

6-2015

The Body As Border: El Cuerpo Como Frontera

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Recommended Citation

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Mayte Escobar

Artist Statement

I became attracted to creating images as a toddler walking about in my family home in Mexico. I used my parents' disposable color film camera and photographed everything I saw. I took close photographs of my dogs' belly and was interested in how they showed their love by laying on their back. I loved the magic of the film process because it was always a surprise turning in the camera at the local Sav-On and getting my photographs back. I received my first digital camera at thirteen and soon enough I was perceived as my family's photographer. I enjoyed photographing my family but I wanted more out of creating photographs. Taking my first black and white film class during my senior year in high school, I fell head over heels with the process. Being able to develop my own film and working in the darkroom printing my images, I finally found a direction I could see myself following the rest of my life. I continued my undergraduate work primarily focusing on landscape photography and the different issues that surround the inorganic materials that are left in organic environments.

I was influenced by artist, Frida Kahlo, who I was exposed to at a very young age. I was captivated by her paintings and the portrayal of the indigenous and the Mexican heritage. Frida Kahlo's beautiful self-portraits were striking and looked at every aspect of her life, situation, and personal battles. She portrayed her experiences by making paintings that exposed her life and feelings to the world. Her paintings depicted her Spanish heritage and indigenous sides of her identity, which is especially evident in *The Two Frida*, 1939, oil on canvas 68x68 inches. This gave me the inspiration to dive deeper into my own dual cultural identity. I portray myself as ambiguous through mosaic patterns of dominant colors that make up the flags for Mexico and the United States. I admire that Frida Kahlo uses herself as the subject in her work and analyzes

the multiple sides of her identity. I further examine my identity through my self-portraits and performances.

My current work was a slow transition from silver gelatin prints. I branched off my strong black and white film background into video. The video *This Land was . . . 2012* was composed of 30 photographs that were each slowly manipulated to distort a reality while erasing a personal footprint. The sound I incorporated was a flat line and a rhythmic heartbeat that took over the landscape. The work dealt with border issues through the simple gesture of sound within the incorporated landscape. This led to my transition from static black and white prints to moving images that dealt with my self-identity, analyzed through my external and internal dialogue.

Taking notice of my “Body as Border”. I became engulfed in the border issues that surround the United States and Mexico because of how much they are a part of me. I began investigating my dual culture and how they blend within me. I realized that, I had become a visual artist to be able to show my dual identity battle. These border issues that I explore with my work opens up a voice for the first generation born Mexican American. Being first generation born and raised in Santa Ana, there were many first generation bilingual people that I self-identified with, but traveling to Mexico I came to realize I was the “other”. It was apparent because of my Spanglish and how I stumbled over my words. People in Mexico soon took notice that I was not from there but instead “Del Otro Lado”. I saw a different side of people there; I was perceived as the “Other” or, in a sense, privileged because I was born in the United States. The stigma of people that go to Mexico from the states, are perceived as privileged since they go to Mexico just to have fun and find release from their reality. This is a stigma that I was a part of and I had to change the way I carried myself around friends and family in Mexico in

order to separate myself from it. I have become a wallflower and I observe their way of living and how it differed from my own. I have immersed myself in it, in order to trace back and walk in the steps my parents and ancestors took before me.

I create work in order to give a voice to immigrants and first generation born people. The United States is made up of immigrants and the goal for everyone here is to find out what “the American dream” is all about. I want to identify, “What it means to be Mexican-American,” and I see this as a current theme in my work. Many first and second generation Hispanics/Latinos/Mexicans have trouble holding on to their culture since the immersion of American Culture starts at a very young age. This alters the identity of some people that can no longer self-identify with the culture of their origin. Therefore, I am deconstructing myself and looking at all the different layers that I am composed of instead of being complacent with the American Identity. I am first generation Mexican-American and I do not choose my culture as an elective but as a major.

In my *Mexican American Sequence #1*, I felt the need to portray myself as a diptych through Mexican-American mosaic photographs. I compared my Mexican culture and heritage with my American nationality and a reinvention of a hybrid culture. What I mean by a hybrid culture is, the way that there is some very clear foundation of my Mexican culture embedded in the translation of the “American”. The mosaic portraits gave me the freedom of portraying both sides individually but united as one. Wanting the viewer to become engulfed by the colors, and having them project themselves onto the work would begin a dialogue within themselves.

I have researched the different types of Folklorico dances and how they have post-colonial influence in various regions of Mexico. We are Mexican people that have lost the connection to our roots; and do not know what connection we have with the indigenous

population from the contact with conquistadors. That is true of myself. I am of Mexican descent born in the United States and I am also part Native American, Yaqui blood from my paternal grandfather. I have only touched the tip of the iceberg in this self-identifying journey, and I am ready to dive in and see what else there is to be dubbed Mexican-American.

I am looking at both sides of the border and the colors that are represented in both cultures. I am researching how the music that transcends to the United States from Mexico is used in the media. I am examining every fragment of my life, by means of looking into my experiences on both sides of the border. I am studying the dances and teaching myself through viewing YouTube videos. I am learning the history of these dances and how some were used for courtship. Many of the Mexican Folklorico dances have indigenous roots. I am doing live performances of different songs for these pieces as well as documenting them on video. Focusing on my single channel video *Investigando "La Negra"* I wear what is perceived to be an "authentic" wardrobe of Mexican Folklorico. But the truth is, it is made of different pieces that were bought in the United States and in Mexico in order to create this outfit. The dress was made of separate pieces that had no relation to one another except for the obvious color and "traditional" façade. I intended to wear just the primary colors of Mexico since I am not from a specific region so I cannot wear that type of attire. I then pieced performances together that were made in Mexico and in the United States and got a feel for the song and rhythm in order to create my performance. I shot the performance in my backyard with a mustang at the edge of the frame signifying an observer but also the close ties that United States and Mexican history have with the horse. I created a split on my video in order to achieve a separation. Showing a distinct border within the self. I layered a filter that gives a boxed color television feel, and applying a Technicolor feel to the television blurs the foreground and background. The installation was

presented with intimate personal objects. A dresser from my bedroom growing up, and a Mexican colored stole that was given to me by my aunt in Mexico during their Independence Day on my 20th birthday. I purchased the chair at a thrift store and my father helped me clean it up and stain for the installation. The installation, as much as the video, are all representations of the different pieces of my identity.

My work ranges from photographs, performances, installations, video, and sculpture. The source and inspiration for my work comes from my identity, family, the Internet, animals, working class Hispanics/Latinos/Mexicans and many more. My Folklorico dance pieces tap into the void I feel having never had the chance to dance or be a part of a group that performed. The dance choreography is my adaptation from a variety of videos I viewed and my response to the rhythm I experienced. I also integrated ideas from my Art History background and research on the Aztec, Mayan, Inca, and early Mesoamerican civilizations, which led me to use a more tangible source to dance to the song *Chips and Salsa*. I felt the need to dance without my shoes as I imagine my ancestors would have in order to achieve a deeper connection to Pacha Mama (mother earth).

Looking at the states that compose these two countries through *Huellas*, 2014, portrays a sense of all those who have crossed the border as embodied travelers. *En el otro lado me vi yo*, 2014, shows both sides of the border and the choice many face when deciding to cross or to stay. *Dressing up Sequence #3*, 2013, portrays the feeling of being a chameleon changing the perception of being identified as Mexican or American by those that cross my path. *Viviendo en dos, se convierte en uno*, 2015, teleports my viewers to my childhood experiences that have manifested the person I have become.

Coming and going, from one to the other, having two homes, two languages, and two distinct cultures and an upbringing, foster the beginnings of this Mexican American exploration. It is through video and photography that I am able to recreate events and document performances. I take a personal look into understanding the history and identity of each nation. I create a juxtaposition with these two identities that become one and explore the social, cultural, and political issues we face in everyday life. I recreate my investigation, by trying to dig deeper, exposing the layers and facing my own identity crisis in the process.