarks and taking these proverbs to the visual form. I have in fact based my accounts from my very own grandparents’ and family’s historical accounts. The process is drawing from the recollective mind and is representative of values shared by many from the Rio Grande Valley. Compilations I have found through Dr. Glazer’s research at The Rio Grande Folklore Archive, at The University of Texas-Pan American, have revealed similar versions, if not exact accounts of the same proverbs shared within my own family.

The *dichos* I am familiar with derived from my grandmother Lupita Medina (my mother’s mother), who also described a neighborhood in Harlingen, Texas known as ‘Mexiquito.’ I asked my grandmother why they came up with these *dichos* and she said to me “it was our way of relating to each other...that’s the way the people just spoke.” My grandmother was born in Texas, as was her mother (my great-grandmother.) While English was commonly spoken, these Spanish proverbs survived and really captured the spirit of the times. Today we have a society that frowns on bilingualism, placing *dichos* in limbo with the younger generations. My art serves to reignite these words of wisdom.

While a literal translation or paraphrase may provide for immediate clarification, the translations I have provided are by no means the only translations known. I have provided these English translations in order for the non-Spanish speakers to understand what I have presented to them. In addition, the *dichos* I have chosen are also unique versions familiar to me as a child, and that are still heard within my own family, among friends and people of the Rio Grande Valley. These Spanish versions also vary in word phrasing, and so my versions are not the only ones known. Evidence that proves that several versions of one *dicho* exist were found within *A Dictionary of Mexican-American Proverbs*, compiled by Dr. Glazer whom I credited earlier (xiv).

I compiled data of universal relatedness among these Mexican-American versions to proverbs found among other languages and cultures, further exhibiting the world's proverbial lore. This research was done out of curiosity, and allowed me to draw parallels within several different cultures, based on the English translations provided. I compared only some of the *dichos* I had chosen for my art work with comparable versions that I felt had some relatedness; so these were exclusively my personal parallels. This included American/English versions, as well as Latin, Spanish, African, Italian, French, German, Turkish, Dutch, Chinese, and Greek proverbs.

With the *dicho* "No tienen pelos en la lengua," universal parallels were drawn from a compilation by Henry Davidoff: "All tongues are not made of the same flesh," also "Let not your tongue cut your throat," (American/English origins); "Keep not two tongues in one mouth," (Danish); "The tongue is a sharper weapon than the sword,"

(Greek). There is evident American influence on my interpretations, here with Anne Bertram's example of the proverb "Letting the cat out of the bag." This idea parallels the fact that people sometimes say more than is necessary.

The subject of tongues and talk is also expressed with the Mexican-American *dicho*, "Que se muerden la lengua," when compared to Davidoff's list may parallel: "I shall keep my tongue between my teeth," (American/English); "Hold your tongue," and "The tongue is a wild beast; once let it loose, it is difficult to chain," (Latin); "He who holds his tongue saves his head," (Turkish). African proverbs were collected from a list by Nat Lambie: "You cannot carry fire and water in the same mouth," (African).

The subject of personal appearance includes the Mexican-American proverb of "Cuerpo de tentacion y cara de arrepentimiento," calling forth proverbs from Davidoff's compilations which include: "All that glitters is not gold," (Cervantes); "Seem not greater than thou art," (Latin). Another Mexican-American favorite on the same subject of appearances includes "Es chiquito pero picoso," which parallels the American proverbs gathered from Bertram: "Appearances can be deceiving," and "Judging a book by its cover," (American); "Don't judge a tree by its bark" (French).

On the subject of appearances and appetite the *dicho* "No te hagas boca chiquita," relates to Bertram's recording of "First impressions are the most lasting," (American); as well as to Davidoff's compilations: "At table it becomes no one to be bashful," (Latin); "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are," (French); "One is what he eats,"

(German); and from Lambie's list "When one sets a portion for oneself, usually it is not too small" (African).

On a similar subject of eating, the Mexican-American *dicho* "Comen del mismo plato," relates to the American proverbs compiled by Bertram of "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours," and being "Like two peas in a pod" which further illustrates American influence during artistic interpretation.

On the comparative note of talking without true thinking, the *dicho* "Se te salen las palabras como las guitarras viejas," (Mexican-American) relates to various proverbs taken from Davidoff's listing: "A fool and his words are soon parted," and "The less people think the more they talk," (American); "Empty words--sound without thought," (Vergil); "He who talks much cannot always talk well," (Italian); "For mad words, deaf ears," (French); "In a multitude of words there will surely be error," (Chinese); and from Lambie's collection of African proverbs, "A wise person does not keep on talking until he has exhausted conversation".

The subject of distrust is highlighted in my art work using the *dicho* "Amor de lejos es amor de pendejos," with universal relatedness stemming from several in Davidoff's listing: "Far from eye, far from heart," (American/English); "To love and be wise is scarcely given to a god," (Latin); "He loves thee well who makes thee weep," (Spanish); "Knowledge and love together agree not," and "Love is blind, but sees afar," (Italian); "From a distance it is something; nearby it is nothing," (French); "A fence between makes love more keen" (German).

The subject of marriage and personal faults is emphasized with the *dicho* “El zapato que yo tiro no lo vuelvo a levantar,” (Mexican-American). One comparable proverb from Bertram and several from Davidoff, respectively include: “Marry in haste, and repent at leisure,” (American/English); “He may find fault that cannot mend,” (American); “All things change and we change with them,” (Latin); “The fault is as great as he that commits it,” (Spanish); “Distrust is the mother of safety,” and “Only great men may have great faults,” (French).

For each Mexican-American *dicho* comparable American/English proverbs are listed below, one taken from Bertram, and the rest from Davidoff, respectively: for “A la mejor llega concha en tortuga,” there is the familiar “Being as slow as molasses”; for “A fuerza ni los zapatos,” there is “Desires are nourished by delays”; and for “Esta montando las muelas,” there is “He that hears much hears many lies”.

The following American/English proverbs were taken from John Simpson’s compilation of proverbs: when compared to “Ni en la botica lo hayas,” this parallels to “What can’t be cured must be endured”; for “Ni para la muela picada,” “Not having enough of a good thing”. For these last few *dichos*, I drew from my own American recollection of proverbs: for “No le hagas ruido al chicharrón,” this is like “Don’t open up a can of worms”; for “¡Que susto llevaron las gallinas!” being “like a chicken without a head,” is appropriate.

SECTION II: INTERPRETING MY WORK

One of the most challenging aspects in depicting my interpretations of these Mexican-American *dichos* was to translate the information in a manner that everyone could understand. These Spanish conversational phrases can literally be translated, but can lose all the intentional humor that is behind them. The origin of the phrase is what I strive to capture exposing my interpretations of a subject matter with infinite definition. The proverbs become interchangeable in that they can all be used in different types of behavioral situations. I have chosen those related to aspects of love, struggle, and human survival, as well as the phrases that typify life and take my depictions to the extreme.

The first painting I will discuss is “¡Que susto llevaron las gallinas!” which literally translates to mean, “what a scare the chickens suffered,” (Appendix, Figure 1). In context this describes close calls in life, and I chose to illustrate this with the extremity of the whole situation. I depicted a half-human, half-chicken ‘being’ in order to personify the chicken and relate this to the actual human experience. A frantic, chaotic feeling is portrayed and I chose a collage-like composition in order to demonstrate the different cycles of violence and reaction. I chose very extreme weapons of destruction with which these half-human/chickens come into close contact. This was done in order to emphasize the ridiculous nature of their actions. The bear clamp, or shotgun would never be used to kill a chicken, which again re-emphasizes all the worry that people go through for nothing.

The second painting, “No tienen pelos en la lengua,” translates to “having no hair on the tongue,” (Appendix, Figure 2). In context this phrase describes a person’s ability to speak very bluntly, and share information boldly. I depicted this situation with a group of people dressed in very stuffy clothing, symbolizing the stuffy atmosphere. I chose to line them up side-by-side to translate the idea of closeness, and how their communication is being passed along ‘grapevine’ style.

Their tongues are depicted in this extreme fashion calling attention to their wild talk and again re-emphasizing their ability to be blunt and not hold back. The razors and Norelco shaver are symbols of how people choose their own weapons in life; for these few it is speaking bluntly. The central figure holds the shaver as an icon revealing the connection between these chatterboxes. I chose to illustrate their closed eyes in order to signal their inability to witness the truth, as they continue to shave the hair off their tongues. This demonstrates how oftentimes people say more than they should.

The third painting, “Comen del mismo plato,” translates to mean “eating from the same plate,” (Appendix, Figure 3). In context this describes how information is readily shared within groups . This leads to the concepts of ‘feeding off of each other,’ or along the lines of sharing details. I chose to depict two ‘fat-cats’ or *políticos* (politician-fast talker/business types) engaged in devouring a plate of pasta. This is their “Blue-Plate” special, and they cannot get enough. I illustrated their eyes as bulging, to translate the feeling of being overwhelmed by information and as a result they are swallowing their food, just barely missing their hands. This explains why their suits are

busting at the buttons, and ready to pop. The shaky table symbolizes their foundation as being unstable or insecure, which is appropriate to gossip. The books in the background signal the reality of being surrounded by facts, and the reality of truth taking the back seat.

The next painting is “A fuerza ni los zapatos,” which literally translates to “even shoes cannot be forced,” (Appendix, Figure 4). In context this describes the fact that you cannot force anything to happen, just like you cannot force your shoes on. I chose to relate this to the concept of marriage and stability with the ideas of the indefinite and uncontrollable. I depicted an eager bride with a very concentrated look of determination. Her eagerness is resulting in delays. She is dressed and ready because she has her religion behind her, which is symbolized with the very familiar Basilica of The Shrine of San Juan here in the Rio Grande Valley. The bride is tripping over her own dress, as well as her own future symbolized by the fetus in the eight-ball.

The concept of the game of pool with the eight-ball is paralleled along the game of “Monogamy” (Monopoly’s evil twin) to emphasize the competitive spirit between people partaking in dating. Just as with board games, in relationships there will always be winners and losers. The groom is depicted as a Monopoly gamepiece, but more along the lines of the Prince Charming gone astray. The bride is holding the pair of shoes which symbolizes the stability she is forcing upon him. He in turn is riding away, holding the lasso as if in denial. I have incorporated actual elements such as real rope, as well as fuzzy dice that add a three-dimensional aspect to my painting. I have juxtaposed the idea of

marriage and faith with the fact that some people choose to take matters into their own hands by forcing destiny.

Another painting, “A la mejor llega concha en tortuga,” translates to mean “maybe arriving as slow as on a tortoise,” (Appendix, Figure 5). In context this *dicho* is describing an anxious arrival that is far from punctual. My composition centers again on the subject of relationships: this time with an anxious groom and a distracted bride. This piece depicts the reality of those who take advantage of time here at the most inappropriate time. The groom is sitting on an hour glass that does not work, with all the sand drained out. This symbolizes the fact that time is not on his side. His expression is one of disbelief and shock. He is the one ready, serious and made symbolic by the fact that he is fully dressed in the wedding-day tuxedo. There is real sand contained in a three-dimensional, real plexiglas box I crafted, with the sand and two wedding rings locked away. This re-emphasizes the untimeliness and chaos that has culminated in this visual representation.

The bride is depicted as a free-spirit type who is half-dressed in wedding-gear and a bathing-suit. She is blowing a real piece of veil, another three-dimensional element to highlight the fact that she is distracted and unconcerned with time. The bathing-suit relates to the idea of being in front of large crowds and fearing being caught in your underwear; only here the bride embraces it. She is riding on a turtle to highlight the fact that she is being “as slow as molasses.” The actual *dicho* is presented in graphic form, with hidden pieces on the actual shell of the turtle. The idea behind this phrase was to

illustrate a type of role-reversal. Instead of always expecting the ‘bride dashing to the altar’ type, we see her taking advantage of time. While this phrase is interchangeable in applying to different situations, I chose to direct this phrase toward relationships.

The next *dicho*, “El zapato que yo tiro, no lo vuelvo a levantar” translates to, “the shoe that I throw away, I will never pick back up”(Appendix, Figure 6). In context this is representative of the idea that one should never look back to giving any past mistakes a second chance. With this proverb I envisioned a different way to express this phrase in terms of changing media. I created a sculptural piece or collective art work using symbolic objects. The message behind this *dicho*, again refers to relationships and stability. I depicted the broken vows of marriage and the destroyed concept of commitment. The shoes are symbolic of the male and female roles, with the female wedding-heel kicking the groom shoe off the top of the cake and into the trash.

The wedding cake is made of plaster and fabric doilies, with the old-fashioned doilies and traditional 3-tiered wedding cake depicted, which symbolizes the tradition involved. This tradition is juxtaposed against a brand-new trash can which is the “modern-day” element that clashes and results in destruction. The Coca-Cola can is symbolic of the American-ness of this all, and how in today’s society there is little respect for the institution of marriage with the advent of infidelity and high divorce rates.

Another collective art piece depicts the proverb, “Esta montando las muelas,” which translates to “piling up the molars,” (Appendix, Figure 7). In context this is

expressing the accumulation of lies one tells. I chose to create plaster teeth (molars) piled up on a stack of tabloids. The molars are symbolic of the lies, and the tabloids are their foundation, where lies are persistently told. This *dicho* is in fact highlighting the fact that people listen to what they want to hear. This in turn makes them deaf to the truth.

Another painting entitled, “Se te salen las palabras, como las guitarras viejas,” translates to mean, “your words flow freely like an old guitar,” (Appendix, Figure 8). In context this describes not thinking when you speak or like playing an old guitar: sound without thought. My depiction of this proverb centers on a figure that is in fact personified by an old guitar which emphasizes the nature of speech paralleled with guitar sound. The figure’s tongue becomes the guitar staff, and the loose, broken strings emphasizes the worn-out feel of the guitar.

I added the element of alcohol with the Skyy vodka bottle as a sign that sometimes people speak too comfortably when consuming alcohol. I illustrated this because sometimes speaking comfortably also becomes exhausting for the listeners involved. So, here the figure is seen hauling a wagon full of alcohol as a support mechanism on which to fall back. The martini and choice of vodka were included in order to make an American reference.

The proverb, “No te hagas boca chiquita,” translates to mean, “do not become a little mouth,” (Appendix, Figure 9). In context this painting describes the idea of not curbing your eating habits just because others are watching. This is a popular phrase especially at family gatherings where someone brings a new guest. The phrase is said

in order to break the ice and make the guest feel at home. I depicted a nervous looking figure who is wide-eyed before this tempting spread of food before her. She does not want to give a bad impression of herself, so she is giving her food selection too much thought and as a result has an empty plate. Being yourself also means revealing your true eating habits.

The next painting entitled, “Cuerpo de tentacion y cara de arrepentimiento,” translates to, “tempting body but face of repentance,” (Appendix, Figure 10). In context this describes the idea of ‘judging a book by its cover’ and the backlash associated with it. I chose to illustrate this using a bar scene with two figures reciprocating this concept. Both figures may have the tempting body, but both of them also have this face of regret or disgust. The female face wants to be hidden behind this oversized martini glass, and she is going to great lengths not to face the male at the cocktail table. The look on her face is also one of terror, which the male could either be winking at or squinting at in disgust. In turn the male figure also wants to be noticed, and stands with confidence. However his facial expression is repugnant.

This sentiment could be interpreted as to the mistakes they made by even looking at one another, and that both are going on first impressions. I chose to depict two types of characters based on their drinking preferences. I have the muscular, beer drinking male, juxtaposed with the uptown, martini-drinking woman. The *dicho* essentially spells out an obvious opinion in very blunt terms. This is what people get when they are judging people based on their appearances.

Another entitled, “Esta barriendo el piso con las jetas,” translates to mean, “sweeping the floor with your dragging frown,” (Appendix, Figure 11). In context this explains how a person’s face reveals his or her attitude. I personified a mop in order to emphasize the frown as dragging all over the floor. The mouth is seen as sagging and I used a gas-station theme because this is where I first heard the phrase being used. The service station scene is symbolic of the work ethic involved at any job and how job performance is dependent on attitude.

People with sagging faces are described as dragging around, and they are seen as people who do not want to work. I depicted the eyes rolling back, to emphasize the person’s frustrations at the work that looms from behind. *Barriendo* means ‘to sweep,’ but I chose a mop instead of a push broom. I felt that the mop illustrated more of the visible dragging and sagging sentiment. Mopping also requires more energy than sweeping, in my opinion, which is the premise behind this phrase: the more work you have the bigger the frown.

The *dicho*, “Es chiquito pero picoso,” translates to “being little but hot tempered,” (Appendix, Figure 12). In context this describes how a person’s height is not an indicator of the person’s punch. I illustrated a half-human/half-snake being in order to personify the snake and stress that “appearances can be deceiving”. I wanted the rattle to stand out, so I used a stark black and white zebra skin in order to give the tail a mind of its own. This is symbolic of the bully-spirit, and only thinking about protecting oneself. I used a Tabasco sauce label as the backdrop for this piece, as a reminder of

the 'hot-headed' fighter spirit, and the facial expression is an additional marker of this. This is another one of those 'not judging a book by its cover,' types but also sending more of a precautionary message; the short fellow is seen as a threat.

Another painting, "Que se muerden la lengua," translates to "hoping they bite their tongue," (Appendix, Figure 13). In context this is used with a Hispanic belief that if you hear your ears ringing you know someone is talking about you. This is what you say in hopes that they will bite their tongue and stop talking. I depicted three elements of conversation. The deer trophy head is symbolic of the speed of gossip and how fast the transmission of it really is. Gossip parallels the trophy head because sometimes it is regarded as a prized possession. The pig head is symbolic of the low-level, slimy dwelling that gossip composes which includes all who actively partake in this habit. The last figure is simply an oversized human head which is representative of the human participant. All three are biting their tongues because they are all engaging in gossip. The composition chosen suggests that their mouths are perfectly aligned with each other's ears, making communication within an earshot. Telephones and actual spiral chords are reminders of the swift and traditional communication taking place.

The painting entitled, "Amor de lejos, es amor de pendejos," translates to mean "love from a distance is love for fools," (Appendix, Figure 14). In context this *dicho* is saying that relationships at a distance do not work. I illustrated this using three distinct picture planes. I divided the top scene from the bottom scene with a stark division using

minimal colors of black and white. This division is the distance between the couple and is symbolized using highway/road lines; distance is what makes their love blind.

The couple in the top scene is depicted in very hot, warm, fleshy colors capturing a romantic embrace. This couple is emphasizing the love that is alive and the passion that is burning between them. The couple on the bottom scene is revealed in very cold, x-ray type colors. I intentionally wanted this appearance in order to emphasize the fact that this relationship is covering up something and the x-ray is unearthing the emptiness.

The *dicho* “Ni para la muela picada” translates to mean, “not enough not even for the rotten tooth,” (Appendix, Figure 15). In context this is used when talking about food and not having enough to satisfy one’s appetite. I depicted this in three-dimensional form using a toilet bowl coated with fast food logos. The toilet seat is colored red and there is a long, red devil’s tail protruding from the back of the toilet. This symbolism emphasizes the consumption by people and how society buys into this convenient, and questionably priced food. This buying power does not explain the fact that we do not have anything to show for it, therefore making these companies evil. The common complaint is that there is never enough portions of food to satisfy even a rotting tooth.

SECTION III: ART EXPRESSION AS MY VOICE

My artistic style explores abstraction and representation through the use of literal Mexican-American conversational phrases or *dichos*. I see my work as illustrative and symbolic, with the cultural and historical elements interpreting this folk wisdom. The elements of illustration and symbolism allow me the freedom to express integrated images and collective art pieces that demand attention. This intentional strategy is done to engage my viewers to question what I have presented them. Therefore, producing art changes me each time I begin to examine and select my imagery. In the end, it will be this Master of Fine Arts series that will allow me to expose my vision of imagination, and emotional connection, as a cultural narrative.

Creating art changes me each time because I am the politician, the journalist, the educator, the poet, the instigator, and the comedian. I am the ring master of my imagination because my art allows me to tap into societal issues and engage with my reality as a documentary-style artist. My art is about experience, so what I feel, read, witness, and hear makes an impact and I respond. My art is a verbal record or 'come-back' for all those instances where I wish I had all the right words to say, but did not. My art allows me to breath, and it is like a resurrection of internal emotion screaming to be let out. Producing art for me is a constant refocusing and recycling of energy that allows me to create my imagery.

The purpose of my art is a two-part vehicle for change. First, my art is tied to cultural and historical factors with its basis on *dichos* or sayings. These *dichos* have made such a powerful and lasting impression on me as a young child and even now as an adult. The change that I strive for lies in the historical account of Mexican-American communication along the Rio Grande Valley. I want to educate people about this folk wisdom because even today there are old-fashioned, stereotypical references that plague the Mexican-American culture. I see these as positive contributions from the Mexican-American culture.

The second component of my agitation for change lies in my stylization of art. There has never been any serious thinking about how I want to paint because it is instinctive and I just let loose. I do concern myself with what I want to paint and the result is symbolic imagery. My expressive abstract and stylized imagery is done with intentional humor and satire, which reflects the symbolic element within each *dicho*. The motifs I choose are based upon pure imagination and fantasy because I do not want my audience to superficially interpret my work. Therefore the style and expression within each piece are chosen in order to get people to question what they are viewing and draw connections of their own. These interpretations should lead to true thinking about values and the difficult situations that life presents.

This two-fold purpose is ‘the voice’ that drives me to create art, to document and express the cultural ties I have to life along this borderland. While many are quick to judge the Rio Grande Valley based on the limited, materialistic void, I concentrate on the

strengths that this area has provided within my own life. I do not deny that I too preoccupied my early years with escapism. But it was through this wonder that I found and formed my greatest weapon, the power of imagination.

My imagination is exposed through my art, and is personally expressive based on the design, color, and stylization of imagery. I am constantly experimenting to achieve new perceptual states, regardless of artistic or financial consequences. When I paint I strive for images that demand attention in order to create the extraordinary. I do not want to paint a beautiful picture. I am not hesitant to paint the ugly, or the uncanny, weird, or strange. The power of the imagination is a powerful tool for me because no one can copy or re-mediate my imagination. I create art for myself, in order to create my own style.

My element of design is personally expressive in the simple fact that it was not acquired by an academic process. I do not concern myself with rules of perspective because I want my work to look collage-like. My imagery is arranged by more of an intuitive process to imply a particular viewpoint. The result is an integrated, symbolic canvas that includes everything that I feel pertains to the depicted *dicho*. I find myself adding imagery where one would least expect something to fit. This, in turn, compliments the abstracted, meta-surreal environment that I deliberately want to create.

My color allows me to convey emotion, which explains my broad, Romantic painting palette. I want color to act independently, as pure abstraction. Because there is so much to be interpreted with the *dichos* alone, my color selection has to create sound, and entice the viewer to feel what is painted. The color has to evoke a response, and

create a willingness to recognize shape and pattern. The actual color selection for my paintings constantly changes, and is never fully planned out. Only I know when the color looks right, and satisfies me.

As for my element of stylization, this is personally expressive in my quest for the extraordinary. My work has become figurative, but I create abstracted and absurd facial expressions. I do not create distinct places in time, but rather dramatized and intimate scenes. When I create symbolic elements it is for the purpose of explaining the *dichos*. Whether it is a style of clothing, down to the hair style and facial expressions, I become the fashion-designer I have always wanted to be, the beautician, and the comedian. I love drama and humor, so when I paint I have to laugh when I create these faces or bodies. These become my stylized elements, which I have come to embrace. This symbolism is done with humor because I deliberately exaggerate real life and I play on the blunt attitudes of the human race, which parallel the very 'blunt' *dichos*.

A Visual Arts Studies course in museum education really opened my eyes as an artist. This is where I became the viewer, and learned how to interpret art: paintings, sculpture, and installation, from all periods of art history. This is where I learned to really look at art, and engage in all aspects of its creation. I studied different methods to draw my own meanings, even if I did not know the artist's real intentions. I realized how every aspect of what you create will be communicated differently to viewers. This is the same outlook that I bring to my interpretation of selected *dichos*. There is power in

simple words, and my art serves as a challenge for viewers to piece elements of my painting together to make sense of the *dichos*.

There is enough room for various levels of interpretation within my art work. I have studied the importance of interpretation, so I take every aspect of my work into consideration. So, even if people do not understand why or how these *dichos* are used, there are enough symbolic elements on the canvas to decipher.

I want my viewing audience to visually engage with my paintings and piece it together like a puzzle. With some works the titles of the *dichos* are painted and serve as a catalyst for interpretation. I deliberately employ contradiction and paradox to create a peculiar mental shock. I want the image to resonate with the viewer and stir up a sense of personal recognition and emotional understanding. I want the perception of the unusual and extraordinary quality of my art to invade a viewer's ordinary existence with a potent and disturbing presence. I want viewers to relate their emotions to my imagery and recall feelings they may have concealed or revealed. It is with this connection that my art then becomes a part of their ordinary existence. I want people to laugh, and say that my paintings look weird, as Rabinovitch and Timmer illustrate:

Ironically, the term “weird,” so often applied to surrealistic effect, perhaps curiously appropriate. “Weird” derives from the Old English *wyrd*, which signifies fate, destiny, or events. *Wyrd* is in this sense a vast amorphous force, associated with absolute otherness and predestination. In its broadest aspect, “wyrd is the destiny of all human life and civilization: death itself”. (5)

There is tremendous, untapped wealth in everyday living that oftentimes gets overlooked as insignificant or unimportant. By revealing these *dichos* in visual form, I am documenting and reminding people of their unique historical and educational significance. If my art can serve as a catalyst for others to initiate a search and reveal other sources of untapped folk wisdom, then I have also succeeded. I want my art to initiate conversation among people and for them to realize the power of the recollective mind, as I have personally discovered with my own family and friends.

SECTION IV: CREATIVE INFLUENCE

Understanding my art within a historical context would classify my work as cultural satire. My personal and historical influences stem from a much admired Post Modern movement, more specifically the Pop Art period. While my work does not classify as Pop stylistically, I relate to its adherence to cultural mores and confrontational sarcasm with reference to satire and the use of universal modes of iconography. Pop Artists sought to satirize shallow and consumerist culture and values by accepting the reality around them. They provided a visual impetus for society to analyze and question a valueless popular culture engulfed in media-driven fads.

Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol were two artists who created their art largely for self-expressionistic means. Their opinions drove their creativity, producing visual icons in machine and factory-like style respectively, in order to express what it meant to be human. Lichtenstein appropriated the lowest form of literature, the comic strip, and depicted “Romantic” myths. He satirized our superficial dreams, using universal norms of iconography and what we are supposed to want: “boy gets girl,” “men as heroes,” and living “happily ever after.” His motifs caused considerable offense, but his subject matter allowed his art to make a statement about popular culture and superficial consumerism. His personal style as Carol Strickland states, “expressed passionate subjects in a dispassionate style, again rebelling against the conventions of showing genre”. (1)

Andy Warhol's influence on my work stems from his appropriation of objects and popular subject matter and the sarcasm that resulted. His work is an expression of 'his' everyday: he incorporated the involvement and interaction of the people around him because "it was what he knew well" (Shakespeare, Stephan 2). Warhol used everyday, ready-made things as images and re-mediated their use, forcing the viewer to form new references and view these images as non-objects. His manipulation of images and repeated elements "are a powerful artistic tool allowing for hypnotic qualities, unconsciously making the viewer's eye flit and find minute alterations of detail. Repetition becomes variation by manipulated, intentional accident" (Shakespeare, Stephan 3). As Warhol explains, "...most people love watching the same basic thing, as long as the details are different. With (Popism) the more you look at exactly the same thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel" (Shakespeare and Warhol 4). His images become symbols that so perfectly resemble the objects that the subjects become invisible, which to me is brilliant given the consumer society we know.

I was attracted more to the artist's reasons for creating than to their style. They were accepting their reality around them and exploiting media driven fads through their art. It is with this respect that I parallel my own desire to make my art more accessible to society. As a result, my art is like an advertisement of visual bilingualism, while at the same time revealing my abstract, yet surreal compositions. My art becomes cultural satire because I am presenting everyday values in all their extremes for the viewer to confront and relate. These extremes are part of life's difficult situations and are part of reality.

SECTION V: CREATIVE PROCESS

My artistic process is the culmination of a thorough mental and visual brainstorming process finally being resurrected to the visual. My art is composed of traditional and non-traditional medium and media with regards to my paintings and three-dimensional collective art, respectively. My art is about outreach and I place myself in other people's shoes and express my reactions to issues that confront us as surviving members of a society. These emotions are therefore the vehicles that drive my visual expressions.

I begin by tearing the proverb apart and piecing it back together symbolically. I am constantly looking through magazines, catalogs, reading newspapers and asking myself what the best representation would be for the subject at hand. This is my way of keeping my work current and on a comparative basis with the reality in which I live. If I feel the proverb relates to relationships, marriage, or love then I usually depict the most extreme behavior. However, the extremes I picture adhere more towards pessimistic feelings I have seen, read, or heard about. I feel that these extremes are a part of our reality: seeing them depicted as art confronts the viewer with these issues.

Once my ideas are solid I begin to pencil sketch my visual representations. Deciding on a painting or sculptural piece just depends on what I want to create at that moment. When I paint, the materials I choose to work with involve oil paint on luane

panel or canvas. My bias for oil paints stems from the attraction to endless color blending and movement created by deliberate marking. I have a strong attraction for the permanence of oils as well as the dark and rich boldness of the color that can complement any mood I strive to translate on my surface.

Color is most important to me and explains my adherence to a broad, Romantic palette. On my surface I begin with a sketch using raw sienna and create an outline of key elements in my composition. My color starts off washy because I work in layers, piling-up the color until I get to the detail and fine tuning of my images. I project a light source in order to engage in dramatic color, especially in my exaggerated, abstract facial features.

With regards to my three-dimensional collective work, I look at everyday objects, both found and used, making my work into collections that are semi-Pop/Dada. The visuals all act as symbols that add the necessary drama, and explain the mood, as well as translate the *dicho* further and give the viewer a personal relatedness. I re-mediate the meaning of objects more with my collective work, allowing for a reinterpretation of the object and understanding of the *dicho* I have presented to my viewers.

While my development of conceptual art is more erratic it does give me a personal balance. My painting process is more timely and orderly, in that I start with a sketch, translate it to my surface, and begin to paint. My collective (sculptural) process is the opposite. When I begin to make a three-dimensional collective piece there is a constant mental reshuffling of images, and even with the final product there are last minute color additions, subtractions, or object substitutions dependent on what I find or purchase.

CONCLUSION

My MFA series fits perfectly into my goal of creating art that is culturally based. I am able to expose folk wisdom that has not been thoroughly studied. At the same time I am able to create my style of art, and express my vision of imagination and emotional connection to this cultural narrative. My roots in the Rio Grande Valley have had a substantial effect on defining who I am as an individual. Therefore, I sense a necessity to represent a part of the Mexican-American culture with positive historical, and educational significance. I found my strength through my close family ties in the Rio Grande Valley. This is where my imagination developed, and if this is why my passion for art succeeded, then I want to share the Rio Grande Valley with the world.

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APPENDIX

FIGURES



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

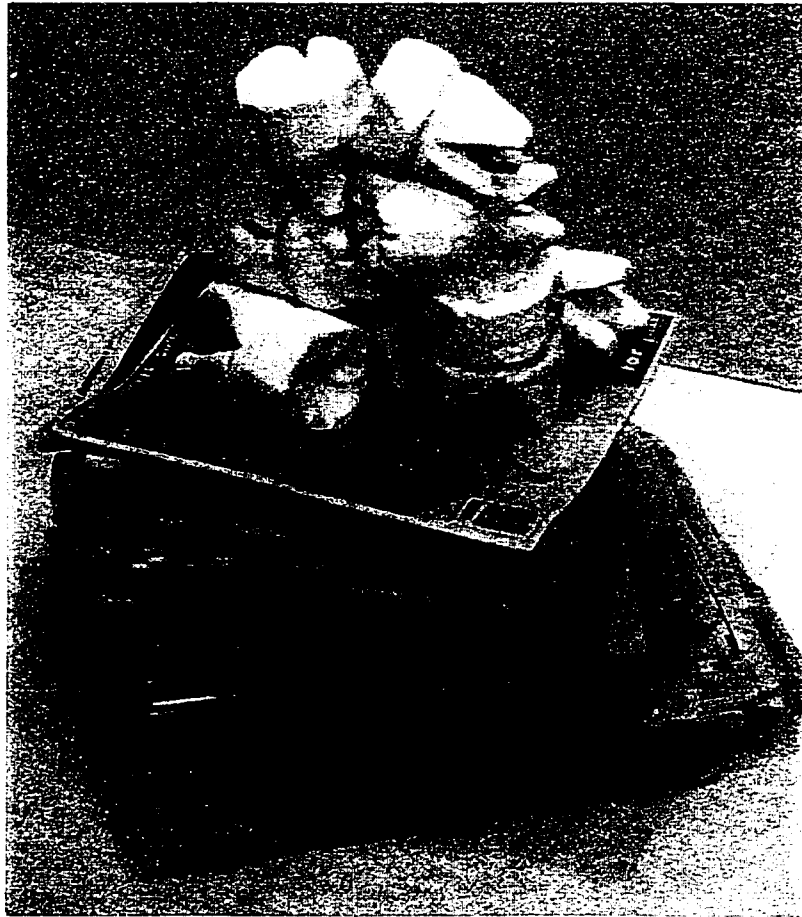


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

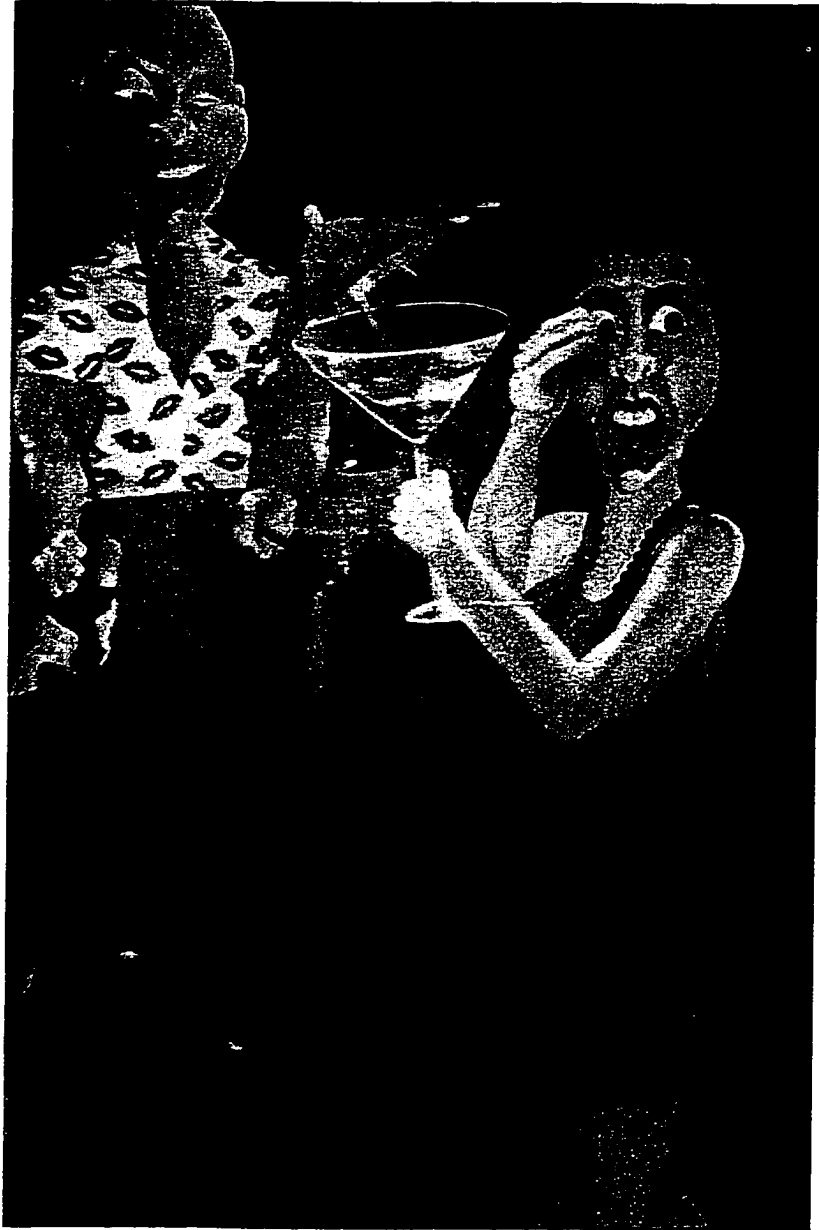


Figure 10

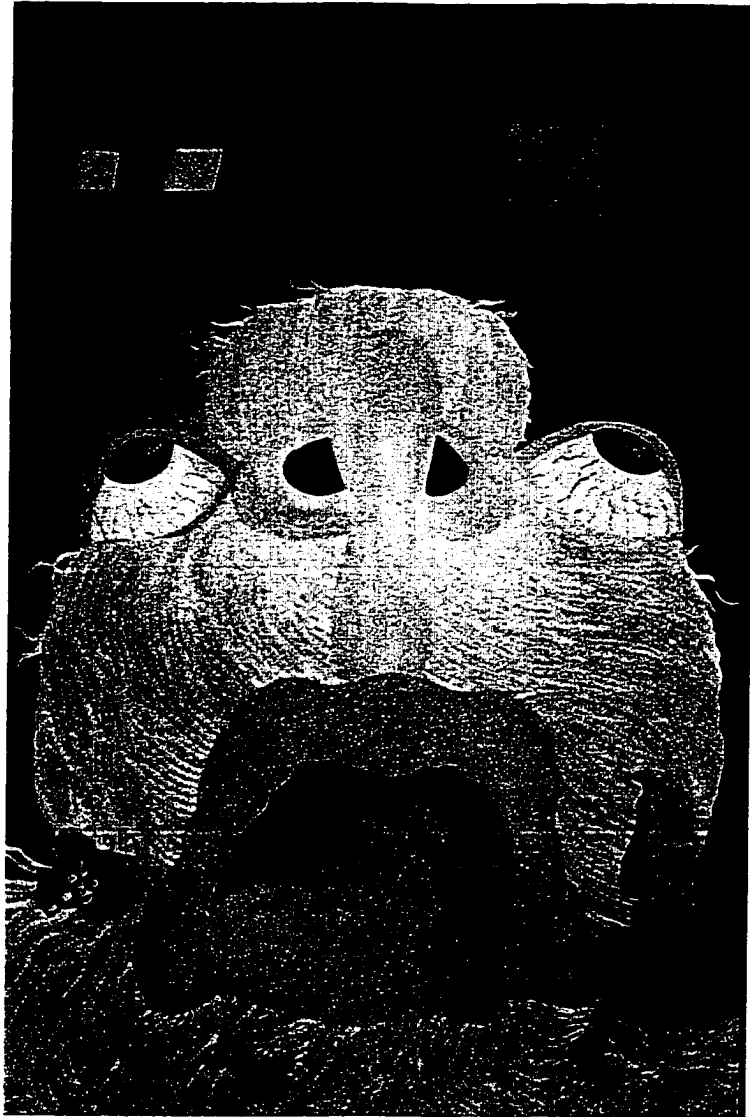


Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

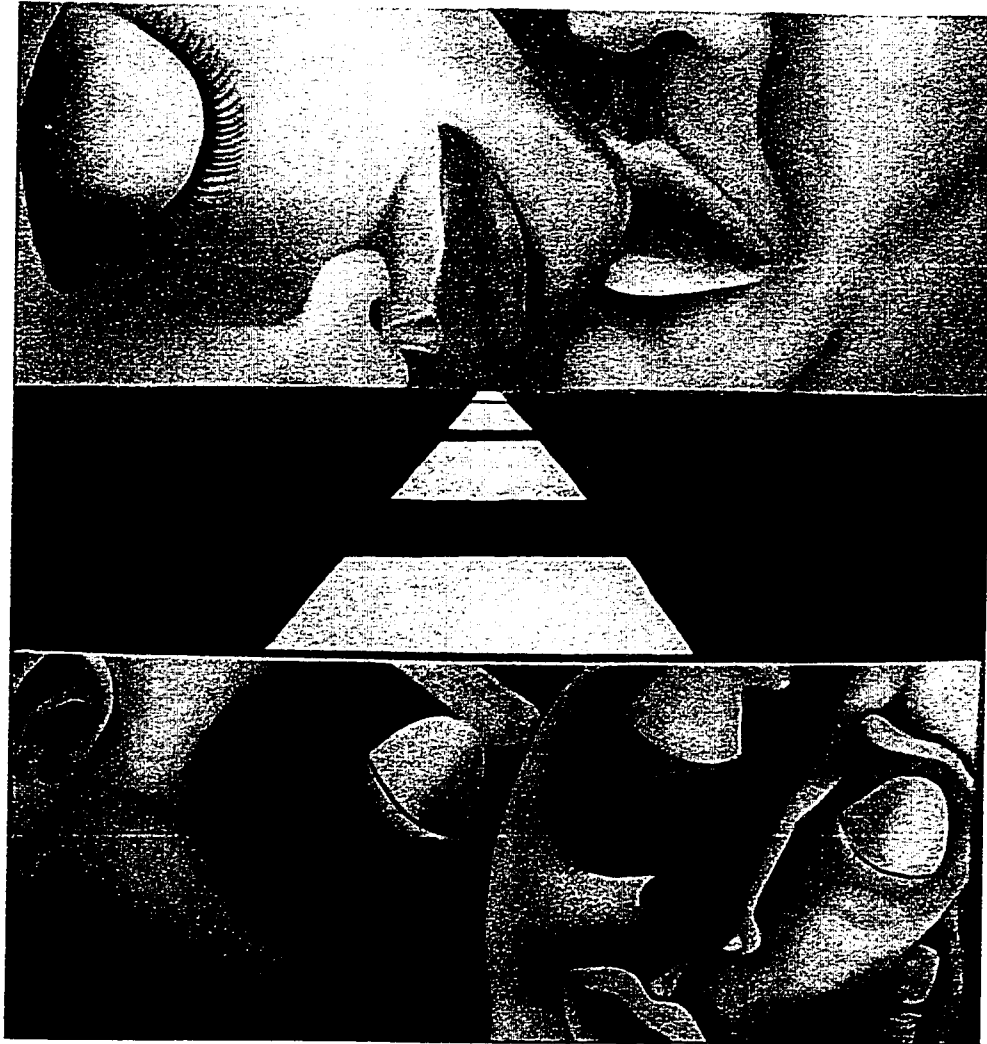


Figure 14



Figure 15

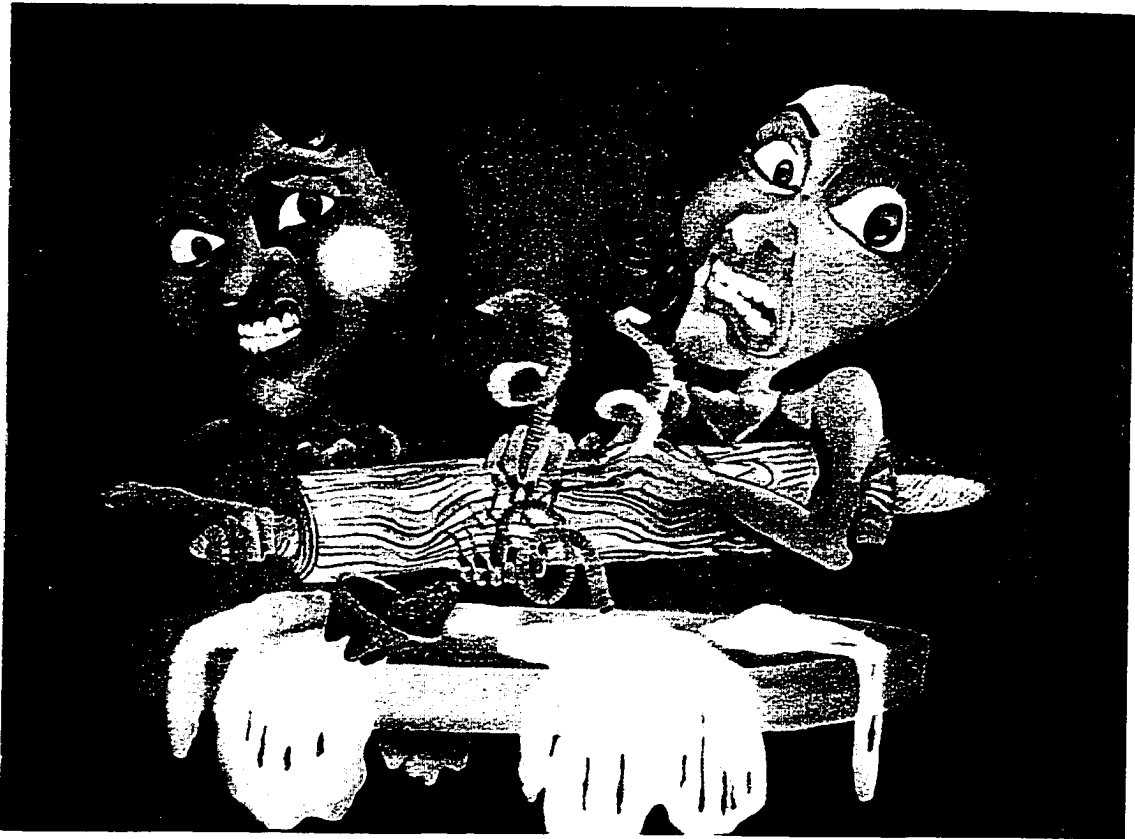


Figure 16

VITA

Jennifer Michele Rodriguez earned her Bachelor of Arts in Art from The University of Texas at Austin in 1998, with an emphasis in painting and drawing. She was recognized as an Outstanding Student-Spring 2001 by UTPA President Nevarez and was nominated as a United States Collegiate Scholar 2000 during her Graduate studies at The University of Texas-Pan American. Jennifer also captured these *dichos* on a short film documentary featuring actual people from various communities across the Rio Grande Valley. This film will be permanently housed at the Rio Grande Valley Folklore Archive library located in the University Library. She has established her name locally as an artist, and anticipates exhibiting nationally, taking these *dichos* from the Rio Grande Valley and familiarizing them among other cultures and regions. She has been recognized within local news magazines and television media, as well as involvement with the Texas Art Schools Association and the Harlingen Art Forum.

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