Cuteness and Curanderismo

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Cuteness and Curanderismo

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Mylan Nguyễn
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Committee Chair: Brian Molanphy
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Abstract:

In this paper I analyze the trajectory of concepts and explorations in my art practice during my graduate studies from 2019-2022. I examine how an interest in magic, healing and interconnectedness has led me to create illustration, ceramic, and risograph art that interprets the stories and practices I have encountered around Curanderismo, and Nahuales. I examine how these stories are shaped and also celebrate the wealth of healing knowledge they can provide.
Introduction

I am a multidisciplinary artist creating ceramics, illustration, printmaking, and installation. Enjoying the alchemy of these mediums, I create cute and playful characters through which I explore themes of magic, healing, and interconnectedness. When all of the concepts, materials, processes, and images come together I create art in a seemingly magical process of transformation, creation, or combination, I liken to alchemy. I create small multiples such as prints and ceramic sculptures as entities or tools that reinforce the ability to manifest desires and transformation in myself and the people who invite my creations into their lives. Magic in my art practice comes from an interest in referencing narratives and art objects that deal with the wonder and mystery of nature and cosmos. I use symbols, sigils, and talismans in my art to illustrate a personal mythology. Often, I gather small pieces and show them together in installations that immerse the viewer allowing them to step into a world of my creation. In the art I have been making since 2020 I draw on curanderismo, and nahualismo, as subjects in my practice that further reinforce my interest in magic.
Image 1. *Salamander Pond*, 2022, ceramic, flowers, water & horikawa incense 3.5h x 9w x 9d in.
I. Symbols

My visual symbols guide (image 2) is an illustrated and risograph zine for my MFA Qualifying exhibition. It holds several images of these cute characters and objects that have come to hold special meaning to me. I created a key to express the meanings behind some of the characters and motifs I use. Through personal observations and learning about their symbolic meaning in different folklore and cultures, I incorporate these powerful symbols to enrich my personal vocabulary.

1. Moth - follow your passion, night time fun, messenger
2. Snails - slow down you’ll get there eventually
3. Comets - make a wish, prophecy, creation magic
4. Clovers - lucky as we
5. Snake - death, beautiful line, rebirth
6. Infinity - interconnectedness, cycles, creation destruction
7. Pegasus - Texas, strong freedom
8. House - home, studio, seeking comfort, finding safe space
9. Birds - migration, boundless, songs
10. Star - guides, ancient light, mystery, hope
11. Sparkle (4 pointed star) - shining, awe or excitement energy, emphasis
12. Cat - playfulness, cuteness, curiosity, soft power
13. Hand - touch, action, creation
14. Eye - portal, visions, mirror
15. Tiger - strength, bravery, fierceness
16. Mushroom - healing, transition from death into new life, connection
II. Cuteness and Magic

The cute approach in illustration style I use draws inspiration from anime, manga, and comics. I especially love 90s anime like *Sailor Moon* (Naoko Takeuchi), and *Ranma ½* (Urusei Yatsura) and movies by Studio Ghibli (Hayao Miyazaki). My exposure to anime came during visits to Mexico over summers as a child where from 1996-1999 *Sailor Moon* aired on TVAzteca Monday-Friday from 3-4 pm. I had a lot more access to watching it in Guanajuato than the 6am Saturday time slot I remember setting my alarm to watch from Dallas, Texas. Movies by Studio Ghibli were introduced to me at my cousin’s house. My Uncle Mauricio had a huge VHS collection and they would often have movie nights with us screening movies like *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Princess Mononoke*. At a time when I was having difficulty understanding how to form my identity as a Vietnamese-Mexican American, in the absence of my father after divorce, I found so much comfort in Japanese exported media. As I look back on it, anime was some of the only representation of Asian identity that American children had to look at in the 90s and that's probably a big part of why I fell so in love with it. Anime led me to reading manga. Most serialized anime begins as manga (Japanese comics and graphic novels). My manga artist influences include Matsumoto Taiyo (*Tekkonkinkreet, Cats of the Louver*), Daisuke Igarashi (*Children of the Sea*), Kamome Shirahama (*Witch Hat Atelier*) and Clamp (*Cardcaptor Sakura & Chobits*) among many others.

Kris Chau, Yumi Sakugawa, Aya Takano, and Ako Castuera are artists who have inspired my studio practice. Their characters try to find meaningful life connections and act to improve society through a deeper respect and understanding of nature and inner cosmos. These artists handle their character designs, and world building is also done, in a cute illustration aesthetic. When I respond to cute art, I find myself quickly disarmed. It makes me feel a desire to get
closer to the art and it speaks to me in a visual language I find comforting, and funny. Antoine de St Exupéry’s *Le Petit Prince* utilizes a cute style of illustration and an accessible writing style that appeals to all ages.

I employ these narrative and affectual tactics in my cute artworks, in my use of soft and subtle color palettes, rounded forms, and big wide set eyes I use cuteness to entice the viewer. “Fundamentally, cute serves to displace, or neutralize, or re-conceptualize in a positive/non-threatening direction; this is possible only to a certain degree, at which point the pendulum swings back the other way.”¹ In choosing how to stylistically portray concepts tied to painful histories like colonialism, creating art in a style of cute can seem to be dismissive or a mask to hide the pain. However, through my art, I’m finding that positive reconceptualization through cuteness, humor, and magic is a coping mechanism. This is a step for me toward coming to terms with these histories, healing, and moving forward. My intention for the viewers or collectors of my art pieces is to incorporate them as tools or talismans for their own lives and daily rituals. The happiness that I get when I look at something cute, the “aww” factor, is something I also hope to share with the viewer. Cute can be a visual antidepressant and I want it to function that way in my art.

I knew I was interested in making art about magic and cuteness when I began my graduate studies in 2019 but was not quite sure how that would manifest. I was most excited about making a series of wood fired ceramics, metal crowns, a risograph printed poem, and a tent installation. Participating in the communal tending of the wood train kiln was an amazing learning opportunity. I learned about the transformation of wood ash to glaze and how the atmosphere interacts differently with the pieces depending on where they are placed in the kiln. The toastie

mustard yellow ash kissed batch I got from that firing included: a star child, a talisman for finding home (image 3), a tiger mask, and a sphinx phone.

I was able to participate in two pours in the foundry and made metal crowns using the lost wax technique. I later began to think of them as altar rings. The aluminum ring is made up of comets and holds a raw opal in the center of an eye shape. The bronze ring (image 4) is composed of hands coming together to hold a small raw sapphire stone. I was using the stones as talismans. I add the symbolic meanings and histories of certain stones to my intention for their inclusion in my artworks. The sapphire represents calming, wisdom, and connection to a spirit realm, and opal is a tool to aid in divination. “The use of crystals is well documented for the Yucatec Maya as part of ritual tool kits for the divination and gaining of knowledge… the use of crystals is connected to seeing and powers if seeing or vision in all parts of Mesoamerica”

**Image 4. Sapphire Altar Ring, 2019, bronze with raw sapphire, 1h x 8w x 9d in.**

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Our graduate seminar class went to Marfa during Chinati Weekend 2019. The show *Candellia, Coatlique, and The Breathing Machine* at Ballroom Marfa featuring the art of Candice Lin, Beatriz Cortez, and Fernando Palma Rodriguez was unforgettable. Each of these artists use storytelling, plants, fortune telling, and mechatronic sculpture to address histories between the Texas-Mexico border. That show led me to make *Take Me With You* (image5), an installation, showcasing a tent tied down to cinder blocks and Topo Chico bottles filled with concrete. In its first iteration shown in the Cedars Union for our group show *Chillnaughty* I sat inside and did tarot readings for viewers. I pulled cards and read their meanings from the guidebook that came with the Mystic Mondays tarot deck by Grace Quong I had gotten for my birthday the year before. I had conversations with people as they interpreted how the card meanings connected to events they had or were experiencing in their life. This process of shared interaction, divination play, and conversation catalyst are important aspects of my practice that I was able to focus on through *Take Me With You*.

In spring of 2020 I took a leave of absence from school and spent that year turning my garage into a ceramic studio, and establishing an artist collective called Brujita Workshop. This time away helped me reflect on how my art could be used as a tool to reinforce mindfulness and attention to daily ritual.
Image5. *Take Me With You*, 2019 mixed media, Dimensions Vary
III. Curanderismo

The pandemic shifted my focus from magic to healing and led me toward curanderismo, a type of Mexican folk healing I remember hearing about since childhood. The root curar means to heal. Curanderx use an understanding and integration of balancing physical, mental, and spiritual imbalances to heal different ailments through the use of talks, rituals, or herbal remedies. A limpia is a type of spiritual cleansing rite done with a sweeping of herbs over the body at crossroads. I included feverfew and rosemary in creating an installation based on this ritual. I made three hanging macramé curtains dyed with cochineal at the ends. I tied plants that are used in limpias to them as well as ceramic beads that I had made depicting moths, eyes, flowers, and infinity signs. The viewer could walk through this set of curtains like a car drives through a car wash. The plants and images brushed over their bodies creating a walk through limpa experienced in a time of social distancing. My art references rituals and ceremonies for divination and healing but also a desire to reimagine them and to make them my own.

Exploring and connecting with the history of curanderismo has been an important connection for me to address a history that ties me to my ancestry. I resonated with Erica Buenaflor’s book *Cleansing Rites of Curanderismo: Limpias Espirituales of Ancient Mesoamerican Shamans* as she points out how “tracing curanderismo practices to their ancient mesoamerican roots allows us to reclaim indigenous healing methods that have historically been derided, ridiculed, and misappropriated. This reclaiming is medicine in itself, and it can inspire us to weave our disassociated ancestral wisdom back into our heritage, as well as learn from, respect, and honor indigenous traditions.”

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concepts of duality, equilibrium, and fluidity were integral components of Mexica cosmology and religious philosophy reflected in curanderismo.

The series of ink and watercolor illustrations for a poem by Amy Zapien titled *Pobrecita Y La Curandera* also pulls from imagery of healing with plants. In the pages titled *medicine hidden in a goodbye kiss* and *you surrender* I utilized simple leaf imagery to represent tears and connection to an inner self. The poem deals with themes of relationships ending and healing from trauma. My drawings of a brown and white rabbit illustrate a sense of duality and vulnerability.
Image 7. *You Surrender*, 2021, watercolor on paper  10h x 8w in.
In my painting *Gatita Yerbera and the Moth Sisters* I reference yerberx, a type of curanderx that heal through their knowledge of medicinal plants. A white- haired brown-skinned cat girl stands staring at the viewer from a golden field under a crescent moon and a 9- pointed star. There are burgundy, gold, and mint green stars, comets, and sparkles in the pink sky behind her. Three brown and tan moth girls are dancing and sleeping among green plants. The plants are labeled in Spanish using my small cursive handwriting with their names, and their medicinal properties. For example Maravilla o Girasol, helianthus annuus, el café se prepara de estas semillas alivia la jaqueca y los dolores nerviosos de la cabesa. (Translation: Sunflower, helianthus annuus, the coffee made with these seeds alleviates migraines and nervous headaches) In writing these descriptions I chose plants that I see commonly. I also chose ones that people in my family use for house remedies. I copied the meanings from *Yerbas Medicinales : Cómo Curarse Con Plantas* by Pedro Alvarez Gonzalez.

When I created this piece I was thinking of the gatita girl as a curandera in training going out to forage and learn about the plants. Simultaneously as I wrote the names of the plants and their properties I hoped to begin taking in that knowledge for myself. Moths are a motif I use to represent following a goal at any cost. I’m fascinated by the theory that moths evolved to use the light of the moon to navigate in a behavior called transverse orientation. Seeing little brown moths become easy prey to the geckos in the pursuit of the warm glow of my porch light I associate them with the idea of pursuing desire to the point of sacrifice. This piece was made with a combination of Flashe paint, and colored pencils on a gourd shaped wood panel I cut with a jigsaw. As I cut the wooden shapes, I was thinking of them as big die cut stickers for the wall. Having curated my own collection of stickers as sigils (including the decoration of my laptop
case), I mirrored this in the *Blurry Eyed Cosmovision* series of paintings. This series referenced prophecy comets, a connection to the stars, and nahuales.

Image 8. *Gattita Yerbera and the Moth Sisters*, 2021, Mixed Media on Wood Panel, 46h x 33w in
IV. Nahuales

Nahuales have come to be a key element to my artistic practice. Nahuales are a subset of curanderx associated with the ability to shapeshift into an animal other. The concept of the nahual is very complex because of how this term has come to be associated with several differing identities, folklores, myths, legends, and functions. Accounts of the nahual range from benevolent leaders and protectors of ancient knowledge in their community who use their supernatural powers for the good of others to malevolent brujx or sorcerers who use their powers for trickery or evil.

Artemio Solis Guzman identifies as a present day nahual and teaches these traditions in his community in Milpa Alta, Mexico. He explains how the traditions and knowledge of nahualismo were passed on to him by his teacher Marcial Gutierrez Artenanco. He considers nahual to mean “a man of knowledge who has passed through the four waters of understanding. These four branches of knowledge include celestial mathematics, cosmic geometry, floricanto, and herbalism.”

He was taught about the stars phases of the moon, certain geometric forms to position the body into that resemble animals (i.e. deer, mountain lion), the directions of the winds, the properties and aspects or plants (categorizing plants as sweet or bitter, hot or cold, poisonous or medicinal), and the oral philosophy/poetry of the floricanto used to aid a nahual in times of sadness. He believes that the idea of the nahual as a person of knowledge became distorted and demonized by political and religious powers during the Spanish conquest. In Bruja y Nahualli: versiones y perversiones en el proceso colonial Roberto Martínez González examines the colonial history of the nahualism 's association with western concepts of witchcraft. He considers that “la definición de nahualli en términos de brujería parece más responder a esta

antigua estrategia de conversión que satanizaba al ritualista hereje para justificar su extirpación.”

(Translation: the definition of nahualli in terms of witchcraft seems more to do with this antique strategy of conversion that satanized the heretical ritualist to justify his extirpation.)

I feel a reflection of the mythology of the nahuales in my multiracial identity. I relate shape shifting to code switching and resonate with the themes of duality in their stories. Navigating ambiguity in how I am perceived by others, I am fascinated by the shifting perceptions of nahuales and how they are so influenced by the history of colonial power structures and the subversions of that power. For Nahualito (Image 9), my solo exhibition at Terrain Dallas, I created a procession of nahuales made from ceramic, wood, and paper mache. Incorporating several different stories of nahuales I portrayed many hybrid human animal forms in different materials and states of transition. They spent a month in their outdoor gallery space and I enjoyed the process of change the sculptures underwent from weathering. After a sparkler ceremony for the closing of the show the pieces came back to my studio where they underwent another transformation. By stacking elements of the previous installation I made Nahual Altar Tower (Image 10), a sculpture that functioned as display and altar space to be seen in the round. The seemingly precarious arrangement of the stack holding several ceramic breakable objects created a tension that reminded me of playing Jenga. Standing on wobbly legs it grew taller.
Image 9. *Nahual Procession*, 2021, mixed media, installation at Terrain Dallas, dimensions vary
Image10. *Nahual Altar Tower*, 2021, installation in studio, dimensions vary
The installation I presented for our 2022 MFA qualifying exhibition, *Be There Soonish*, consisting of several ceramics arranged on burnt cedar planks and milk crates to form a sculpture that references an altar, a botanica and procession. A family of four terracotta tigers form the main structure holding the planks through holes in their body and on their backs. The scalloped edges on the planks allude to moth wings. The tiger’s stripes and eyes are brushed on with white slip and a deep red iron oxide on the burnt orange terra cotta clay. The two larger tigers are lying on their bellies like sphinx with arms folded in front of them and big open smiles reveal small triangle teeth. They carry the weight of each other and all of the small talisman and healing tool ceramic sculptures that I made with a smile. The baby tigers with their scowls and side eye glances are growing plants from the tops of their heads. The tiger moths family are the strength and protection that is the structure for my interpretation of a botanica altar space.

I made a procession of ceramic snails. They are vessels for holding healing plants as they travel across a road of salt that winds its way under the tiger botanica. Logically, snails and salt don’t mix. The process of osmosis would take place; the salt would draw water from their bodies through their thin permeable skin. The snails I made symbolize resilience. They made it through all of the transformations that they had to. From being minerals in the earth crushed, combined with others, and rehydrated; in my hands they formed new bonds. They made it through the fire at cone 10 taking on 2280-2300 degrees of heat F only to come out stronger. I know they will continue on their way, slowly but surely, finding their way to a new home. They are talismans to take time and reminders to keep moving.
V. Conclusion

The heart of my practice right now is rooted in making art that examines my relationship with magic, transformation, and healing. Learning about curanderismo and other healing traditions that relied on nature for healing and sustenance, I want to make art that reflects the way that these traditions promote relationships of respect and reciprocity with nature. I will continue to build my material knowledge and craftsmanship with ceramics, riso printing, and further installations. Through the art I create I interpret the stories and practices that I have encountered around Curanderismo, and Nahuales. I analyze how these stories are shaped and also celebrate the wealth of healing knowledge they can provide.
Bibliography:


