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Shattering Taciturnity: The Use of Visual Arts as a Method of Communication and Expression

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SHATTERING TACITURNITY: THE USE OF VISUAL ARTS AS A METHOD OF
COMMUNICATION AND EXPRESSION

A Thesis

by

JESMIL M. MALDONADO RODRIGUEZ

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

December 2019

Major Subject: 2D Studio Art

SHATTERING TACITURNITY: THE USE OF VISUAL AS A METHOD OF
COMMUNICATION AND EXPRESSION

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December 2019

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ABSTRACT

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Silence an action that conceals a person's memories, thoughts, emotions, fears, and insecurities, making them crave a method of expression. In this case, the Visuals Arts serves as an approach to investigate, create, understand, accept, and confront the darkness within the artist's psychological and emotional state. Inspiration taken from vibrant colors and insects found within Puerto Rico's natural sources, how these interact, relate, and consume the human within. By creating a series of artworks, the artist starts to comprehend how silence has taken over her life. Taciturnity has become the flame that ignited the artistic flow that leads to the discovery of her voice, identity, and acceptance. It is a constant creative struggle that consumes time, effort, creativity, and sanity. In which the artist learns what she is capable of and how far she is willing to continue with her artistic expression.

DEDICATION

The completion of my master's studies would not have been possible without the unconditional support and love from my family, friends, and professors. To my parents, Jesus A. Maldonado Rodriguez and Milagros Rodriguez Guzman and my brothers: Alberto J. Maldonado Rodriguez and Jesus A. Maldonado Rodriguez, thank you for motivating me to pursue my dreams and for providing me with affection from far away. To my friends Dayanara Morales Rodriguez and Pedro D. Fortunato Velazquez for their feedback and analysis of my artwork. To my Rio Grande Valley friends that made Edinburg, Texas, my second home. To my professors for sharing their knowledge and helping me find my way within the Visual Arts. Thank you is not enough to express my gratitude.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my gratitude to professor Paul Valadez, chair of my dissertation committee, for his constant motivation to produce artwork and to believe in my capacity as an artist. For always providing constructive criticism, knowledge of different artists, and providing research and visual materials. To Veronica Jaeger, who challenged me since I started the program, helping me find and establish my style and to develop a cohesive line of work. To Josefina Stoleson for her guidance in the usage of technology to create and take my artwork to a new level and for giving me feedback in the development and function of my website. Thank you all for your guidance, intellectual commentary, and advice for the creation of my Master's in Fine Arts Final Thesis Exhibition and dissertation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to Jonathan Bergeron, “People don’t need to read an artist statement or a thesis on me to get something out of it.”¹ It does not matter how explicitly or detailed; I explain my artwork; the spectator will relate and decide the significance behind my work. Nevertheless, I will do more than my best to express myself in words.

Who Am I?

I am a female Puerto Rican artist looking for self-acceptance and self-love among this critical world. I am from Guayanilla, Puerto Rico, a small town in the south, where I grew up as a quiet and peculiar kid.

In August 2011, I started my Bachelor’s Degree in Art at the University of Puerto Rico at the Mayaguez Campus. I have always been the odd one in my family.² It took me three years to decide my major, torn between Art and Biology. I found a way to connect both passions in my artwork. I decided to use art as a method of communication and healing. Because it is easier for me to transmit a message this way when I decide to stay silent about my emotions and thoughts.

¹ Jordan, Matt Dukes. *Weirdo Noir: Gothic and Dark Lowbrow Art*. (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2010) 48.

² My brothers decided to pursue a career in Agricultural Science, and I did not follow their example.

I graduated in June 2016 from my bachelor's in art; I did not get into graduate school. Moving back with my parents was a harsh transition. I fell into a small depression, and I had lost my way. I started to repeat shapes to get my mind occupied on something and control my anxiety. A new interest emerged in my artwork, but I did not fully understand what it meant.

I needed to start saving money for the journey ahead. I started working as a delivery girl for my mom's lunch service. After the lunch service period ended, I started making stickers of my illustrations and engraved glasses to sell. The last thing I did was to work in a small fruit and vegetable stand. During the six months, I was living with my parents doubt about my potential as an artist consumed my work. Creating new pieces helped me see that I can overcome my negative thoughts. I started my Master's in Fine Arts at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in January 2017, moving far away from home.

New Horizons

The transition has not been smooth, and it will never get comfortable. Edinburg, Texas, is where I studied, worked, and lived, but my home is in Puerto Rico.³ I was a "jíbara"⁴ among a different crowd and learned to defend myself. I felt alone, and my routine was to go to class, create artwork, and make sure to catch the 9:45 pm bus. A small dorm room felt like a monumental and tiny cage at the same time. I decided that it was time to step up my game and asked for help. I did, and here I am, writing my thesis with the hope to serve as an inspiration to others, to those that doubt and hate themselves as I did. Throughout my thesis, you will learn how vulnerable and resilient humans can be, which I can relate to the following lyrics. "I wrote

³ Why? Because I am always home sick, it does not matter how many times I look at photos, videos and talk to my parents my heart remains in Puerto Rico.

⁴ According to the urban dictionary jíbara is a Puerto Rican proud of their independence and relation to nature, yet here I refer to the other definition in which it is use as a mockery referring to an unsophisticated Puerto Rican.

my way out/ when the world turned its back on me/ I was up against the wall/ I had no foundation/ no friends and no family to catch my fall/ running on empty, there was nothing left in me but doubt/ I picked up a pen/ and wrote my way out...”⁵ Life, for me, is a daily struggle, even more, when my support team⁶ is far away. Instead of using a pen to write poems or lyrics, I use mine to create images of what words fail to explain. Expressing the fear of death, of losing my family, the smile reflecting happiness when I want to cry and scream. The thoughts about giving up because I am not good enough and not worthy. The constant anxiety that makes me sleepless and eat more than my share. These are the things I ignore but inspire and fuel my creative process.

Do I have permission to speak my mind? No! Taught that my problems and battles are mine and no one needs to know about them in the end, I decided to be silent and avoid conflict. It is assuming that what I felt was nothing compared to everything else that was happening in my household. I needed psychological treatment, but growing up in a Latin-American household, talking to a psychologist is for crazy people, the weak and your mother knew what to do and say. “I told you that, but since I do not have a degree, you do not believe me.” The response I would get when I talked about my appointments with my psychologist to my mom. I kept everything inside, and it affected emotionally and psychologically. Thinking I had forgotten about them. In reality, I decided to lock them away to ignore their existence with a smile and an “I am Ok,” now they resurfaced in my artwork. According to Stephen King, “... when we repress feelings and drives, there is a return of the repressed, and they come back to haunt us and cause problems for us.”

⁵ Nas, Dave East, Aloe Blacc and Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Wrote My Way Out”, December 2, 2016, track 3 on *The Hamilton Mixtape*, Atlantic, 2016, compact disc.

⁶ My parents, brothers, best friends, teachers and professors.

The result is my artwork and the use of a pencil to write a justification for everything I create. To reconnect with my passion for writing, to liberate and give a voice to my muted self. I do not like explaining because I do not fully understand the meaning. I never know what the meaning behind each piece is because I evade facing the truth; it is exhausting to pretend that everything is ok, but it is not ok. It takes time and self-analysis to comprehend the different what is and why it is. I relate to the artist Alex Pardee when he expresses, “I have a long way to go before I can really help you see what I see.”⁷ I can attach a detailed description to a piece about its meaning and help the audience see things from my perspective. In the end, we all have different experiences that make our ways of thinking clash and development new meanings.

What is it to me?

It is a visual extension of my insecurity and worth as an artist and a person; these images transform into my voice and identity among a sea of people. I am evading social and cultural oppression for fear of being bullied and exposing myself as a first-time naked model. In the art field criticism is part of it, and as an artist, I started to observe more and ignore negativity. I am expected to be a false version of myself to fit within the norms of the ordinary. Perfectionism is a constant state of mind in which I always wanted to prove my capability as an artist and human being. I was never good enough for my grandparents; why? I will never know, my grandma is dead, and my grandfather is alive, but I do not have communication with him. Due to my fear of rejection, it did not matter what I did or what I achieved. It is still not enough.

In my upbringing, perfection was something; I had to achieve continually so no one would criticize or said anything about me.⁸ Getting in the way of my artistic growth and made

⁷ Revelli, M., and Saelee Oh. *Juxtapoz: Dark Arts*. (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press Inc., 2009) 148.

⁸ This is the result of my mother’s way of teaching me how to do things correctly and become a strong and independent woman.

me forget why I decided to pursue a life as an artist. I am not comfortable with the person I see in the mirror every day, because something is missing, and I hate myself. “Art is about setting us free. Sometimes with noir art, that liberation happens through the depiction of the feared or forbidden. By helping us face our fears and explore alternative realities, noir art is liberating.”⁹ In my degree, I found my path and my artistic style. I am looking for acceptance and inclusion among other artists, and when I meet new people, aggravating my mental and emotional health, losing sight of what is essential.¹⁰ Demanding perfectionism in everything I did in the year 2018 caused an artist block. To get rid of it, I entered an experimentation phase in order to clear and understand the clutter in my mind. Learning that my most substantial work is the one that represents and expresses whom I am and learning to accept my individuality and that my artwork is not for everyone. I stopped thinking about what society will say and started learning to have more confidence. It took me three years to achieve this throughout the development of my Master’s in Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition. By sitting, observing, and analyzing my work, exposing my vulnerability, creating a “melcocha”¹¹ made of my unusualness, insects, body parts, and colors from nature in Puerto Rico, anxiously waiting to share the truth behind my artwork.

The aftermath of the graduate

All I wanted is to be known worldwide, but that dream had changed. After graduating and moving to another state to be a full-time artist or work as an art handler in a museum or gallery was my primary goal. Dreams and goals change and are achieved at random times in life. Rediscovering my passion for teaching through the experience as a Teaching Assistant for the

⁹ Jordan, Matt Dukes. *Weirdo Noir: Gothic and Dark Lowbrow Art*. (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2010) 13.

¹⁰ As professor Valadez always told me, “you need to find your tribe and enjoy what you are doing”.

¹¹ Melcocha is a term I learned growing up that refers to the unorganized thoughts in one’s mind and how you would like to integrate them into one thing.

Printmaking I at the UTRGV-School of Art. Where I learned my capability as an educator and how I can help students use art as a method of expression. One day I will travel the world and impact different communities with the importance of the arts and learn their perspective in art. Establishing a union between cultures by offering advice and support to the communities facing different adversities. Why do I want to do this? “Art provides a partial catharsis of fears and the hopes of gaining some mastery over their world.”¹² To help them find their voice and confidence to stand up for their aspirations and fight the power. Art is a method of communication that is a weapon of choice that introduces imagery accompanied by philosophies and theories.

The education and integration of Puerto Rican culture is the next step in my artwork. The primary goal is to acquire the recognition as a Puerto Rican artist using traditional imagery in contemporary art forms. Expressing how it feels to evolve within modern times and still hold dear my culture. The distance from home taught me to seek and love my culture, and the moments and memories I took for granted are influencing my artwork. Learning and pursuing a greater understanding of the wonders in art and applying them to my work, always looking for perfectionism. Giving life to the unexplainable within my mind and relating it with my childhood, death, family, sadness, hate, and the contemplation of what was presumed lost.

¹² Jordan, Matt Dukes. *Weirdo Noir: Gothic and Dark Lowbrow Art*. (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2010) 15.

CHAPTER II

INFLUENCES IN MY WORK

Art Movements that Influence my Artistic Development

How to express my influences? There are so many that it is hard to keep track of them. I am thinking back to all the Art History courses I have taken throughout my college education. There are two main artistic movements with which I feel a connection. Starting with Romanticism (1780-1850) "... importance of emotion over the rule of reason. Exploring pictorial possibilities of the melancholic, the discontented, and exaggerated."¹³ Influenced by the emotional state in which I am creating the piece, my selection of color is also affected by it. I have different periods in which my color palette was composed only of red, black, and white. Then, the use of blue tones started to resurface in my pieces. The presence of color in my work is strongly inspired by the nature that surrounds me. Ever since I moved to Texas, I have been recreating the vibrant hues of Puerto Rico's landscapes because I felt nostalgic and missed my home.

It is not just about the color used in the compositions; it is also about the topics and the artists' concerns presented through his or her work. It is the time when confronting ourselves

¹³ Buchholz, Elke Linda., Gerhard Bühler, Karoline Hille, Susanne Kaeppele, and Irina Stotland. *Art: a World History*. (New York: Abrams, 2007) 320.

turns in to a series of works that serve as a healing mechanism; in my case, this is what art has done for me. "...seek to express all that is repressed and forbidden in a rigid rational world, to acknowledge it and come to terms with it. Sometimes that means confronting the darker side of the human psyche."¹⁴ At the moment of creation, I am focused on the task ahead; after the piece is finished, that is when the analysis starts. Everything starts to make sense. On some occasions, I had to leave my studio because it was too overwhelming, but it has been harder to explain everything through writing. It is easier for me to paint or draw it all than to sit down and type away.

The other strong influence in my artwork is the Lowbrow art movement (1979-present), which encases all the things that contributed to the development of my art pieces and the acceptance of myself. In this movement, there is a strong influence of literature, underground comix, punk music, among others. To me, this movement feels like home. Here I have found painters and illustrators that created most of the visual imagery I grew up with. Remembering how I would watch *Tales from the Crypt* as a young girl, that is where all the weirdness started. Admiring different band posters and the artwork painted on cars.¹⁵ Leading to my constant interest in literature and movies within the genres of fiction, mystery and horror. I thought it was odd for a girl to be interested, but in the end, there many people that share these interests. It is a matter of accepting the craziness that inspires and forms part of me. Reading different interviews done to artists in this artistic movement has given me the confidence to move forward and show my peculiarity.¹⁶

¹⁴ Jordan, Matt Dukes. *Weirdo Noir: Gothic and Dark Lowbrow Art*. San Francisco (CA: Chronicle Books, 2010) 18.

¹⁵ I was introduce to the culture of custom and old cars by my dad. It is our father daughter bonding time, when we go to car shows and he starts explaining to me the models, the work and how he used to race back in the day.

¹⁶ Jordan, Matt Dukes. *Weirdo Noir: Gothic and Dark Lowbrow Art*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2010.

According to Matt Dukes Jordan, “Key element is the use of and appropriation of corny, campy, cartoony pop culture of all kind. Borrows them from underground and cheesy pop culture.”¹⁷ By researching and aspiring to form part of this movement, my illustrative work has been shifting into a union between popular imagery, in my case, the use of food labels, in Puerto Rico and insects. Leading to a new perspective and approach to social-cultural aspects in which I am not afraid anymore to contribute and express my opinions. This is what art should be allowed to do, to break the barriers of the closed-minded and visually express the truth we live and experience every day. It does not matter if they are personal or part of a community. In my opinion, imagery has the power to convey emotions and critical thinking.

The artist that Impacted my Art pieces

Inspiration and knowledge from other artists to fuel my creative process and work is something that I have studied consciously and unconsciously. There is a lot of them, but I will mention a few that have captivated me throughout the years and remain in my aspiration list. My interest in the organic line, the use of repetition and covering areas with them comes from the work of Brandon Boyd. Being the lead singer of one of my favorite bands, Incubus, I was introduced to his work by a friend. From the moment I saw it, I was captivated and wanted to create work influenced by the elegance in his linework. In his work, you can see the use of line

¹⁷ Jordan, Matt Dukes. *Weirdo Noir: Gothic and Dark Lowbrow Art*. (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2010) 12.

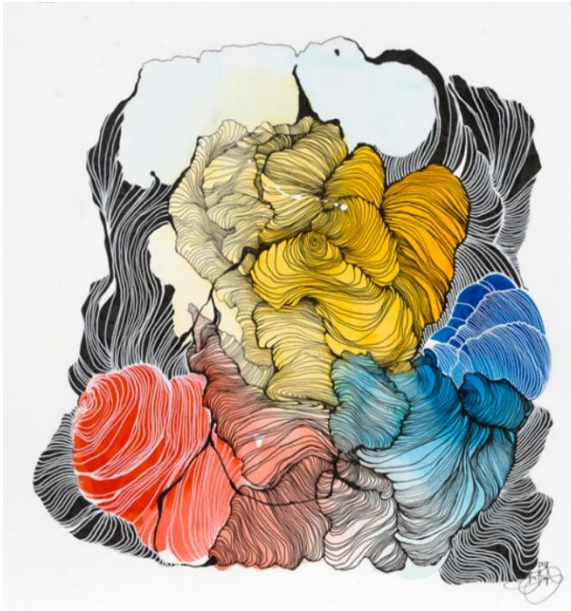


Figure 2. 1 Brandon Boyd, Remnants #6, Watercolor and Ink.

integrated with watercolor, organic forms, and including female faces and bodies interacting with these forms. (See Figure 2.1)

An artist that expresses his anxiety and depression through his work is Alex Pardee. His illustrations have inspired me to continue to create work to manifest all that I am feeling and thinking. At an early age, he was placed in a mental hospital and used art as a therapy. Just as I am using art as a mechanism of communication and expression. In his

work like mine, he is accessing the most profound areas of the artistic mind. (See Figure 2.2)

Expressing a strong sense of the interaction between humanity and nature. In the work of Simon Prades, I have found an active use of color and the constant presentation of the importance of nature and how it can consume and overpower humanity. (See Figure 2.3)

Reminding me of how I use these elements in my work to distract the viewer from the real purpose of the piece.

Patterns are a huge part of my work; in my case, I recreate the silhouette of insects, but Christopher Marley uses real insects in his work. His pieces consist mainly of the use of butterflies, dragonflies, moths, and



Figure 2. 2 Alex Pardee, Unknown, Watercolor, Ink and Digital Art

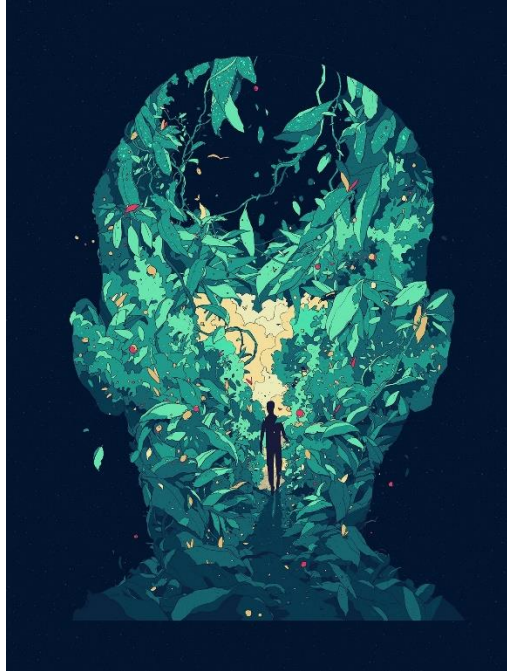


Figure 2. 3 Simon Prades, *New Scientist II*

beetles to create beautiful and elegant patterns. (See Figure 2.4) I admire his work, but in some way, I do not find the use of real insects in art amusing. I comprehend if they are part of an entomological collection that helps scientific research. The integration of bugs into my work is for the audience to find the beauty I see in them. To explore the endless possibilities to develop intricate patterns, which brings me to another artist, I admire M. C. Escher. With his intrinsic printmaking techniques creating surreal atmospheres and patterns that dwelled

into the unconscious. (See Figure 2.5) His patterns and work have inspired me to create more complex designs and to push myself further in the printmaking area. In which I am starting to develop different series involving the use of insects and abandoned places.

Through the work of Alphonse Mucha, I have found an appreciation for the integration and influenced of nature in his work. (See Figure 2.6) Inspiring a further development in my use of the human figure and its interaction with nature, and I want to achieve the same level of elegance in my work. The way Mucha



Figure 2. 4 Christopher Marley, *Catenarius Prism, Butterflies and Beetles*

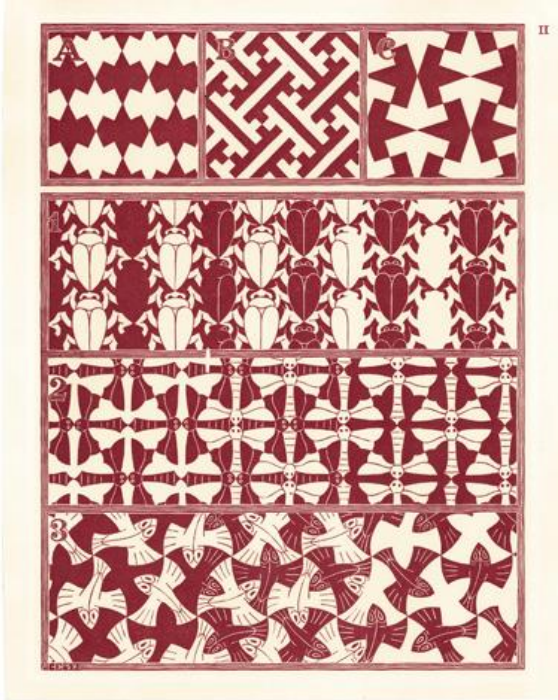


Figure 2.5 M.C. Escher, *Regular Division of the Plane II*, Woodcut, June 1957

portrays female figures as divinities and the use of lines to recreate movement in his work inspires my approach to faces and bodies in my illustrative work. Not satisfied by a beautiful approach, I looked into the work of Joel Peter Witkin in which his subject matter is the people marginalized by society. His interest in the peculiar and death helps me identify and investigate further this subject matter in which I feel at home. His approach to death helps me cope with the acceptance of this process of life; Witkin explicitly shows this through his photographs. (See

Figure 2.7) In my art pieces, I aim more for a way to camouflage the fear of death throughout the use of color, patterns, and organic elements. That unravels little by little through contemplation and examination.

The Integration of Philosophy into my Artwork

One thing that interests me is to research the origin of things, especially of words and their definitions. In this, I am looking for a philosophical approach to my artwork. Throughout my work, I talk about how repressed memories and the subconscious

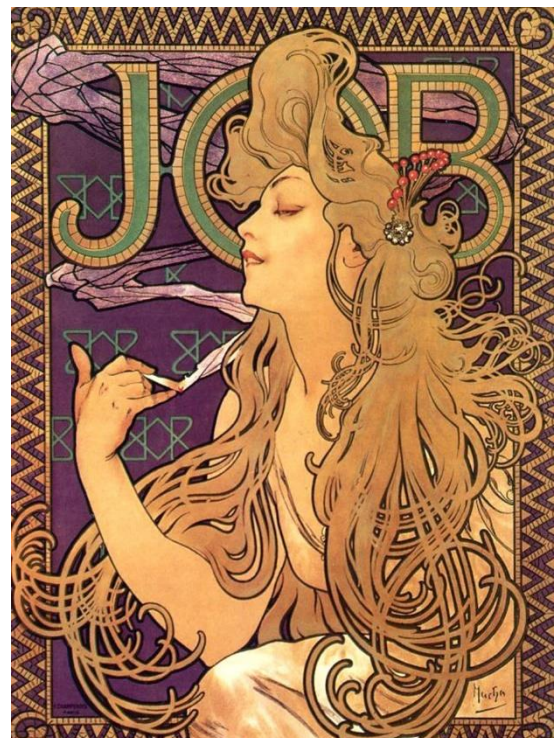


Figure 2.6 Alphonse, Mucha, *Color Lithography*, 1896



Figure 2. 7 Joel Peter Witkin, *Anna Akhmatova, Photograph, 1998, Paris*

that produce stress and anxiety start to pop up in the analysis of my creative process and the result. According to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), "... the formation of the subjects' individual psyche occurs through a consciousness of gender. However, this can bring with it feelings of anxiety, envy and fear, which are often buried in the

unconscious."¹⁸ In my case, I have restrained expressing verbally all the factors that have affected me since childhood. Now unconsciously, they are represented through my art. It is with determination and observation that I can dissect my pieces and find the significance of the color schemes, the body parts, the insects, the patterns that have transformed into an obsession. In my opinion, at first, it did not make sense that events from years ago would resurface in my work. As if they were dormant and waited for the right moment to make a comeback. According to Freud, unresolved experiences in our childhood influence our adulthood.¹⁹ In my case, it is the constant questions about my relationship with my paternal grandparents. In which I was rejected and abandoned that make me question my worth and capacity as a person. My relationship with my mother is strong. However, at the same time, her overprotectiveness and the constant reminder that I could not show or express my emotions have suffocated and restrained my true self.

¹⁸ Want, Christopher, and Piero. *Aesthetics*. (London: Icon Books, 2010) 63.

¹⁹ Want, Christopher, and Piero. *Aesthetics*. (London: Icon Books, 2010) 64.

Divided into two personalities, the one I allow people to meet and see and the one I keep hidden within me. Leading to my connection with the theory of *The Other* in which it feels as if there is a division between what I see in the mirror and what I feel. "... the other designates not simply an idea of divergency, but of an absolute difference that is, by definition, unknowable and, therefore, unrepresentable."²⁰ Within my artwork, I cannot give a proper form or explanation for my sentiments and ideas. Nevertheless, I give them the shape of insects to have a visual reference. On some occasions, it is not enough, and that is when the ink abstractions emerge, giving life to what is in my unconscious. This takes me to approach the study of the Rorschach test, which consists of the observation and analysis of inkblots. Exploring the verbal and image associations express by the viewer and revealing the most profound personality traits in a person. It is named after their creator Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922), a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, which used these tests to explore the human mind. Leading me to a close observation of the ink abstractions I create and use as background in some of my pieces. Except for *In Solitary Confinement: September 20, 2017*, where no figure or form could translate how I felt at the moment of its creation. (See Figure 4.5) Every time I sit in front of this piece, it turns into a whole new conversation, and there is no repetition or consistency only expressiveness.

²⁰ Want, Christopher, and Piero. *Aesthetics*. (London: Icon Books, 2010) 45.

CHAPTER III

GIVING LIFE TO THE UNSPOKEN

Scratching the darkest corners of my mind

It is more comfortable to search through archives full of images and start a new piece than to explain or talk about my artistic process and meaning behind every detail. I never know what my pieces are about until I finish and observe them. Austin Kleon would differ. “What a good artist should understand is that nothing comes from nothing. All creative work comes from something that existed before. Nothing is original.”²¹ In the end, my work is a mixture of my surroundings and how I deal with my problems. My artwork is the connection of mental manifestations and organic elements in search of answers that will lead to my essence as a person and artist. Isolation has become a familiar ritual in my creative process. Finding reassurance in the poem *Ghost Story* “.../What no one ever told you/ was that nothing ever dies/ not if it matters to you/ your memories keep it alive./ ...”²² When analyzing the work, bits of my past are between the shades of colors or hiding deep in the black spaces. By seeing a silhouette or form, contemplating colors, and the arrival of familiar smells take me back to those repressed memories. A wave of images bombarding my mind causing a mixture of unexplainable

²¹ Translated from Kleon, Austin. *Roba Como Un Artista: Las 10 Cosas Que Nadie Te Ha Dicho a Cerca De Ser Creativo*. (Mexico, D.F.: Aguilar, 2012) 7.

²² Gill, Nikita. *Wild Embers: Poems of rebellion, fire, and beauty*. (New York: Hachette Books, 2017) 19.

emotions, anxiety takes over. It is evolving into a repetitive element, a line, and a vibrant hue, forming a set of fragments in my compositions, creating a visual and existential addiction — leading to a series of works consuming my life. Looking for answers, I stare at the sky, waiting for a response that is when I am at peace; later on, I find myself trying to recreate this feeling through the use of color.

Overthinking causes me to look for perfectionism, that is why the selection of images is at random and develop as I progress in the piece. When taking pictures or looking for things that inspire me, I am always inclined to areas and subjects considered taboo or ignored according to my traditions. “You must contemplate the things that nobody else sees.”²³ I always found this subject matter more appealing and relatable. I have come to develop an interest in the ugly, unknown, and odd, associated with my concern and understanding of the beauty that transforms into the whole body or parts of the human body. Why? Hating my physic is one of the oldest battles I face. Trying to live up to social and family standards denying self-love. The only way I have achieve acceptance is through one body part at the time. Fascinated by the dismemberment of the human body from scientific illustrations to horror movies. The contemplation and beauty of the figure as a whole is impressive, but as parts, it is a new level of appreciation. It is also a more natural way to relate to the body when it does not have a face or a unique characteristic. In some pieces, iconic bodies are used, representing the yearning to be like that. However, using my own body is my method of accepting myself as I am. Fueled by the fear of rejection and abandonment, the thought of self-hatred, remembering the forgotten in the form of written messages and ink abstractions that manifest as a repetition of figures and lines that serves as a

²³ Translated from Kleon, Austin. *Roba Como Un Artista: Las 10 Cosas Que Nadie Te Ha Dicho a Cerca De Ser Creativo*. (Mexico, D.F.: Aguilar, 2012) 80.

coping mechanism. However, it produces stress when contemplation gets complex, or it is too simple. I never seem to understand them entirely relating to Nikita Gill's verse in *Dark Matter*:

“... The answer lies in that 80 percent
of your heart, you have not yet channeled.
There are stars glittering inside you
that have never been handled.
This, the dark matter of you
hides an immeasurable amount of strength
and an impossible amount of energy.”²⁴

To create art is my way of channeling this “dark matter.” Speaking about it has never been an option, I was taught to be reliable, independent, and fight my own battles. The glittering stars shift and transform into a series of patterns composed of insects apprehended by organic lines, similar to a whip to establish dominance and order in the sanity within my insanity. Creating a world of my own and escaping to it.²⁵ Searching and looking through piles of images, then picking the ones appealing at the moment, and my mind starts to develop a composition as I go. Establishing silent conversations between my materials and my mind accompanied by the solitude contained in my studio.

Artistic Methodology

Working in layers, because it is a way to protect and create an atmosphere in the artwork. To establish a barrier between the viewer and the piece similar to the placement of emotional and psychological barriers for self-defense in which there is no explanation. They are

²⁴ Gill, Nikita. *Wild Embers: Poems of rebellion, fire, and beauty*. (New York: Hachette Books, 2017) 8.

²⁵ Translated from Kleon, Austin. *Roba Como Un Artista: Las 10 Cosas Que Nadie Te Ha Dicho a Cerca De Ser Creativo*. (Mexico, D.F.: Aguilar, 2012) 90.

here to stay and contain every story, going through them in order to understand the origin of everything. From the most superficial to the most shocking, the inner layer is the most secretive, always portrayed black, creating an appealing contrast with vibrant colors. My artwork welcomes the viewer with a colorful composition containing black areas or hidden messages in the background. Why are these parts like this or ink abstractions it is because of the struggle to get out of the darkness that feels welcoming.

There is no specific way to control ink, using different instruments help create something but, in the end, it takes its own path. When the ink merges or fights with water, it translates into a conversation with the subconscious. Where can I see things once forgotten or ignored, what can be seen? Broken branches, nerves, veins, tears, dead people, and the streaks that cover my face. I see and hear how they scream, but all I can do is cover my ears. Mom, why do you scream so much? What did I do wrong this time? I know you are trying to make me into an independent girl, but why so much discipline? I have neglected the truth for so long that silence became a norm. This comforting and welcoming place has turned to a lump in my shoulders. The silence is like a virus consuming everything. Now it feels like a fist in my throat, an endless ringing in my ears and a burning sensation in my eyes. While my body shakes and turns, trying to hold my voice within, whatever happens, I must not raise my voice. It feels as if the black smears are the chains that contain me in place. I hear her telling me a story and calling to me, and she is crying for help placing her hands in her mouth because she has to be strong and not show weakness. Behind the figures, patterns, and black areas, she waits. Extending my hand into this familiar pool of ink, I have found myself.

Contrasting black and greys with the use of vibrant colors become a diversion that hides insecurities and prejudice, followed by a tribute to the hues in Puerto Rico's landscapes.

Yearning to return to the culture I took for granted. In my perception, earthly and dry tones prevail in the Rio Grande Valley; it feels as if the color in my life has been weakened by the sun and ripped away. By keeping photographs from Puerto Rico, I counter-attack this outsider feeling. Nostalgia is a constant feeling that pours into the use of color in my artwork to remember and be closer to home. The primary medium used to apply color is watercolor, which has developed into my connection and interaction with different bodies of water back home. This technique was the most difficult for me to use, but its transparency and multiple possibilities made me push it forward and develop a love-hate relationship with this medium. A cold color palette dominates my work, expressing my constant search for the blue sky and sea, where I lose track of time immersed in my thoughts. Blues and greens also are a reminder of how I would stare out my window when a fight emerged in my house. I would stare into the endless blue until the noise faded into nothing, I have forgotten most of this; all I remember is the transition from colors into black. Sometimes I try to remember parts of my childhood, but all I can see is darkness. Like part of Rojas's poem, *Natural Lighting*, "... pero la luz no impide/ cerrar los ojos/ desaparecer horas/ anular los movimientos."²⁶ It all makes sense now; these are the times I slept to ignore the fighting, screaming, and slept through depression.²⁷

Creating patterns started as a small project for a design course during the last semesters of my bachelor's degree. (See Figure 3.1) It consisted of the repetition of a



Figure 3. 1 *Tendrillar pteridofitas*, Ink, 2016, 8in. X 11in.

²⁶ Rojas, Laura. *Crujir Insecto*. (Puerto Rico: Ediciones Alayubia, 2019) 53.

²⁷ This is how I would spend days under my maternal grandmothers' care, she would overdose in medication and sleep the majority of the day. My only way to create a connection and pass time with my grandma was by sleeping next to her.

form using the silhouette of a leaf to create a pattern. The result was incredibly soothing, relaxing, and challenging. The control of my anxiety and stress develop through the creation of a design with insects representing each of my emotions, thoughts, and fears. Entering a hypnotic mental state that turned into a therapeutic mechanism to control my anxiety. However, the patterns keep getting more complicated interlocking with each other recreating other forms like flowers, chains, among others. There are no specific requirements when selecting colors or insects. I pick the one that appeals to my emotional and psychological state. Repeating its form until there is no more space in the piece of paper. Using insects as a method to explain and present visually, my voice and the sadness caged within. I cannot verbally express how I feel and how it affects me. The only way I can understand this is to compare it to the fear of embracing or holding an insect. The patterns remedy started to lose its effect; it helped me confront and face the truth, but I could not concentrate, leading to a trail of negative thoughts. Each bug is a repetition that becomes an addiction and full-on concentration on a new piece. It also has the side effect of feeling isolated and sad; this is when I lose the motivation to create artwork. These insects are my way of challenging and saving myself, leading to the production of a series of works containing in their format all my secrets.

CHAPTER IV

SHATTERING TACITURNITY

Eventually, everything deserves an explanation

Shattering Taciturnity emerged from looking for definitions of random words I associated with silence and my artwork. Shatter is a word that expresses the strength of breaking boundaries without leaving a trace, in my opinion. I had never heard of the word taciturn it appeared as a synonym of silence. A taciturn is a person that keeps quiet and does not say much, everything I am. By uniting both words, I achieved empowerment and acceptance through my Master's in Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition and explaining everything in my dissertation.

Some artists do multiple sketches before they start the official piece; for me, it depends on the mood. My creation method is different and peculiar, reading an interview done to Tara McPherson, filled me with hope. She expressed the following "... I sometimes try to not question why right away. I like to let it all flow out, swirl around, and see what happens. Then afterward, I can try to find the reasons behind my inclinations."²⁸ It is difficult to explain the

²⁸ Jordan, Matt Dukes. *Weirdo Noir: Gothic and Dark Lowbrow Art*. San Francisco (CA: Chronicle Books, 2010) 122



Figure 4. 1 *Kaleidoscopic Corpse*, Colored Pencil, Ink and Watercolor, 2017, 18in.X24in.

bodies are claimed by nature before they are identified? I have always wondered about it, ever since I saw a body on the side of the road covered with a blank sheet. How I would always hear in the news the finding of an unidentifiable body. Creativity and curiosity merge into the peculiarity that inspires my artwork. It is pleasing to observe and analyze dismemberment and anomalies in the human body.²⁹To capture the audience with a kaleidoscopic³⁰ background composed of butterfly silhouettes leading to the grey figure whose face is unknown due to nature's consumption is the intention.³¹ (See Figure 4.1) Reclaimed by nature and substituted by organic organisms a reflection of how I feel when I am stressed and anxious. It feels as if my head is filled with different vines and roots, creating linear patterns waiting to sprout. By observing and researching flora, many plants resemble organs and

the purpose behind each piece; some of them have an aesthetic function and others with observation and analysis; I can determine the source of their inspiration and connotation.

Kaleidoscopic Corpse

Ever wondered how many dead



Figure 4. 2 *Hydenellum peckii* commonly known as Devils Tooth Mushroom

²⁹ Inspired by researching and observing different images in books I have about Human Anatomy and Surgery and the Mütter Museum.

³⁰ Term use to refer to a group of butterflies.

³¹ Faceless bodies are an homage to the dead bodies that have never been found and become nutrients to their resting grounds.



Figure 4. 3 *Manduca quinquemaculate*, commonly known as the Tomato Hornworm

functions like the human body. For example, the Devil Tooth Mushroom,(See Figure 4.2) which contains an appearance similar to drops of blood. That is one of the reasons I like to unite corpses with nature due to their similarities, interactions, and influences among each other. By using a grey tone on the body, it expresses the absence of

life and the rejection of the things that lack color. I wonder how many died there.³²

Manduca Feminine Host

There is always something we hate. In my case, it is myself. When observing this piece, the first noticeable aspect is the dramatically curved warm-colored worm³³. (See Figure 4.3) Intriguing, the viewers with curiosity to take a closer look and discover the host, a female body that contains no identity and my ideal body. (See Figure 4.4) A representation of hatred towards my physic, the use of a worm is how I came upon a news article about the consumption of tapeworm pills. In which a worm grows and lays eggs in you and eats the extra calories consumed in theory. Similar to how my negative thoughts consume my



Figure 4. 4 *Manduca Feminine Host*, Ink and Watercolor, 2017, 24in.X18in.

³² Whenever I integrate these insects into my work, it reminds me of how my mother would always tell me that the presence of a black butterfly in our garden meant that Death was coming.
³³ Inspired by the *Manduca quinquemaculata* commonly known as the Tomato Hornworm

positivity. However, this is not an essential part of the piece; in the background, words emerge from the shadows, which resemble my darkest matter. It is an unreadable and unexplained letter. Written in Spanish, because it is my first language. This letter is full of hate; I refer to myself as an ugly pig that does not deserve to live, among others. It has a mirrored effect³⁴ to confuse the viewer so that I am the only one that knows its true meaning. Bullied in school for being fat; in college, I avoided my reflection at all times; I always looked at the ground. Now it depends; some days, I love what I see, and other days I evade the mirror once more.



Figure 4. 5 In Solitary Confinement: September 20, 2017, Ink, 2017-18, 26in.X55in.

In Solitary Confinement: September 20, 2017

September 20, 2017, a date that Puerto Ricans will never forget, and I will remember every time I observe this piece. (See Figure 4.5) Category five hurricane Maria hit the island, making my biggest fear come true; a natural disaster happened. My family was separated, and I could not do anything. Losing all types of communication, I became an empty vessel that functioned under commands and let the ink seep into my life. This art piece is the perfect abstract

³⁴ Inspired by how Leonardo Da Vinci applied this technique to his notes in fear that someone would steal his research.

example of having zero control over my fears and anxiety. What did I do? I decided to paint and express what I was experiencing at the moment t became my escape, and the only thing that could take my sadness and loneliness away. While maintaining a straight face and a positive attitude while the semester and work continued; however, my hands trembled like an addict; I needed my drug. Painting and drawing did not work; nothing did.

I could not create figures. My breath became my tool; the ink did not want dominance or influence. I blew on it as the winds blew during the hurricane, transforming the black ink into an abstract landscape of incomprehension and hope. With every breath, I would transfer to the paper the weight over my shoulders. I was transforming into a mess of thoughts and emotions waiting to burst like splatters of black ink wild and free, creating inexistent images. Every day I would call my family with the hopes of hearing their voices once more. When I finally got to speak to them, holding back tears and feelings because I was the primary connection between all of us. My mom reminded me every time that I had to be strong. Everyone has different opinions and stories, just like the ones that experienced Maria on the Island and those that felt useless overseas. Whenever I look at this piece, everything changes. A new dialogue is formed and transforms into something completely different, which is what I love about this piece and makes me want to have endless conversations.

Periplaneta Blossom

There is always a subtle beauty within darkness and tragedy, just like Edgar Allan Poe's writings. Destruction is over, yet the recovery seems more brutal than the force of nature. In the aftermath of



Figure 4. 6 Periplaneta Blossom, ink and Watercolor, 2017, 18in.X24in.



Figure 4. 7 *Euphoria pulcherrima* commonly known as *Poinsettia*

Hurricane Maria, communication was somewhat ok. However, one element was similar in all the conversations. Cockroaches were everywhere, no matter how much they cleaned. Within this disgusting creature, we can find beauty if we look hard. It is within my human nature to look for the beauty in the

abnormal. I decided to create a pattern using the silhouette of our little foe. (See Figure 4.6) This pattern turned into a reference to the “Flor de Pascua”³⁵ (See Figure 4.7), a plant I see during Christmas in each household. They are reminding me of how close I was to see my family once again.

Thinking of Shrews³⁶

Musarañas³⁷ is the vast mass exploding from the female’s headless³⁸ body. (See Figure 4.8) For me, it signifies anything that I am thinking of — spacing out into the nothingness. As a result of these infinite travels, I find inspiration for new pieces. I am representing thinking outside the box and how my ideas would explode if I do not get them on paper. The silhouette of my body inspiring the female figure is the



Figure 4. 8 *Thinking of Shrews*, Ink, Spray Paint and Watercolor, 2018, 55in.X37in.

³⁵ Which is the Poinsettia commonly known as the Christmas Eve Flower, in Spanish it is also called Flor de Nochebuena.

³⁶ Here I am not referring to mouse like mammal, but to the Puerto Rican slag version I grew up with.

³⁷ When I would space out my mom or teachers would always tell me “Deja de pensar en musarañas” it is the Puerto Rican way of to stop thinking about nonsense.

³⁸ The body does not have a face because it can be anyone’s body and how we do not perceive ourselves like others do and our mind distorts our reality making us feel guilty of what we are observing.

start of the acceptance of my body without feeling embarrassment or shame. The beetles³⁹ interacting with the body are physical representations of the chain of events that leads me to hate my body. How holding everything inside has consumed and hurt me throughout my life. There



Figure 4. 9 *To the Newlyweds*, Ink and Watercolor, 2018, 11in.X11in.

are things I will never be able to confront or talk to the persons because they are dead. Even so, I try to think outside the box; everything is contained and held prisoner within the picture frame. Exposing myself to criticism and judgment while facing my worst enemy; me.

To the Newlyweds

This image came to life when I was looking at a wedding book.⁴⁰ The use of skulls as flowers is a way to express the yearning of having a bouquet like this. (See Figure 4.9) One should treat themselves to some floral beauties and not wait for them. There is no profound interpretation or understanding of this piece; it is a representation of my dark humor. This piece contains many layers, representing the barriers I put up to prevent people from hurting me or getting to know me entirely. I have always hidden many things for fear of rejection and abandonment. The grey background is another way to show the debts within the human heart and mind are better left alone. These are the most secluded and fragile areas in my work and my persona. This piece helped me remind myself why I enjoy art and make it. It is valid to create artwork that pleases me, that lets me explore my interests and accept them even if they

³⁹ Because the first insect I held in my hand was a beetle, I was inspired by its beauty and decided to start integrating it into my artwork.

⁴⁰ I am not getting married I was just looking at the floral arrangements.



Figure 4. 10 *Social Stigmatization Indigestion*, Graphite and Ink, 2019. 20in.X16in.

are considered twisted or strange. It is time to look in the mirror and say it is okay to be who I am meant to be.

Social Stigmatization Indigestion

Another attempt to manage the use of ink and my life. However, it does not matter how much I try some things will always get out of my reach and find their course in my life. It is the beginning of a new series that will consist of the interaction of the human body with an explosion of ink representing the effect of being silent.

How it explodes into an abstract black mass representing everything withheld and silenced. The dark mass feels like it has a life of its own; you cannot tell if it is pulling or pushing away the mutilated female body. (See Figure 4.10) Affected by those that surround me and the prevailing trends and standards in social media. I am always looking for acceptance from others that I tend to forget that the opinion that matters is mine.⁴¹

I do not Know

I do not know why she came to be. When creating a figure or portrait illustrations, the primary influence is the artist Alphonse Mucha and the Art Nouveau movement. The person represented can be anyone related to or unrelated to the viewer. A blank gaze is always present in my portraits because it reminds me of my childhood best friends' eyes,



Figure 4. 11 *I do not Know*, Ink, 2019, 17in.X11in.

⁴¹ I learn to surpass this way of thinking through psychological treatment.

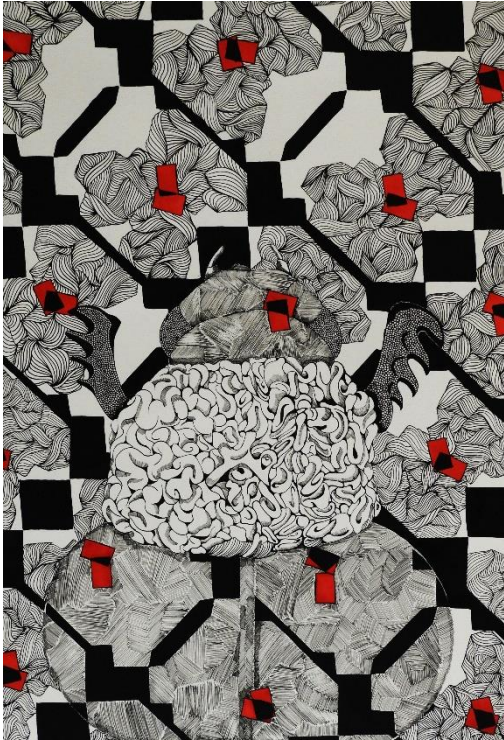


Figure 4. 12 *Linear Manifestations, Ink and Watercolor, 2019, 30in.X22in.*

how she is losing her eyesight. (See Figure 4.11) A condition that has been passed down to every female in her family. In my opinion, more enigmas, more profound meanings are preserved in the whiteness of the eyes. The presence of the centipede is the highlight of my fears and insecurities, which are always in the foreground or prominent in my artistic world. This arthropod is the only insect I cannot bring myself to stare more than necessary less touch it. I sometimes worry that if I overcome them, my artwork will never be the same, which brings me to question my sanity within my insanity. I should not deny

the change and evolution of my artwork because I will be holding myself back. All I want to do is move forward.

Linear Manifestations

Most of the time, I make patterns around parts or a whole human figure. Interested in origami insects, the art faculty advised using the technique differently. The result of this was the use of the origami shape of insects to create a geometric pattern. (See Figure 4.12) However, in this piece, you will find a series of organic lines encasing these sharp forms because I need to have a sense of flow and control in my work. This piece reminded me of the “losa criolla” in Puerto Rico (See Figure 4.13), a type of tile found in homes that created a series of



Figure 4. 13 *Example of the pattern in the “Losa Criolla” in Puerto Rico*



Figure 4. 14 Morton Salt Girl redesigned in 2014

patterns.⁴² It is the beginning of a new series recreating these tiles but using insects and flora found in Puerto Rico. Besides the development of the pattern, the main subject is a beetle composed of straight lines, inspired by the human brain and graffiti used to create the thorax.⁴³ A combination that I plan to keep exploring in my artwork. This piece does not have a meaning. It is just a union between a geometric and organic perspective in my work.

Phases of Stress, Anxiety, Loneliness, etc.

In this collection, the main subject is the reinterpretations of the *Morton Salt Girl*. (See Figure 4.14) It is a brand of salt that my mother would use from time to time. I was attracted to the simplicity and beauty of this illustration. Not complacent with the image, I did not know why, but I wanted to maintain her sweetness but combine it with peculiarity. In this series, a red splatter descends into the girl's headless body while she tenderly carries her head under her arm. Under her head, there is a trail of petals similar to drops of blood guiding the eye to the semicolon under her feet that refers to the continuation of this image and its story. (See



Figure 4. 15 Phases of Stress, Anxiety, Loneliness, etc, Screenprint, 2019, 15in.X11in.

Figure 4.15) Related to stress, anxiety, depression, and

⁴² Wilder, Lundy P. "Puerto Rican Cement Tile." *Cement Style*, July 30, 2015. Accessed November 22, 2019. <https://www.villalagoontile.com/blog/puerto-rican-cement-tile/>. Also known as creole tile or "losa isleño" (island tile) these type of tiles were introduced in the 1900's from Barcelona, Spain.

⁴³ When creating this piece, I was listening to the documentary *Obey Giant* which talks about the artistic development of Shepard Fairey.



Figure 4. 16 Logo of the Puerto Rican brand *Tres Monjitas*

loneliness produced by homesickness, self-hatred, and doubt, and demanding too much from myself when producing artwork. This piece helps me analyze and think back on all the obstacles I have overcome and where I am now.

One Sermon and Two Rosaries

I was inspired by the reimaging of a milk brand called *Las Tres Monjitas*. (See Figure 4.16) This work emerged when I was learning and researching about the Lowbrow and Juxtapose art movements. Since I had always struggled with weight problems, I decided to collect Puerto Rican food labels. Considering that I do not create artwork that highlights my culture, this is a way for me to approach and reconnect with my roots. The logo is composed of three nuns, so I thought about how I could make them look creepy by giving them bug faces. The roses in the background are more of a decoration, but it is also inspired by a rosary that my mom had that smelled like roses and had metal roses instead of beads. (See Figure 4.17) I have never been a fan of nuns or of how my grandparents used to force me to go to church, which I associate with judgment and labeling. The name comes from when people would meet me and give me a sermon for wearing black clothes, spikes and skulls like in *Steal Like an Artist*, “People will judge

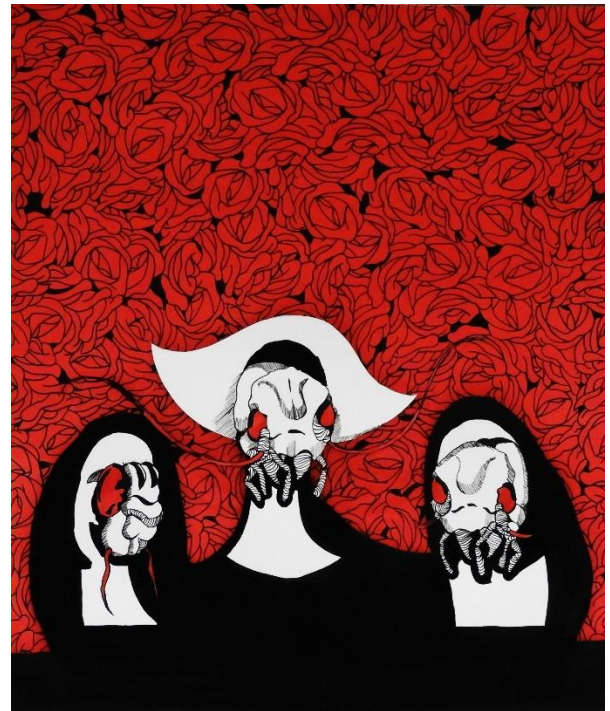


Figure 4. 17 *One Sermon and Two Rosaries*, Ink and Watercolor, 2019, 20in.X16in.



Figure 4. 18 *Danger! Girl Thinking*, Ink, Spray Paint and Watercolor, 2019, 23in.X23in.

you and your work.”⁴⁴ Two rosaries come from the time I confessed to the father during my first communion that I wanted to commit suicide. He told me to go and pray, Our Father and the Hail Mary, to solve my problems. I thought I had forgotten about all of this, but this image made me remember and relive the imposition of Catholicism in my childhood by my grandparents.

Danger! Girl Thinking

A female figure that remained lost for almost a year without a composition in my studio; here, the blank stare is present once again. This time, the female figure is submerged and lost in her thoughts. A series of beetles concealing or freeing her from whatever she is thinking. (See Figure 4.17) It is a self-reflection of when I always look at the sky, synchronizing my breath with the wind, canceling all sound, and holding back my tears. I compare the chain of beetles to how people used me when they wanted something; they were my friends and then became distant. In order to free and express myself, I need to break away from these rusty chains. However, when my perspective is different from others, I am categorized as a danger or freak to others. Through the visual arts, I have found my method of expression and learned to not care about what others think or label me as.

⁴⁴ Translated from Kleon, Austin. *Roba Como Un Artista: Las 10 Cosas Que Nadie Te Ha Dicho a Cerca De Ser Creativo*. (Mexico, D.F.: Aguilar, 2012) 112.

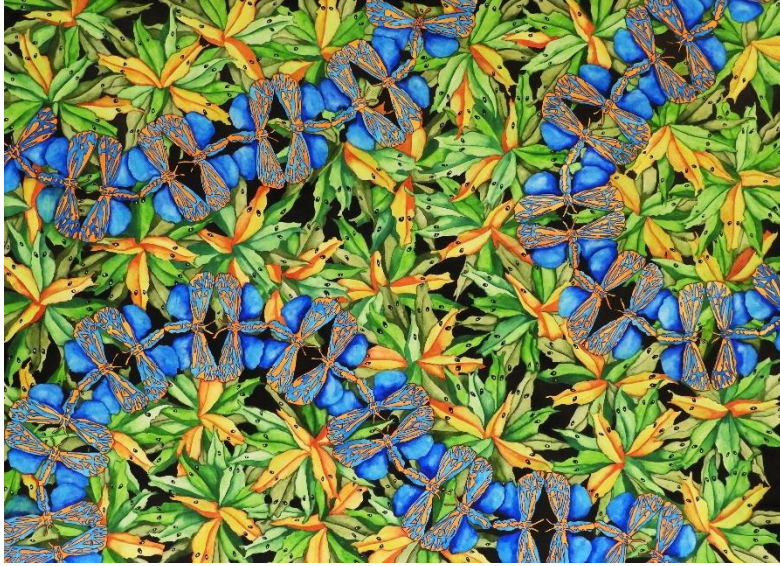


Figure 4. 19 *Entomological Drugs, Ink and Watercolor, 2019, 22in.X30in.*

Entomological Drugs

My favorite piece in my exhibition due to its complexity and color scheme. The use of blues and greens is a reference to the combination of the flora and the sky, and bodies of water hues in Puerto Rico. (See Figure 4.19)

In my opinion, everyone has a vice; whether it is good or bad, mine is creating patterns that cure and produce my anxiety. In this composition, the *Papilio phorcas* pupae (See Figure 4.20) plays a camouflaging role in the background. I am intrigued by the cocoon's resemblance to a leaf and how to break with its static representation by merging and giving life to something new. The other element you will find is the chain of blue and orange moths swarming through the composition, creating an aesthetical contrast, and guiding the viewer's eye. The black spaces in the background are a reference to my secrets and the loneliest moments that I do not talk or express. Somethings are best left alone. This piece is just aesthetically pleasing, and it does not require a deeper meaning, that is what this piece means to me. This piece was a way to challenge my stress, anxiety, and push my limitations even further. During the period of



Figure 4. 20 *Papilio phorcas* pupae of the apple-green swallowtail butterfly



Figure 4. 21 *The Cool One*, Screenprint, 2019, 13in.X13in.

its creation was when silence took over every room, disrupted the notion of time, and a sense of calmness took over my body.

The Cool One

Originally the purpose of this image was to be related to politics, but at the last minute, I changed the concept.⁴⁵ Here is a gentleman with a beetle's head

walking with his flow to who knows where. (See Figure

4.21) I gave him a beetle's head because I was thinking about how much shit humanity talks and how they live in it too. His apron is stained red, showing part of his belly, expressing my disgust towards those in power. How they have influenced and encourage hatred towards each other, the imposition of ideals, the oppression on the weak, tired, and defenseless has developed throughout the last years in our society. It also reflects the freedom I find to express all of this in this type of art. Which is a theme I am willing to explore further through my work and to help me find my voice fight social-cultural injustice.

Memories between Bones

The biggest and most shocking piece for its size and heavy use of the color red. The one I hate the most. Since the start of its creation, it shifted and altered my emotions from being excited, intrigued to anger, and to cry. No other artwork has produced such effect and reaction in me. The heavy use of red is the rage I held for years within. (See Figure 4.22) The things I never

⁴⁵ In order to create a political piece, I need to submerge and educate myself in the topic to make a strong statement.



Figure 4. 22 *Memories Between Bones, Ink, Spray paint and Watercolor, 2019, 50in.X55in.*

spoke of, the strong desire to punch a wall until my hand would bleed, and endless thoughts of self-harm.

Nevertheless, this piece of paper took it all for me. Deciding on how to approach the drawing was a matter of bravery, facing reality and the damage within me. Someone always says's

“sticks and stones may break my bones, but words shatter my soul” well, I agree. Inscribe in my bones is the rejection and abandonment from my paternal grandparents. One may think it is not a big deal, but I will always ask myself what I did wrong? Why was I not good enough for them? That is why two faces are resembling them. The sources of myself hatred and doubt questioning my worth, my fear of loneliness is thanks to them.

Moreover, I will not be able to express myself verbally adequately. I rather avoid conflict and suffer in silence, which is “... a monstrous noise.”⁴⁶ The centipede is the creature I fear most, which has turned into a visual representation of everything I am and conceal. Holding everything together and not complaining was part of my upbringing; nevertheless, my artwork takes everything I throw at it. Even with the framing, you can feel the immense weight of it. It is

⁴⁶ Curtis, Emily. *In the absence of the Sun.* (Emily Curtis, 2017) 47.



Figure 4. 23 *Weirdo at Full Capacity*, Ink, Spray Paint and Watercolor, 2019, 22in.X30in.

as if my emotional and psychological weight is transferred to this piece. Getting rid of it is one option; another is to let it be someone else's interpretation or let it burn along with my hatred. I do not know the fate of this piece, but somehow it is starting to grow in me.

Weirdo at Full Capacity

The last piece created for my Masters in Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition, entirely exposing myself to an unknown crowd. My first intentional self-portrait surrounded by ladybug silhouettes⁴⁷. (See Figure 4.23) Expressing how I felt the stress and anxiety of the exhibition piling up on my shoulders. How I have overcome many struggles to understand and accept who I am. A weirdo that is always fighting against the crowds and making her path and embracing my oddness. Bullied in school and by my paternal family members for being different and not following social standards, I was labeled as an *anormal*⁴⁸. That the reason for the repetition and strong presence of the word in the background. Legible, in comparison to my other piece, expressing the acceptance of who I am. My facial expression is as if I do not care or that I have something in mind. The truth is that when confronted with loneliness, my thoughts wander into the past, and depression takes over. In which I find solace in one of Lang Leav's prose "...The

⁴⁷ Fun Fact: The colors for the silhouettes are inspired in cherry and blueberry flavor Jolly Ranchers.

⁴⁸ It is a depictive word use against those that are different or considered weird.

events up until the present that had seemed of no particular significance, now imbued with a deeper, darker meaning.”⁴⁹ That is why the background has a dramatic transition between dark and light, I can overcome many things, but my mind can be the most unsafe and unstable place. However, it will not keep me from progressing in life and accepting myself. This piece is my way of closing a chapter in my life.

What was the reaction?

“You are encouraged to be different.”⁵⁰ that is the main message. I want to transmit confidence to my audience and show the beauty within the most peculiar areas of the human mind and emotions. The audience during the reception mainly responded to the selection and use of color. It is a beautiful visual experience, and for me is the yearning to return to the origin of all those hues and how I manage to bring Puerto Rico to the Rio Grande Valley. One of the funniest reactions I have received about my work was from a student. Asking what drug I was on when I did *Entomological Drugs* because it reminded him of getting high. I just laughed with him and told him, “It is all-natural; I do not consume anything.”⁵¹

The audience was commenting and talking among themselves. It seemed as if they were conversing with the artwork and waiting for it to spill its secrets or tell them its true meaning. One person found it hardworking and beautifully executed. A little morbid for her taste, this comment made laugh because it meant I had achieved my goal.

A reaction that I will not forget is how a professor came to the gallery excited to be able to see the exhibition. Before he left the gallery, he asked me if I was the artist and congratulated

⁴⁹ Leav, Lang. *Sea of Strangers: Poetry and Prose*. (Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2018) 63.

⁵⁰ Curtis, Emily. *In the absence of the Sun*. (Emily Curtis, 2017) 81.

⁵¹ For some awkward reason people assume I consume drugs when they see my work, it is just the effect of the Tropical Flow of Puerto Rico in me.

me on the work while he was wiping away some tears. He said that *Phases of Stress, Anxiety, Loneliness, etc.* created an emotional reaction in him. He felt something stir within him and started to cry because that is the reality we live, and we do not express it because of the fear of being seen as weak. This person does not know how his words have impacted me. I never thought that one of my pieces could produce such a strong reaction in a person. This reaction gave me more confidence in my work, to continue this path, and create work that pleases and expresses who I am.

What did I find?

I found myself, learned that it is ok to be awkward, to accept my flaws, and that rejection is not my fault. Finding self-forgiveness through my artwork, somethings I will never talk about, but most certainly use them in my art. Keeping some monsters in the dark, but within this dark matter, I have found the strength to move on. “Don’ let them tell you that your pain should be confined to the past, that it bears no relevance to the present. Your pain is part of who you are./ They don’t know how strong that makes you.”⁵² Silence is a part of me. Now I transform it into artwork. There will always be a conversation between my pieces and the understanding of who I am.

Now I can go into the artistic world and industry to compete among the artist I looked up to. This exhibition may be the last one of my Master’s Degree but is undoubtedly the first of many more. I remembered why art is essential; it is not a hobby as others view it; it is my way of life. It has transformed me into a better artist and person. Something I wish to tell the audience and remind myself is

⁵² Leav, Lang. *Sea of Strangers: Poetry and Prose*. (Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2018) 51.

“...Never let anyone
tell you that it was easy
for you have the fire
the storms, the oceans
of strength
to speak your mind
that you have today.”⁵³

It is a matter of time, before I create a name for myself, and everyone will learn where I come from and how obstacles made me stronger.

⁵³ Gill, Nikita. *Wild Embers: Poems of rebellion, fire, and beauty*. (New York: Hachette Books, 2017) 87.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

What awaits beyond the classroom?

My path now leads to educating, sharing, and expanding my knowledge within the Fine Arts, especially drawing and printmaking in different educational levels and communities. To learn from them, their interpretations, their approach, and the use of the visual arts as a method of healing and communication. Establishing a cultural relationship and finding a way to empower the oppressed and silenced. I plan to keep applying and finding a way to share my artwork with the people. If they cannot come to see my work, I will make sure they get to see and experience it. Applying to residencies is also at the top of my list. I want to be able to see how different spaces influence my work and how I can give back to the community that is willing to accept me as a resident.

To establish artistic aid to those like me that struggled to find a way to pursue their dreams or to study art. To give back what I lacked as an emerging artist. To achieve great things with traditional mediums that will make the audience question if the piece is done by hand or through a computer program, to emphasize the fundamentals of art in this technological era. My contribution is expressing through my artwork, my vulnerability, and humanity, my perspective, and interpretation of how criticism and rejection have influenced made into the artist I am.



Figure 5. 1 *El Farito, Guayanilla-Puerto Rico, Screenprint, 2019, 11in.X15in.*

Future Series

Food labels will keep impacting my work. I have been selecting brands that remind me of my childhood and that are hard to come by nowadays. Reinventing and morphing these labels with insects, creating my brand and world where everyone is equally peculiar. That will relate and reflect different emotional

states and how these manifest visually, to give life to the unspoken, and to break the barriers of body shaming.

Another is a series of multiple color screenprints depicting abandon places in Puerto Rico. Every time I return home, and I take pictures of different areas that form part of my childhood or become a new memory. However, in the selection of these images, I want to express kenopsia⁵⁴ in the selection of hues and a high contrasted image. Sometimes I try to remember how these places looked back in the day and wonder about all the stories they contain within their walls. This series gives me the liberty to recreate these spaces and give them a new meaning, trying to recreate my feelings when I am home. (See Figure 5.1)

I considered myself a Puerto Rican artist that does not have cultural imagery in her work. I decided to start learning and educating myself more about my culture. Creating two series that will involve these studies, one will be the recreation of the “losa criolla” with silhouettes of

⁵⁴ “Home.” Kenopsia. Accessed December 1, 2019. <http://www.kenopsia.com/>. Refers to places usually swarming with people that have been abandoned.



Figure 5. 2 Photo of the Vejigante mask and attire at the Vejigante Festival celebrated in Ponce, Puerto Rico.

insects and the flora found in Puerto Rico. This project will be challenging because it will have a more geometric approach and the use of solid colors in my work. The other project will involve the “Vejigante’s” mask⁵⁵ (See Figure 5.2), replacing the demon

characteristics with different insect parts. The use of colors that express their uniqueness and how they camouflage in nature. It resulted when I was thinking about assigning every fear and insecurity an insect to represent them. Maybe this will turn into a series itself.

In the end, it does not matter how much I write and try to explain my work; no one will truly grasp its meaning. Everyone has a perspective and interpretation of art different from the artist's explanation. It is like Nikita Gill’s poem My Monsters

“ I had hoped one day to find someone
who loves my monsters,
the wolves that I feed,
the demons I sing to sleep
the tiger that is my caged heart
the parts of me I do not talk about
I prayed and wished and yearned

⁵⁵ It is a mask representing the Moors that were defeated lead by St. James. To honor this event people, dress as demons with these masks to celebrate festivals, processions and the influence of Puerto Rican folklore which includes the taino and African traditions, specially their music. Grupo Editorial EPRL. “Las Máscaras Puertorriqueñas.” Enciclopedia PR. Accessed December 2, 2019. <https://enciclopediapr.org/encyclopedia/las-mascaras-puertorriquenas/>.

until I realized that I had already found her
within me.”⁵⁶

The only person that will truly understand and accept myself is me through my artwork, my self-acceptance, my growth by taking care of myself. I am allowed to be me and be peculiar, weird, and abnormal. That is who I am.

⁵⁶ Gill, Nikita. *Wild Embers: Poems of rebellion, fire, and beauty*. (New York: Hachette Books, 2017) 141.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jesmil M. Maldonado Rodriguez was born and raised in Guayanilla, Puerto Rico. She pursued her bachelor's degree in Arts at The University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez. Maldonado-Rodriguez received her degree with honors in June 2016. She embarked on her journey in January 2017 to acquire a Master's in Fine Arts. Maldonado – Rodriguez pursued her degree at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley with a concentration in two-dimensional work and two minors, one in design and the other in three-dimensional work. She earned her Master's in Fine Arts in 2D Studio Art in December 2019.

During the Fall 2019 semester, she worked as a teaching assistant for The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley instructing basic Printmaking courses under the guidance of Professor Reynaldo Santiago. In which she established priority in the learning process, understanding, and the outcome in the student's artworks. Within the UTRGV – School of Art Maldonado-Rodriguez has also worked as a graduate gallery assistant from since the summer of 2017 until the summer of 2019 under the supervision of Professor Maria Elena Macias, learning the handle and care of the School of Art permanent art collection, the installation, and de-installation of exhibitions of local and international artists and the maintenance of the galleries.

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