Cultural Formation of Place: Making Yourself at Home

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Cultural Formation of Place: Making Yourself at Home

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Photography and Social Practice

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By
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Abstract

The environment you grow up in can become a pivotal part of your existence. The sights, smells, people, and places you experience every day can transform the way you see the world. Growing up in a Mexican-American household has brought its own set of experiences that have made me the artist I am today. I am one of many contemporary artists building on the foundations of their heritage and the Chicano movement. I am also a Mexican-American artist expanding the identity and extending the legacy in the 21st century. This paper will investigate how Mexican-American heritage has influenced my artistic practice work and how this heritage has influenced contemporary artists' work. I will then discuss how my photographs, sculptures, and installations are in dialogue with my Mexican-American heritage and reference Chicano practices in terms of my materials, subject matter, and visual storytelling. Chicano practices and my own personal heritage influence my artmaking as well as how I create a home for myself, my family, y familia.

Heritage | her·it·age | /ˈherədi/  
noun  
1. Heritage is a person’s unique, inherited sense of family identity: the values, traditions, culture, and artifacts handed down by previous generations.
Chicana Culture as Influence

Chicano art was established in the 1960s during the Chicano Movement. This social, political, and cultural movement sought to fight racism and preserve Mexican cultural heritage and religious practices while actively redefining what it meant to be Mexican and American during the countercultural revolution of the 1960s. The Chicano artist movement sought to resist cultural stereotypes and actively include representation of peoples of Mexican heritage. Arts in the Chicano Movement drew inspiration from Mexican muralism and pre-Columbian art and incorporated it into contemporary media such as zines and photography. Murals were a visual storytelling method that often-depicted community life, family dynamics, historical Aztec and Mayan symbols, and political and religious icons. Chicano artists also intentionally favored specific colors, materials, subject matter, and stylistic rendering native to Mexico yet were reimagined as a part of their Americanism.¹

Growing up in East Los Angeles, the influence of Chicano art surrounded me. Every street corner was decked out in murals. Chicano visual culture is still alive and continues to influence artists of Mexican descent throughout America today. This unique visual culture inspired my first book *Mi Corazon No Esta Lejos Del Tuyo* (Images 1 and 2). Moving from California to Texas, I desired to be surrounded by who and what I called home, so I started treasure hunting locations and places that reminded me of home. I discovered that the idea of home is not just a physical place but names, colors, saints, prayers, and architecture. I experience a deeper sense of self when my culture and heritage surround me; I feel like my heart is not far from the ones I love.


Image 2. Olivia Arratia, *Untitled (Mural in San Antonio #2)* 2020, Mi Corazon No Esta lejos Del Tu Yo, Photograph print in book
Artist Yreina Cervántez aims to preserve the movement and representation of Mexican-American peoples while telling new stories of the people of Los Angeles today. In her historic mural, *La Ofrenda*, Cervántez makes an offering to the community it resides in by providing a representation of the people, their history and culture (Image 3). The mural also represents spirituality as Native American iconography and symbols are represented. Cervántez’s hope for the mural was to bridge a gap and make a space for the Chicano community who resided in Los Angeles. Cervántez recalls her childhood, she saw these murals while walking and driving around her neighborhood every day. She wanted to continue to showcase the Mexican peoples who migrated to the neighborhood, highlighting their importance in everyday life.² No matter how Chicano art is represented or expressed, there remains the importance of representation of Mexican-American Chicano culture just as it was necessary in the 1960s.

Image 3. Yreina Cervantez, *La Ofrenda* (2006), Painted Mural, Under the bridge on Toluca and Second St. in Downtown, Los Angeles
Artist Carmen Lomas Garza is a Chicana narrative artist who creates depictions of the everyday events in the lives of Mexican Americans based on her memories and experiences in Texas and California. Since the 1970s, Carmen Lomas Garza has worked as a painter, printmaker, muralist, and children's book illustrator, showcasing her family's traditions and her South Texas Latino community as an inspiration. While growing up in Kingsville, Texas, she was subjected to institutionalized racism in segregated schools that punished Mexican Americans who spoke Spanish. As an artist who draws on her childhood memories and depicts the relationship between family and community, Garza challenges the legacy of repression while establishing folk art idiom as an integral element of American modernism.¹

Image 4. Carmen Lomas Garza, *Virgen Guadalupe* (1991), gouache on cotton paper, 17.5 x 13.5 in

Family as Home and Heritage

My grandmother is a large inspiration for my artistic practice. Her name was Margarita Castaneda, born in Juarez, Mexico, and migrated from Mexico to the states (Image 4). She lived to be seventy-nine years old and was a strong matriarchal example for my family. After her passing in 2018, there was a sense of loss. Losing my grandmother was difficult for my family, not just because she was a beloved family member, but because she was her grandchildren’s matriarchal glue and cultural identity. Not only from her physical and spiritual self-departing, but a loss of family ties, culture, recipes, and place. I wanted to preserve all these things and in turn started creating work that represented her, my family, and the people and places I loved.

Image 6. (left), Margarita Castaneda (Grandmother of Olivia Arratia), Circa 1965, Los Angeles, CA

Image 7. (right), Kathy Sosa, Keep Calm y Dream On, Circa 1965, San Antonio, Texas

January 8, 2019
In my thesis exhibition, *Wish you were here*, I showcased objects, both recreated and real, from the inside of my grandmother’s home, her backyard, and scenes from her neighborhood (Image 6). In doing this, I created a space for reliquaries, both old and new, to exist a space, not for their original intent. I brought a little square of El Sereno, East Los Angeles, California to a gallery space in Dallas, Texas. This large mural-like installation allowed me to tell a story through objects and location. I created a scenic version of my home and allowed the viewer to step into it and bring their own experiences to the work.

Image 8. Olivia Arratia, *Wish you were here* (2022), SMU MFA Thesis Exhibition, Pollock Gallery, Dallas, TX
The work *Untitled (altar)*, is a photographic collage compiled of items from my grandmother’s home, landmarks from her neighborhood, and objects taken from memories in particular moments in time (Image 7). For example, the two corn tortillas piled with queso on top of them are from the reception we had after my grandmother’s funeral. The roosters and chickens are from her kitchen, the tix container once holding board games now hold empty yellow pill containers she used for her cancer. The orange garland of paper marigold flowers represents honoring the dead during Dia Del Los Muertos. The keychain in the center of the college holds an image of all the men in my family carrying my grandmother away in her casket on the day of her funeral.

Image 9. Olivia Arratia, *Untitled (altar), Wish you were here* (2022), SMU MFA Thesis Exhibition, Pollock Gallery, Dallas, TX
Artist Cinthya Santos Briones documents the subject of grandmothers telling their stories as undocumented immigrants (Image 8). Each image in the series is of a grandmother in her own home, surrounded by her material positions. Such possessions include iconographies of saints, stuffed animals, vibrantly colored walls, and the warm polyester blankets, the kind most suited for winter. Briones called these carefully crafted images, *a symbolic recreation of culture, memory and ownership of a place that moves beyond any border*. Many of these women, if not all, are often seen as the invisible. In this series, the strong matriarchal figures are highlighted and made known. These grandmothers are symbols of identities long passed down through generations of culture.


Another body of work I chose to include in my thesis exhibition was *Untitled (Viewmaster)*. This was a series of reels alongside a reel viewer to document images from my family's 1990s and early 2000s (Image 10). Each reel tells the story of a certain family member(s); for example, *Your Love is King* is an eight-image reel of images of my mom and dad, Elsa and Gabe (Image 9). A sentence gives a quick descriptor of their larger story, with one saying, "Elsa & Gabe had six kids and would struggle in their marriage. Their kids are what kept them together." Another reel consists of "Un Dia Con Abuelita" and showcases images of my siblings with my grandmother singing happy birthday, talking chisme, and going to church (Image 9). These are intimate mementos from my childhood as I recall certain parts of my heritage as I move through today.

Image 11. Olivia Arratia, Images from series *Untitled (Viewmaster)* (2021), Los Angeles, CA
Image 12. Olivia Arratia, *Wish you were here* (2022), SMU MFA Thesis Exhibition, Pollock Gallery, Dallas, TX

Image 13. Olivia Arratia, Image from series *Untitled (Viewmaster)* (2021), Reel *Un Día Con Abuelita*, Los Angeles, CA
Since moving to Texas from California, I have missed the people, places, and sights of my every day life. I was not aware of how much the beauty of my Hispanic culture surrounded me until there was an absence of it. The longing for the lush landscape of palm trees and hibiscus, my grandmother's caldo de pollo, and driving down Whittier Boulevard in Los Angeles pushed me to recreate memories of living in the Golden State with my family. I started first by recalling memories of my childhood and putting them in the space of familiarity. This is how I worked through these memories in *Untitled (Viewmaster)* (Image 11).

Image 14. Olivia Arratia, *bougainvilleas’, Wish you were here* (2022), SMU MFA Thesis Exhibition, Pollock Gallery, Dallas, TX
The desire of wanting to be home, surrounded by colorful and vibrant structures, doves cooing, with the smell of bougainvilleas’ in full bloom, was close to my heart (Image 12). I had left the place of the family I knew and all the experiences we were a part of. There was a psychological transition of place I had to make myself aware of: I felt a loss of culture, identity, and family. I felt the need to preserve the traditional family practices, objects, places, and people I felt disconnected from during this time. This leads me to create work about California, Hispanic culture, and my family.

Image 15. Olivia Arratia, Migration (Guajillo chilies), Edition One, To Speak In Her Mother Tongue (2022), Goldmark Cultural Center, Dallas, TX
Thinking about this idea of change through place, I created a continuing body of work titled, *Migration (Guajillo chilies)* (Image 14). These are strung Guajillo chilies dipped in gold and painted with flower designs from Michoacan, Puebla, and Jalisco, Mexico. They are manipulated and formed with red wire in an upward direction to represent the migration from Mexico to America. This work was inspired by my grandmother’s own migration from Mexico to the United States. It is also reminiscent of family lineage. The chilies form a family tree-like figure all dependent on one another to take its shape (Image 13). The red wire represents blood and the original color of the chilies. The flowers represent the diversity and beauty of design of
who we are. This piece is just one expression of experience and displays family as home and heritage.
Object Familiarity: Creating Place

Have you ever seen an object, color, food, or even a chair and been transported back to when, where, and what you associate with that object, color, food, or chair? There are clusters of objects, singular things, and even fragmentations of physical forms that can move me from one mental state into another just by looking and being with them. An object can carry a psychological power or emotional weight that can connect us to a person, place, or time. These objects can be things associated with our childhood, a box of letters given to us by a friend, or even a bottle of perfume once owned by our mother. Holding and playing with my grandmother’s food fridge magnets can transport me back to being with her in her kitchen, smelling the delicious food she made on the stove, and hearing Univision playing in the background on her TV. Each was a visual masterpiece, not of porcelain craftsmanship from the hands who made them, but because they were grandmothers, they were unique (Image 15). They could trigger an emotional response from me that would ultimately allow me to utilize them as forms of art.
After my grandmother passed away, I inherited her fridge magnets. These magnets have been in my life ever since I was little - always occupying a space on my grandma’s fridge. The colorful fruits, bananas, papaya, and tangerines, once objects to play with and rearrange, are now vessels of memory. Once in my possession, I began to recreate the moments in which I would spend time with these objects as a child. The magnets held memory by their very existence. Recreating her fridge resulted in the piece titled, Grandmas Fridge (Image 16). I fabricated the material of her fridge onto a 12-inch x 12-inch magnetic metal frame, screwed it into the wall, and displayed the magnets. The display would not be complete without a San Miguel Archangel prayer card, a polaroid print from 2022 of my sisters and me, and a family photo with my grandmother (Image 17).
Image 18. Olivia Arratia, *Grandmas Fridge* (2022), *Wish you were here* (2022), SMU MFA Thesis Exhibition, Pollock Gallery, Dallas, TX

Image 19. Olivia Arratia, *Grandmas Fridge* (2022), *Wish you were here* (2022), SMU MFA Thesis Exhibition, Pollock Gallery, Dallas, TX
Another object of memory is a nine-foot rosary my grandmother owned. The rosary was glow-in-the-dark and displayed above her bed for most of my childhood (Image 18). Growing up, I remember laying with my grandmother in her bed, Univision on the TV, the smell of Vicks in the room, all while being snuggled up in her warm Mexican blankets. These memories are associated with her rosary and that is why I decided to make it. Also, because the original rosary was not passed down to me, therefore I did not have it. I wanted to have it, I recreated it, and since I am an extension of my grandmother, with her blood flowing through my veins, I have an original copy (Image 19). And although someone who has no association with my family or my grandmother, for that matter, I know it will invoke memory in someone whenever they view it because of the rosary’s specificity.

Image 20. Olivia Arratia, Rosario (Glow in the Dark) (2022), Wish you were here (2022), SMU MFA Thesis Exhibition, Pollock Gallery, Dallas, TX
Artist Lucia Hierro has and is a large inspiration for many of my works. Hierro uses colorful displays of objects documenting her Dominican heritage through the lens of capitalism (Image 21). She takes objects like prayer candles, Takis bags, Carnation evaporated milk, and clotheslines and makes them larger than life into soft sculptures and photographic prints (Image 20). Many of the objects used are in reference to specific memories, people, and places. When talking about her work she mentions, *The more specific I got, the broader the conversation could get surrounding the work and content*. The personal really does become universal in Hierro’s work when the images become recognizable to the Latinx eye.

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Another vessel for memory is my work, *Keychain Viewers* (Image 22). The *Keychain Viewers* is a body of work I created in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic and I continue to this day. The use of the keychain viewer came from a nostalgic memory of using them when I was a child. They would hold images of places and specific times I wanted to be in. I started to fill my own with images of times, places, and experiences that felt so distant, yet I wanted to keep them close. Each viewer holds a small 1.5 in x 1.5 images for an intimate viewing session (Image 23). These pieces are not important for the plastic they are made out of, but because of the places they can transport someone both psychologically and mentally in time.
Image 24. Olivia Arratia, *Keychain Viewer, Family Ties* (2022), *Wish you were here* (2022), SMU MFA Thesis Exhibition, Pollock Gallery, Dallas, TX

Conclusion

Cultural Formation of Place: Making Yourself at Home is a thesis exploring how one’s heritage and culture can form who they are, where they are, and what they call home. The idea of home is not limited to one definition, one person, or place, but comprises our experiences, family, whether that be blood or chosen, and our interests. The Chicano movement will always have a place in my heart as it reminds me of home, my family, and the palace I come from. Many contemporary artists draw inspiration from their culture, heritage, and family. These artists have inspired me to document and represent the underrepresented peoples of my communities and showcase their beauty. In addition, objects can be vessels of memory and elicit a psychological response from color, space, and iconography. All examples are how I continue to work in my practice and how I will explore them in my further research.
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