

5-2009

Visual Cultural Identity in South Texas Art and Design

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VISUAL CULTURAL IDENTITY IN SOUTH TEXAS

ART AND DESIGN

A THESIS

by

MIRLA GONZALEZ DE MARTINEZ

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MAY 2009

Major Subject: 3D Design

UMI Number: 1468399

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A Thesis

By

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ABSTRACT

González De Martínez, Mirla., Visual Identity in South Texas. Art and Design.

Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2009, 35 pp., 8 illustrations, references, 16 titles.

Transculturation as the key element in the search for autochthonous visual richness and profundity is the theme for my investigation. In the process, numerous questions arise for the need for authentic cultural expression but also ownership of cultural, social identities. I selected the Río Grande Valley region having little knowledge of conflicts that surround this border and its territories. I also explored the social and cultural histories that included art making and architectural and graphic design. The transfer of cultural imprints, sometimes accepted but often rejected or unknown, forms the basis of this inquiry.

My intent resides in a respect for this culture in general, and for retrieving the cultural values in visual terms that can be conserved and further explored in the field of object-oriented design. This formal investigation would include the appropriation of found artifacts from Texas to the Northern territories of México, integrated in textiles as a means to broaden the collective audience for marketing these ancient forms to a widespread and functional network. Objects elaborated with the design referents of this region would provide content and identity in the marketplace, preserving the imperishable validity of these formal expressions in

their appropriate cultural context. An appropriate design paradigm for this local region known as the Río Grande Valley would demonstrate the ability to produce objects that would be immersed in a discourse with the harmony of this cultural entity characterized by the dynamic nature of its transculturation phenomena between distinct ethnic groups.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Richard Phillips, chair of my thesis committee, for all his mentoring and advice. From information gathering, research design, data processing, to manuscript editing, he encouraged me to complete this process through his infinite patience and guidance.

I would like to thank Professor Karen Sanders, major professor of my thesis committee, for all her advice and closer help in the realization of my projects. Her input was substantial to my art work.

I would also like to thank professors Reynaldo Santiago for his help, and David Martinez for his guidance in the everyday work.

Finally I would like to mention and give thanks to Dr. Aje-Ori Agbese, for her patience and guidance during her class.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This project is the result of a formal and aesthetic exploration of the visual culture of the Río Grande Valley region of south Texas. It is the result of my personal commitment to the development of design as a discipline that integrates art, object, culture, and community. Since the beginning this investigation has been defined by concerns for cultural preservation with regard to visual and aesthetic dialogue. It also involves the theme of transculturation as the key element in the search for autochthonous formal and visual richness and profundity, raising numerous questions about the need for an authentic cultural expression achieved through rigorous visual aesthetics in the medium of graphic design. This is not a matter of imposing traditional models upon this particular visual and cultural environment: To the contrary my intent resides in a respect for this culture in general, and in a call for retrieving these cultural values in visual terms that can be conserved and even further explored in the field of object-oriented design.

Perhaps my efforts will find their just answer in the unification of community and industry, surmounting the current alienation between the two, between the soul and labor, and the way in which the latter could produce objects that would respect and reinforce the hoary, magnificent values inherent to this region. Nevertheless, my concrete achievements during this investigative process were limited to the university and the productive capacity of its workshops. If this university as the formative institution of

future design professionals values this effective integration of creativity and the production of objects, then there will be great possibilities for achieving this association. Such a bond would benefit a Río Grande Valley economy rooted in a true and comprehensive authenticity. Objects elaborated with the design referents of this region would provide content and identity in the marketplace, preserving the imperishable validity of these formal expressions in their appropriate cultural context. As he reflects on the importance of design in contemporary society, Gui Bonsiepe comments that

“Design should function as a salvaging mechanism for regional cultures. Ethnic design is a lifesaver that keeps local cultures from disappearing through internationalization. Ethnic design can refer to a topology of regional products, a given method of production, or a vocabulary of formal aesthetic motives.”¹

An appropriate design paradigm for this local region known as the Río Grande Valley would demonstrate the ability to produce objects that would be immersed in a discourse with the harmony of this cultural entity characterized by the dynamic nature of its transculturation phenomena between distinct ethnic groups. Composed of individuals who belong to Mexico and to the United States, this zone reflects the conditions noted in many Latin American nations where the process of imitation substitutes for authenticity due to the lack of a sufficiently independent industrial and commercial development. This Valley enclave, while belonging to a highly industrialized polity, lacks its own formal and technical resources that would provide effective design expressions of the local cultural milieu.

This project experiments with traditional graphic visual traditions as adumbrated by an analysis of color and lighting effects, the latter examined according to its natural properties as manifested in the visual field provided by the lower Río Grande River

Valley. The color palette employed in some of these design proposals finds its referent in this natural setting. Colors with low saturation that contrast with others with high white content in their composition predominate in my design responses, while at the same time alternating with the hues found in typical Mexican costume.

It is also important to emphasize that this project is devoted to the part of the Río Grande Valley on the frontier between Mexico and the United States that runs from the coast on the east to Roma and San Ygnacio on the west. This geographic limit has been defined by my personal experience with the region, which leads me to the conclusion that McAllen and its adjacent communities form the cultural and socioeconomic nucleus of this wider zone, whose cultural development follows the typical mode of an isolated periphery of the dominant centers.

The integration of diverse media in this exhibition corresponds to an exploration of the expressive potential of the materials that are commonly used in design such as silkscreen printing, and that are typically characterized by limited durability over a short period of time. Such is the case with the plastic transparencies employed as well as the silkscreen nets subsumed into the video as a reinforcement of the visual projection.

This document traces my conceptual trajectory from design to art. It is like a path with many pauses, full of discoveries in the interchange of ideas that I have maintained with all who surround me; but this road has also been full of hazards, of doubts followed by renewed affirmations and determinations. One thing I knew from the beginning was that this odyssey has transformed me. Such a banal pronouncement arises from instinct. Nevertheless I repeat, it has truly transformed me: My way of thinking, of visualizing form, my methodological approach toward the creative process that is now much more

unrestricted than before, the search and elaboration of information in a spontaneous way, are what this local culture has provided me. Here I have discovered analytical freedom because this culture is the sum of many differences with freedom as an inherent variable in the creative process.

It should be noted that my work at the beginning of this program was marked by an impersonal character. Unlike the primacy of the artist's point of view as his/her central criterion, mine was always more bound up with society and culture. This preoccupation with the nexus society – culture comes from my prior life experience in Cuba and from the ethos of the Institución de Diseño Industrial, or Institute of Design in La Habana, based on the close interaction of students with the means of production, with product designs dedicated to the resolution of problems inherent to society.

At the inception of my work at this university, or in other words my insertion into the ambient of the plastic arts, (if it should be that I ever crossed the frontier between art and design), my constant orientation has been to produce aesthetically and functionally worthwhile objects and patterns for the benefit of my new community. I seek to unite community and university through design proposals responsive to the cultural dilemmas of the Valley. At a different level, my latest work has explored this theme, but from a more personal vantage point. It demonstrates the emotional and inspirational level that a designer does not normally reveal. Is it possible that I have crossed the line between art and design? This final proposal that includes the video installation is where I integrate and cross the indefinite line between art and design. The whole accumulation of ideas that I have examined are reiterated in this installation. Through movement, it integrates

into video images those elements of bi-dimensionality that were previously explored in graphic designs.

The concept that art is design is accepted globally, but there is a difference in the creative response elicited from each productive specialization. Perhaps design integrates or appropriates art in order to manifest its criteria. In this, I believe, lies my transformation during my participation in this program at the University of Texas – Pan American. I have incorporated a new set of critical values into the practice of design that includes the exploration of other media for their utilization within the artistic discourse while generating freer creative possibilities.

CHAPTER II

WHO AM I? MY POINT OF DEPARTURE IN UNEARTHING THE ART OBJECT

The foundations for my creative enterprise lie in a socialist society completely dedicated to norms of socio-cultural and intellectual well-being that sometimes are attained and sometimes not. Its basic principles, very different from those of the United States, are based upon the University of Industrial Design where the creative criterion finds its justification mostly in the real needs of society for useful objects or effective communication. This heritage has been followed by my natural process of cultural transition in a new nation. My cultural and didactic formation in Cuba was based on a rigorous theory of design for practical results, but honest in the methodological process that conditions the creative act. This preoccupation with formal and functional analysis and the simplicity bequeathed by the Bauhaus theorems generates the design criteria that lead me to probe the cultural values of my new society.² Criteria that refer to the simplicity of forms are present in my work process because of all the years I spent at the University of Design in Cuba; the honesty in the treatment of the materials, the preoccupation with function and the interest to create objects that respond to our identity were constants in the process of design analysis.

My specialization in costume design has enabled me to generate a line of inquiry toward the study of traditional visual forms as seen in such decorative motifs as stamped designs inherited from the past, in book prints, or in artisanal objects created by the

common people. The study of costumes as objects most intimately connected with the human being has led me to the observation of the part of culture that expresses itself through objects and traditions. Through dress I discover people's lives, customs, traditions, and cultural heritage. One of my classes at the University of Design was specifically dedicated to the study of the image of woman/man and to the analysis of costume, which included clothing and accessories in general. This included theories of historical analysis of countries, generations, and the understanding of community behavior by deconstructing the way people used objects related to the body, the way they painted their faces and bodies, and the way attachments were created to a specific kind of garment because of social significance. There is a very long list of successes that could be analyzed through this historical construct of clothing, but the most significant element for me is how later generations can appropriate all of these meanings for contemporary societies.

Telling who I am and how I developed my professional life before coming here to the United States is the key to making someone else understand how I see this society. As I said before, it is not my interest to critique the way any society approaches the design process that includes objects or products with the intention of commerce, but it is important to make some effort to promote the values of traditions in regions such as the border between México and the U.S. Gui Bonsiepe was one of the designers and theorists that often visited my university in La Habana, Cuba, and the thing that impressed me most was his concern for a conscientious development of design in societies that are in transition toward new economic models.³ This is the attitude behind my project and my

commitment to raise the consciousness of this region about the traditions that join México and The United States.

It is important to state that we have only three decades of continuous work about the practice of Design in Cuba as a discipline integrated with industry. Lucila Fernández in her article about Modernity and Postmodernity in Cuba comments that "...In its origins, Cuban design was driven by three modern utopian goals: that of design itself, of politics and of history. The first aimed at reaching a physical, rational and harmonic framework. The second aspired to eliminate the distance between the collective and individual elements in a socially just polity and the third had the intention of rising above the under developed reality of the country."⁴ Saying this I am making a point where my ideas come from and how my experiences as student and designer in Cuba influenced my work as a designer in the United States.

To make my pride in my beliefs applicable to the visual identity that pertains to these two regions on both sides of the border, it must be inspired by a consciousness of the needs of these people and communities for authentic representation of their cultural heritage. If there is something special and beautiful in these regions, it is the phenomenon of acculturation. Histories about how territories expanded and how families were divided or grew under these conditions of separation make me think about how government could facilitate conscious production of objects with the needs of this region in mind. And when I say "this region," I refer to the both sides of it. One of my recent readings about intercultural communication in one of my classes of Culture and Communication led me to this analysis of how cultures integrate but where, in my personal point of view, the strongest communities absorb the weaker. The concept that

mostly recalls this process is related to the analysis of community; the author stated that community is a synonym for culture.⁵ And here I refer to how much is being absorbed in terms of traditions and visual culture in this region of South Texas from the American culture. Or thinking in the opposite way, Mexican culture is being silenced by its absorption in the American. Either way it is a natural process of adaptation, where one culture takes from the other. My worries lay in the reaction of the governmental institutions toward these acculturation phenomena and the preservation of the best aspects of this dual dialectic.

In this project color is another subject of analysis in terms of visual identity. The study of color goes from its occurrence in nature to the representative colors of the visual elements in the traditions of Mexico that are found in this area. I sought out regions with old traditional towns and compared them to the style in new construction or representation of objects or architecture. I found that color is an element that continues the path followed in old representations in graphics, clothing, and architecture.

The peculiar color sensitivities of Mexican culture distinguish it from others and therefore constitute one of its most communicative visual elements. In this project color is of great importance since from it I translate part of this cultural heritage into contemporary forms. In the study of color, one of the theorists that I take as a reference is Rudolph Arnheim, who comments that color is integrated to shapes and that both are the whole of the object.⁶ One of the criteria that I always respect in the use of color is harmony; especially, not using more than three colors in a composition because of the risk of visual noise. This is another interesting subject on the theory of basic design that Arnheim proposed.

I define my work (or better, as has already been apparent in this document), I declare it to be the integration between art and design; as an appropriation by design of art to establish dialog with one's surroundings, an ambient that does not belong to me and which I cannot nor will not judge. In part this approach is completely functional and critical. The other part, that acquired living in this ambient among these people is completely ethereal, based upon creative urges that are more in accord with feelings, sensibilities, and the desire to identify with this place. If I could bring a sense of pride in this culture to even the smallest number of the individuals who make it up, part of my "other vocation" as a designer would be fulfilled.

CHAPTER III

MY INTENT

Mi intent goes no further than to awaken respect for the innate cultural values of this region. It is the responsibility of the educational, trade, corporate and cultural institutions to sensitize the populace and enable the economic conditions that will permit the rescue of this culture and a re-evaluation of the projects for its emancipation. One of the points of departure for my evaluation and investigation is Río Grande City and the town of San Ygnacio, settlements that in a very modest way provide a model of the original autochthonous Hispanic architectural prototype for this area. In both settlements, part of their original layout has been restored. The church, the adjacent park, and some of the nearby buildings bespeak this care and respect for city and culture.

One of the old families of San Ygnacio has undertaken the restoration of some buildings. Many possess an historic value dating from the first migratory waves between Mexico and the United States. One of the first customs houses is there along with its outbuildings that surely were connected with it administratively. It is impossible to communicate the inestimable cultural value of this configuration to those who have not been there. However, in this enterprise for cultural rescue, there is no evidence of collaboration nor cooperation by local regional institutions that would promote respect or admiration for these authentic expressions. By comparison Río Grande City is a little

better known and more closely situated near highly used commercial zones. One arrives there in search of McDonald's but not for cultural preservation or self-actualization.

These are among the discoveries that have led me to fall in love with this place. Through them I have glimpsed the nearly hidden beauties of this region where nature mixes with architecture, or at least with the remains of what was once the valid architectural idiom of this zone. Strolling through towns like Mission and McAllen has led me to appreciate the process of acculturation in their streets, in their sidewalks: an Hispanic cultural heritage that derives from the Spanish conquest of Mexican lands. One finds appropriations of constructive strategies from the styles of the antebellum and post-Civil War South of the United States to reflections of *Mudéjar* influence in the use of tile floors, in the façade and wall decorations, and in the latticework or *celosías* for shade, ventilation, and privacy.⁷

This leads to the question, "Is there some way to give these beautiful forms and traditions their just recognition?" And I have only mentioned some of the Valley places with authentic cultural heritage. I am sure I have not found all of the possible aesthetic roots of this area. Would there be a way to sensitize local institutions so that the construction projects and economic expansion would respect and draw upon this valid cultural reserve? Doesn't the ongoing process of world internationalization validate such an approach? The McDonald's, Burger King, and other prototypes, could they be inserted into new projects of image and construction that would include cultural preservation?

The quest for cultural vindication is a very long story to document. It is a difficult battle to wage. It is necessary that the University as promoter of new professional

workers create a love and loyalty to these cultural roots that goes beyond folkloric dance, mariachi bands, typical cuisine, language, and frontier publicity. Education based upon respect for ethnic identity and pride ought to be the instructional goal.

In view of this, my proposals are nothing more than an approach toward culture by means of a perspective toward a future, now indispensable, of cultural preservation.

Designers and artists must incorporate this criterion in projects and in creative work respectively. In this way the transcendence of this frontier zone between Mexico and the United States as one of encounter and interchange between cultures could be revealed.

CHAPTER IV

INITIATION OF THIS REDEMPTIVE PROJECT

I began this creative quest within the plastic arts under the aegis of the Master of Fine Arts program in Art of the University of Texas – Pan American, by trying to incorporate the methods of making and visualizing art into the professional methodology of design. I followed this path first so that I could reveal to myself the culture of this new place to which I came to live, The Valley, and second, to attempt to find the ties between design and this cultural configuration. In both cases I sought contact with this social milieu through visual expression. My first projects were in the field of design and explored the possibilities of traditional visual images projected onto objects. This was a means of probing the possibilities for expanding the extant fields in which pride in cultural identity can be legitimately expressed. This initiative expressed one of my theoretical fundamentals from the beginning: Elaboration of a formal discourse through which a rallying call could be made in favor of cultural preservation and integrity. This approach has its roots in the civilization of my nation, Cuba, where one of the government's central premises is its commitment to cultural preservation.

These first projects consisted of the visual appropriation of authentic Mexican graphic images, first studied in their original intention and then re-contextualized in a contemporary setting in objects of daily use such as floor tiles and T-shirts. The process of design is founded in the synthesis of the form of graphics compiled from indigenous

cultures as they pertain to places that are today territories from Mexico and the United States.⁸

This university lacks workshops where prototypes for tiles could be elaborated. Accordingly, the alternative was to explore techniques traditionally used to apply color to ceramics. One technique apt for a good finish in fired tiles is Chinese ink. This procedure permits the application to the ceramic piece of an extensive variety of tints and tones. The result is a translucent color that can be applied in several layers until the desired effect is achieved. This process very much resembles that of watercolor since the superposition of different color stains produces a wide diversity of tones and values. In order to impress patterns onto these tiles, Chinese ink was applied in a thicker consistency by use of the screen printing technique. The goal of printing several tiles compelled the use of a more dynamic process than that offered by the limited possibilities inherent to the application of Chinese ink to ceramic surfaces. Screen print application required that the ink mix be thick enough upon passing through the screen that it would not scatter on the slick tile surface. Normally, Chinese ink is applied to surfaces with a brush in highly diluted, nearly clear form. When applied via the medium of screen-printing, it required a longer than expected drying process. Even in a scenario of small-scale production, this process was very drawn out and in conflict with the need for continuity through the diverse steps of production. However, the visual results of this manufacturing procedure were those that had been hoped for: The application of color is permanent and it maintains the desired stain after firing without chipping or peeling. Nevertheless, the slowness of this method conflicted with the need for effective mass

social dissemination of these design motifs in a much shorter space of time and with a more dynamic industrial technique within adequate productive conditions.⁹

Another iteration of my design campaign was the use of graphic design motifs on T-shirts. Because of the technological tools involved, this is commonly called stamped design because it is applied in the workshop not only to make patterns on the finished garments, but also due to the possibility of stamping it before final assemblage or sewing. This screen-printing process is the one typically used to stamp T-shirts or pullovers with patterns. It facilitates massive scale continuous production without wearing out the screen.

The t-shirt is also a very functional and ubiquitous item of clothing that satisfies huge market demand by men, women, and children who use it for multiple activities. In the modern world, it is one of the most powerful media for mass corporate advertisement. In addition to its optimal functionality and visibility, in general it can be sold at a good and reasonable price. This criterion is basic in the analysis of the market. The t-shirt is functional, easy to wear and sold in markets all around the world.

In both of these initiatives, the appropriation of autochthonous Mesoamerican Pre-Columbian seals and patterns that were used for communication formed the basis for the graphic designs to be printed on tiles and T-shirts. Images from the book about ancient motifs from Mexico elaborated by Jorge Enciso have been my primary source of appropriation in this project. Appropriating traditional cultural motifs into contemporary contexts reflects one of my design imperatives, which seeks to expand pride in regional cultural assets. Contemporaneity resulted from the application of the organizing principles of design to each initiative, including those inherent to the original graphic

motifs. The application of color reflected a palette composed of tones of low saturation in contrasting with completely saturated colors in some models drawn from those characteristic of Mexican culture, such as those observed in nature at different times of day, especially the ochre and green tints of earth and vegetation.

As already explained above, this first group of projects expressed a social commitment in that the identity of each object embodied regional elements. Each of the graphic designs for t-shirts synthesized the regional culture that extends from Mexico into the United States. This reflects the intrinsic interrelationship between these two countries over the centuries. The initiative of selling t-shirts was successful in the dissemination of these motifs of high cultural and aesthetic quality. The clients demonstrated an understanding of the theme through form, color, and content. These prototype patterns had to be realized in small scale since, as stated before, the university lacks the necessary conditions for production and distribution that could serve as the point of departure for the recognition of the importance of generating contexts for mass production and dissemination of benefit to the institution and to the wider community.

CHAPTER V

THE "SLIDE" SEMESTER

During the course of the semester subsequent to the first design initiatives, the second group of projects was oriented more toward artistic expression. It resulted from experimentation with materials commonly used in screen printing for image transfer. The ink jet slide possessed the necessary qualities for the production of translucent images that enabled their impression via the corresponding printer. The slide medium consists of a smooth side while the obverse is transparent but with a porous texture. The impression is made using this latter side, resulting in a clean and totally sharp image. The objective was to seek solutions with which to apply the design images previously printed onto the tee-shirts but now formulated with a decorative and experimental approach toward formal realization. "Decorative" is sometimes used as a pejorative word with regard to design. When we seek functional design, decoration is not the means with which to realize this goal. In this sense, "decoration" signifies unnecessary elements within the form, design, or composition. Nevertheless, when ornamental effects are the result of experimentation with materials not regularly utilized in decorative pieces, then the banality of this decorative approach is surpassed.

One of the references utilizing this kind of incorporation of unusual materials in objects can be found in the works of the Memphis group. The group works with a large spectrum of applications that goes from objects to furniture and patterns. In all the work

their incorporation of unusual materials in their design is a constant. It could be functional or decorative. The material in the objects made by the Memphis group is authentic and a new value is added. They also incorporate in their work the aesthetic of diverse cultures plus the use of basic shapes and complementary colors as a pattern design.¹⁰

I visualize the creation of such objects as the quest for experimentation in three dimensions via the graphic motifs with which I had already experimented to determine their compositional potential. Space plays a crucial role in the experience and enjoyment of the given piece. They are composed of a grouping of four or five levels of images separated from one another by a distance of one centimeter or more. The spectator's eyes are invited to move around the piece. The image can be discerned on both sides and the perception changes according to the spectator's position in relation to the light.

(Illustrations 1, 2)

The incorporation of space and light in a single piece was also the result of studies of color and of lighting effects as influenced by the surroundings. In this regard, the exploration of lighting effects had already been studied in some video projects, but since one of the purposes of this thesis is to document the chronological development of the methodology that was followed, we will leave this theme until later. At any rate, this demonstrates that the creative process is not linear and that it is founded upon experiences in diverse fields. The creative mind trained in more options will have more expressive and generative possibilities in support of its efforts.

It is important to note here that at this juncture the creative artistic process was gradually supplanting the design process approach with its functional outlook. Function

was replaced by experimentation. The result was that each material experiment became interesting because it propitiated an image/result that diverged from the traditional usage of the design motifs. From that moment on in this process, the concept of experimentation sustained my efforts. As I have already indicated, the work tasks were characterized by creative experimentation; nevertheless, the focus on the cultural theme was maintained. In this case effective solutions were sought in the formal images that the spectator would self-generate as she/he searched for enjoyment through active observation.

The leap of faith was to stop seeing the object or the medium in an exclusively functional way. For the first time in my design career I did not think about the physical function of the object. By function I mean the interface promoted by objects in the person to need relationship. This new line of inquiry lacked this tool for justification. The result was a great surprise for the spectator. It combined the exploration of the expressive possibilities of materials, space, perspective, light and color.

CHAPTER VI

THE RELATIONSHIP OF TEXTILE PATTERNS TO POSTERS IN THIS EXHIBITION

The intent of this exhibition is to show what has been accomplished during two years in this M.F.A. program, and even here at the end I feel the growth of creative capacity. Proposals in the treatment of stamped design motifs have been elaborated to the level of discourse in this exhibition. They are included as possible projects for product design, but now only as referents. The poster medium now appropriates these earlier stamped design proposals in order to promote through them the concern for the regional culture. I consider this exhibition to be a design demonstration that includes text, graphics and images in movement that conjoin into a message beyond words. Graphic design has never been my strong suit, nor was it my choice of study. As a clothing designer, I enjoy the space and freedom to move freely within it. Now, however, graphic design has allowed the expression of my ideas and their ephemeral display in visible form for a few days. The power of the inter-articulation of the image with the text as enabled me to anchor my prior work on stamped designs to my campaign for the preservation of valid cultural heritage.

These posters with their design motifs based on textile patterning are influenced by the graphic designers of my native country, Cuba. Special among them are Rafael

Morante, Héctor Villaverde, Alfredo Rostgaard and many others who influenced me ever since I attended the Latino American International Cinema Festivals in La Habana, or digested some source that included their works while a student at the University of Design. The use of flat color over large spaces, the appropriation of forms whose synthesis is one of the primary traits, the application of color to achieve simplicity of form, are some of the aspects that are unconsciously reflected by these tasks.¹¹ These tasks have emerged from the analysis and appraisal of the cultural transcendence of these images as points of departure, which in the beginning stunned me with their formal beauty and were then incorporated into this cultural inquiry. It is to be admitted that part of the formal expression of these motifs results from contact with the visual context of the United States. The enhanced power of the image at an even grander scale has been derived from this nation's propagandistic and commercial graphic formats. Contact with graphic milieus in different United States cities has led to the incorporation of the dynamic mode, free from limits, in which modern graphics express themselves, that is to say, the graphic expression of here and now. Here word and text are brought together in one single visual context and because of that both fuse in my designs.

“In language, signs are joined together to create messages. Words as verbal signs, grouped together in a linear fashion, attain their value vis-à-vis other words through opposition and contrast. Words can also evoke meaning through mental association.”¹² This exhibit's graphic posters constitute an initiative to use visual media to speak to the people's identification with their culture.

1. The Political Context of this Design Initiative

The duality of the Mexican-American experience intrigues me through the canons of speech, interaction, and identity. I have found that many Mexicans that travel here to the United States seek to assimilate with the population as a means to shed their complete Mexican heritage because they feel, or more accurately perhaps, are made to feel inferior to white America. I find this idea striking in the duality of two lines making up a single Mexican motif. One line is larger and encapsulates the smaller, less imposing one. It appears that there exists a parasitic relationship. Through this proximity, the larger entity cradles the lesser one with a containment that connotes the relationship of the two countries. It is a metaphor in the sense that the United States has for too long bolstered its weaker neighbor in a less than nurturing way, but instead by way of contempt.

(illustrations 3; 5)

Confusion exists in the psyche of the borderlands Tex-Mex culture. Does Mexican ancestry imply permanent identity as a Mexican? When does this bridge become crossed and the fog of what is white and what is Mexican becomes a single human being without fear, stereotype, or prejudice? In this series of posters there exists a campaign that questions these ideas but also an exploration that seeks to add value to this cross-cultural division aptly titled the Río Grande.

When I speak of certain “isms” in relation to the United States and México, I use them in combination with white, slave, labor, among other words to speak about the relationship of two geographical entities which cannot exist without the other. Yet a constant seam and tearing occurs in the consciousness of the people that live here. It is a relationship built on fortune when the outcomes are favorable to both parties and a convenient point of contention when disputes occur. Cheap labor in theory should work

for both peoples: American products would be cheaper, Mexican workers would have jobs. However; we know that problems occur as witnessed by the exploitation of children and poor people working under inhumane conditions. We are supposed to only see the garment, not the factory or the laborer that produced it.

The Fashion:

I found in my research the beauty of a mark. The decorative designs suggest leisure to me and with these motifs I wish to express the same idea using fabric and colors. Loose materials cut in fresh, simple gestures make up a summer dress. The colors are warm and optimistic so that the dress appeals to the modern woman while reinstituting the mark of the regional people that was buried or forgotten. By using these motifs, the idea is to show that culture has applications for the people. It is their identity after all, the ancient markings become fresh again and though the initial meaning may be lost, a new language appears once more and suggests that culture has transcendence. (illustration 6)

The Symbol:

One of the more intriguing marks found thru this research was a crudely drawn graphic that resembles a snake with two fangs and a vibrant tail suggesting a rattlesnake. The line quality is drawn thick and blocky with what appears to be seven eyes at different terminals within the body. Once again I find the relationship between victim and prey as potent while viewing a stretch of the border wall, bridges and highways under construction or maybe the river itself. It is a mysterious creature that presents to me a fascination when contemplating the future of this relationship between the Río Grande and the people that live adjacent to it. Does the snake eventually devour itself as a result of overt consumerism and cultural displacement? Or will there be a reconciliation of the

two countries through shared experiences and a transaction of understanding.

(Illustrations 4; 5; 7)

I'm reminded of Frank Lloyd Wright's approach to re-interpretation of a medium with the construction of the Charles Ennis house in Los Angeles. Wright took the simple but crude concrete block and created a whole new language or decorative pattern with this material. With what was outcast as cheap materials that had essentially run their course as far as a building material and perhaps would never be a consideration for clients who lived in California with its high interest in cultural and personal materiality, Wright's genius created a new language, a language he called "textile weaving" with the concrete block. The results were stunning. Suddenly, clients with considerable wealth were contracting Wright to build a series of homes made from this order of geometry and simplicity.¹³

Many of the images I collected during my research of ancient Mexican motifs share a similar aesthetic to Wright's designs for his concrete block homes. My initial reaction towards the simplicity of these motifs was how to utilize them as three-dimensional applications in terms of fashion design. The pattern of concrete passages in the motifs I collected resembled that of a maze or architectonic fortresses that gave a solid expression indicating strength via mass. The result was a series of shirts that contained a selection of 15 motifs in a variety of colors from nature typical of the valley and Mexican heritage.

The graphic designs became a three-dimensional study that assimilates fields, patterns, and a bird's eye view of human environments. In this study I wish to go beyond the traditional two-dimensional replication of graphic elements. I found the possibilities to create new forms challenging, but wanted to explore further the complexity of color,

written combinations between speech (English and Spanish) and overlapping layers of dimensional space to complement the architectonic forms within a plan or in other words, a microcosm of human environments.

2. From architectonic print (textile/poster) to video

Again I referenced Wright's use of building materials as a means to construct a new utopia. Created from ordinary materials, I again thought of this line of approach but began to think of a more holistic means. These patterns created from a plan of concrete blocks made me begin to consider the environment as a living plan. A plan constructed out of non-tangibles within me as a means to dictate a living space. I then realized that this "plan" was ancient as revealed by the urban plans of border cities such as Guerrero Viejo and San Ygnacio. These two archaic cities are easily accessible along the Río Grande Valley, an area of concentration for many of the motifs utilized in my projects.

Since Frank Lloyd Wright found new application for materials, I have paralleled his approach with my own search for new venues to introduce these motifs in contemporary fashion, graphic design and video. But I wanted to consider the earth and the planned environment beyond a single entity. According to the architect Christopher Alexander, design for urban living has an unusual history in that it may be more appropriately applied to the future. I am referring to his book, *The Timeless Way of Building*. Most intriguing to me were his passages that discussed the possibilities of building motifs, planning and spiritual qualities.¹⁴

The indigenous motifs are similar to the geometric design of the border city plans from the Spanish colonial influences which seem to suggest a more pedestrian or communal way of living. "These patterns of events are always interlocked with certain

geometric patterns in the space. Indeed, as we shall see, each building and each town is ultimately made out of nothing else; they are the atoms and the molecules from which a building is made.”¹⁵ It makes sense to me that this way of living considered that life itself was contained within a social order and that the town had a nucleus for living with all other activities branching out from there.

CHAPTER VII

VIDEO INSTALLATION

In general this exhibition is determined by three-dimensional design. Graphic designs for tiles or tee-shirts cannot be viewed in an isolated way outside of context, because this investigation is not founded upon the object regardless of its milieu. Having said that, it is now necessary to enunciate the general concept on which this project is based. Three-dimensionality includes sound, space, depth, time, and the way that the object is used. These qualities form part of the video process. The traditional view that three-dimensionality includes the space surrounding the object, or art work, undervalues the elements of its make-up in the newly available technologically advanced media of expression. Video as a three-dimensional expression is recognized as such in many universities that deal with the theme of the image in movement. The new technologies have prompted a re-evaluation of the definition of the term "video" precisely because it inserts the individual into a new spatial dimension and a new context. Such is the case with video games, which depend upon the three-dimensional analysis of space for their projection.

My video "Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente," which can be translated into English as "What your eyes do not see, your heart cannot feel," is a discourse that presents the mode by which I feel and see this region: The Río Grande Valley. Here is captured what I have never expressed verbally before and even more specifically what I

cannot demonstrate except through images. This project silently probes whom I have been and part of what has affected me here: I say “part” because there have been moments incapable of capture, impossible in their restitution except in the retelling. Because of this ephemerality, the river and some of the characters lack a specific name while at the same time reflecting all and everyone.

Through video I saw the possibility of capturing that which it is impossible to explain rationally since it incorporates my feelings and critical posture toward this society. It is a strategy for formulating my ideas, for revealing what is difficult about it for me as I come to it out of a place such as Cuba. It is not the intention of this video to be used for criticism, but rather to describe how I feel this culture that is new to me. The video installation “What your eyes don’t see, your heart cannot feel” is a revelation of cultural heritage via graphics and images that belong to a sector of this culture. Each image speaks to personal experience in contact with this culture. The video’s protagonists are solely the vehicle by which to reflect on what I have heard from so many people native to this region as well as those who came here from Mexico. In this zone of conflicts due to language and place of origin, I have discovered that diversity is the essence of this culture. Through acculturation, individuals express themselves to demonstrate that they belong in both spheres, both Mexico and the United States. And this is how I understand the term “Tex-Mex,” as a cultural process or verbal strategy to resolve this clash of cultures.

One of my first solutions regarding the incorporation of projection on a three-dimensional space was actualized with screen printing I had used previously with the production of T-shirts. These screens were marked with symbols that came from the

Mexican heritage and were incorporated in the images projected on a wall. One of my solutions was a video installation that included a monologue of me talking about how I was feeling in this new culture. It is important to mention this art work because it was one of the first that took me to the idea of exploring video media and integrating the media with the design process. In this very beginning I found myself trying to explore how I felt and it paralleled what I was trying to explore with the visual heritage that comes from old cultures, work that I have already explained in previous chapters.

In this aesthetic populist initiative, the video takes its place in the material three-dimensional world through its projection onto the serigraphic screen. The integration of these two media results from the appropriation of the work done with graphic motifs applied to tiles and pullovers prior to the creation of the video. This multimedia integration is the product of yet another experimental initiative in the work processes of my M.F.A. studies: Yet again the materials became the communicators of the creative endeavors. Consequently, it can be stated of my labor methodology that the re-application of media explored earlier converted itself into my work strategy. Through the quest for new means of expression, one method led to another distinct from the one utilized before. The melding of different material strategies, the utilization of prior methods toward a new stance became the creative constant. Because of this, none of my prior initiatives ceased to survive; as they are renewed, they die to be reborn in a different dimension. I do not believe that the traditional design methods in which I was trained allow such freedom. In this case, "to create," not just "to make" or "to manufacture," is the new dimension (in my work) by which the design discourse achieves a new expression through art, since design is achieved in the context in which it exists. If it is

true, as Bonsiepe asserts, that design “must be ideated within its [sociocultural] context,” then this has been the vehicle through which I have been able to express my criteria regarding cultural expression and its dissemination into the wider community.¹⁶

Why Video Projection on Silkscreen? The projection of the image onto the silkscreen net comes from the idea of cultural transformation. Certain individuals lose the ability to speak correctly in Spanish. Traditions are no longer authentic celebrations but instead become immersed in the American mode or get internationalized. The architectural traditions are almost erased, displaced by the American model. The supposed pride in one’s identity when one is only pretending to be what one is, that is, more American than Mexican. These are just some of the innumerable instances that corroborate the cultural transformation that I recognize through my discourse as the loss of authenticity. The image loses itself in the serigraphic screen just as the culture is lost, or transforms itself into something new. The viewer reads a deformed image in the netting, just as the cultural milieu and the individual are distorted. Such transformations are inherent to the cultural developments between two regions distorted by the power imbalances between one civilized configuration and the other in its effort to validate and disseminate these values.

In the creative process this idea became complex and I also found some limitation due to the physical characteristics of the new exhibit space. As a designer the analysis of the space became a challenge for the exhibition. How could I show a kind of work in which the most important element would be the interaction with the pieces in order to sensitize the audience for an appreciation of the culture? This new project “What your eyes do not see, your heart cannot feel” continues expressing the way I see culture(s) in

the valley; it is important to say that my approach to this subject is influenced by of my previous education in Cuba with a very different set of cultural and social values.

The final proposal, the one exhibited in the gallery, was a challenge in duration and in the incorporation of animated graphics. These graphics are found in the poster's designs and again in the pieces containing text and graphics on transparencies. Here they are combined with images in motion to constitute a single piece. This project forms a close connection to the people of The Rio Grande Valley and their identity. Through interviews, the individuals I conversed with were able to express their feelings and impressions about their identity. It is interesting when hearing how each one of them manifests having a big and deep pride to be an American, in the land to which they belong, and at the same time to their Mexican heritage. The issue of the border between Mexico and The United States is stated as a figurative element, a situation to avoid or that which will prevent closer contact between both cultures.

The individuals interviewed belong to different social groups, and therefore they have a very different way to comment on their impressions about the regional culture. In common they have their nationality and a connection to relatives living in México. The relation between city and farmer and the way that life is integrated in these two different spaces without any conflict is part of the images that are incorporated in the piece. The dialogue occurs between the individuals and their environment, expressing something that they need to say but never do. A typical day in the Valley is shown in this piece with ordinary people who have a lot to express. I didn't elaborate deep questions; I only gave them a humble incentive to talk about their life and culture.

The graphics incorporated in the piece were made in After Effects. This software allows for the manipulation of graphics in keeping with the quality of color and shape that were previously elaborated in Illustrator and Photoshop. The overlapping of graphics in the video installation has the same effect as in the transparency pieces and the posters.

I think that by giving the opportunity for some people to share their feelings and showing it in the exhibit complemented and gave more meaning to the posters and to the rest of the work. My intention was founded in the idea to produce a project that benefits the community. As I stated before, as a designer it is not my first intention to talk about my ideas only, but it is to speak for the benefit of this culture.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION: WHERE AM I GOING?

My work at this intersection where art and design criteria fuse in the themes that I have continued to elaborate is influenced by a variety of factors, artists, and contexts with which I have interacted intermittently since the beginning of my MFA course. For me this project, this program and this exhibition have been an encounter with this new spatial continuum in which I have slowly inserted myself. Life and work have fused together in my creative endeavor, so I cannot say that these have followed a divergent path. I have explored the contexts of the plastic arts and culture but I have also explored my life and I have grown within the creative practice.

Each project that I have set for myself has been a constant exploration of the diverse facets of this, my new society. Constant dialogue with each of the professors with whom I have worked has deepened my understanding of this culture and this nation. Up to now I have been in closer content with these denizens of academia than with the common people. I still wonder what will happen in my future encounters with the milieu outside of UTPA.

Where will I go now? I believe that this new ambient has served to reaffirm myself as a designer. I have crossed the indefinite bridge between art and design but at the same time I have realized that each discipline has different spheres of work and that it is difficult to mix them without committing errors. I realize now that my future output will

be imbued with everything learned in this new artistic milieu. If the book *La piel prohibida*¹⁷ (“The Forbidden Skin”) written by María Elena Molinet is a tribute to costume and what it reveals about humanity through the ages, if *De la abstracción a la ironía* (“From Abstraction to Irony”) by Lucila Fernández Uriarte is a study in the development of form in the Twentieth Century that also treats the arts and analyzes design developments, then my exhibition is validated by both of them since it begins in design theory and crosses the road into art to explore both languages.¹⁸

I faced the paradigmatic confrontation between art and design from the time I entered this university. I confirm my pride in what I have learned here. I am now able to understand the normative and actual forms and expressions of art and design in the United States.

Up to now my dialogue with artists in the U.S. has been limited to those like myself affiliated with this UTPA MFA art program. Others have influenced my approach to analysis and self-criticism in the creative process. Theoreticians here have provided me with an understanding of culture and history without which I could never have been able to pinpoint such a diversification of ethnicities and cultures in space and time. I am also acquainted with relative’s professionals in the design field who, from the period of my studies of European and the United States design, have assisted my formation in the theory of design and art. Without exaggerating the significance of this influence, here especially I refer to the teachings that I received regarding the world’s first great kinetic artist, László Moholy-Nagy, which confirmed what I had already learned within the intellectual context of my country.¹⁹

It must be said that contact and dialogue with plastic artists in this area has led me to understand this new culture. It was not a goal to seek a terminal degree in art; instead it was a means of self-insertion into this culture and this new society. Each moment of discussion advanced the understanding of these surroundings within the context of this region and of this nation. By means of this dialogue, an understanding of this country as the sum of diversity provided by ethnicities, social groups, and religions was obtained.

In this way, this exhibition is also an interactive occurrence with this society from the viewpoint of the plastic arts and design.

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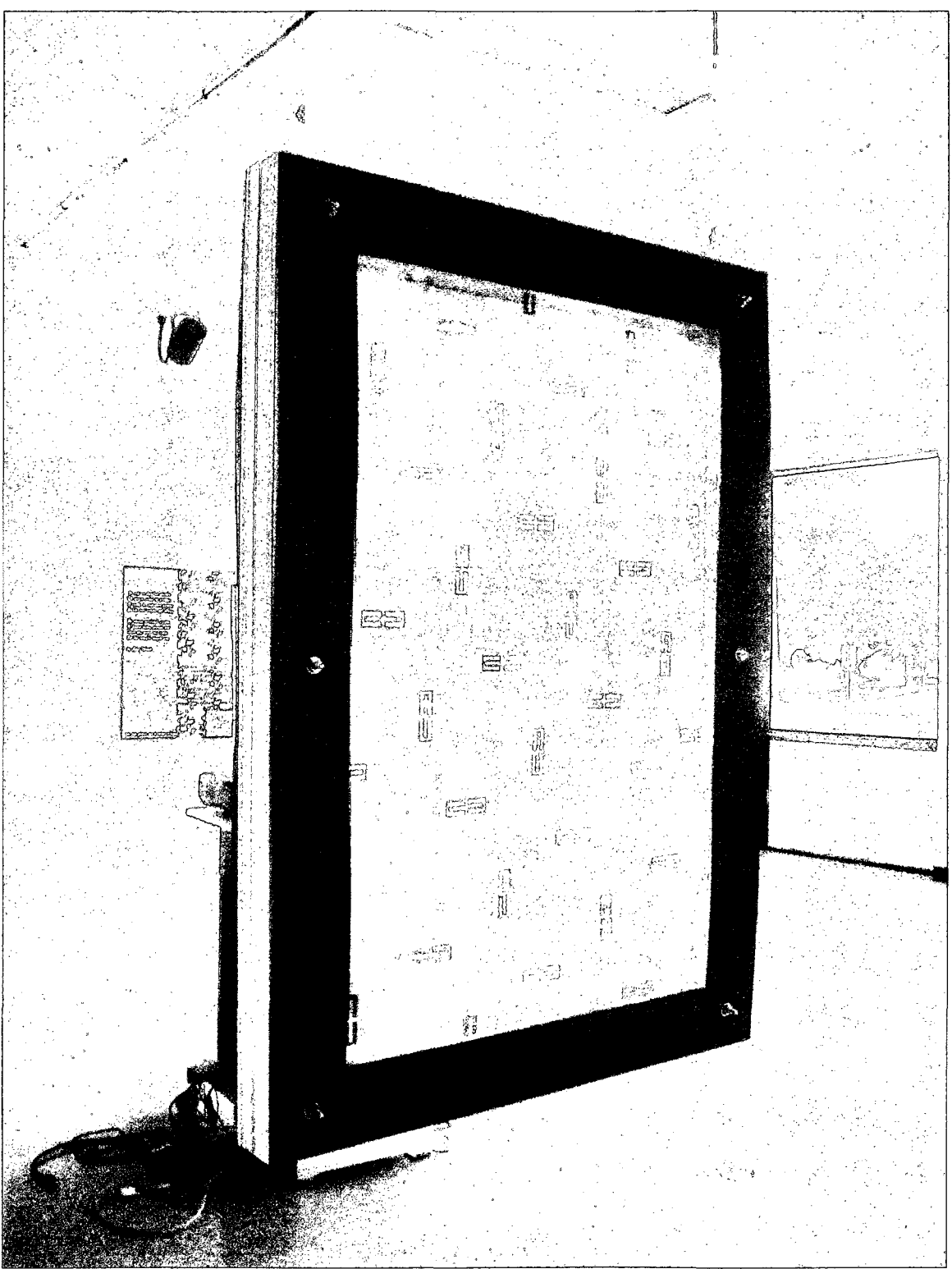


Illustration 1. Experimentation piece number 1. 20" x 30"

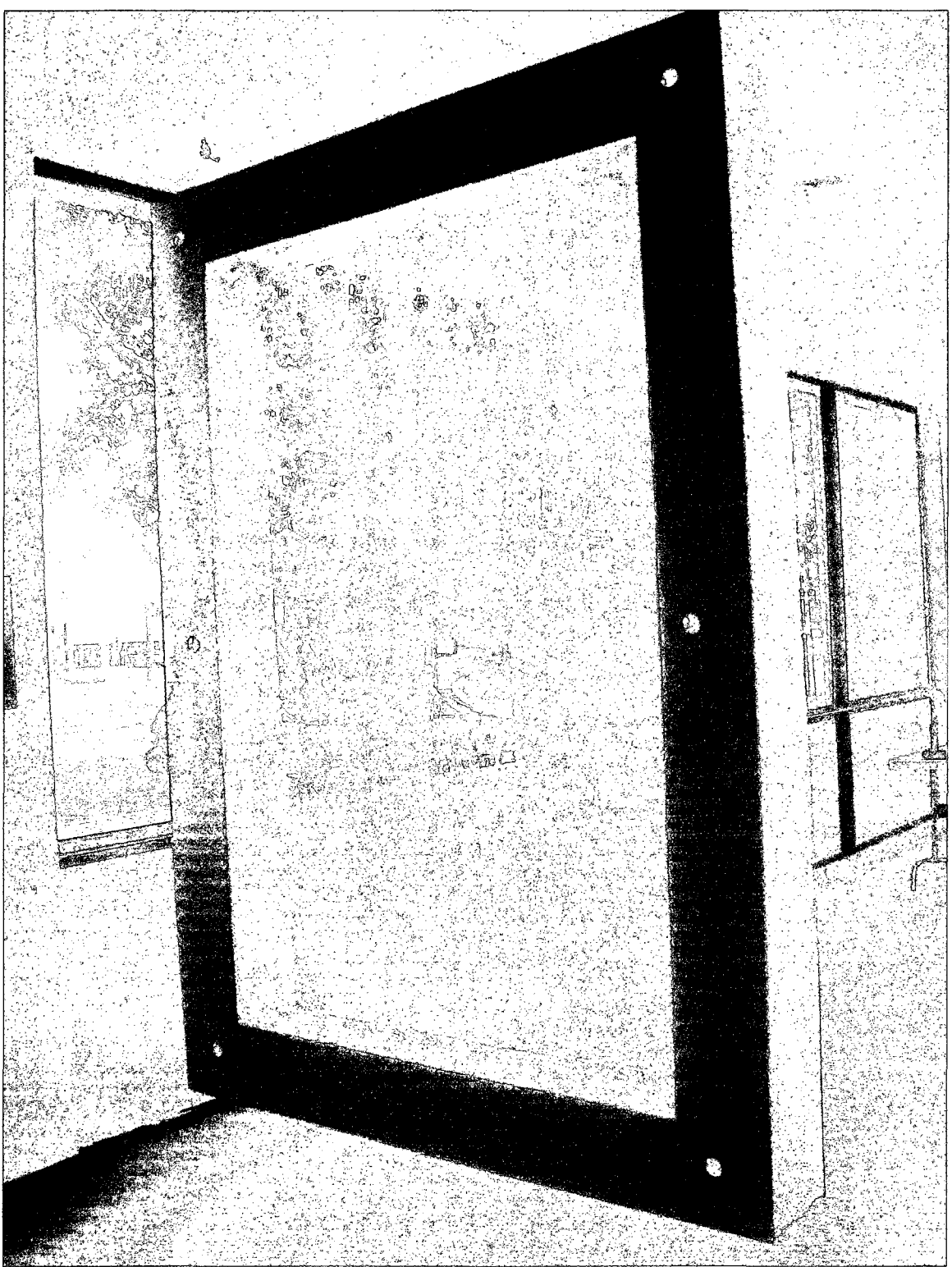


Illustration 2. Experimentation piece number 2. 20" x30".



*Design should function as a salvaging mechanism for regional cultures.
 Ethnic design is a lifesaver that keeps local cultures from disappearing
 through internationalization.
 Qui Bonsiepe*

Illustration 3. Poster number 1. 34" x 48".

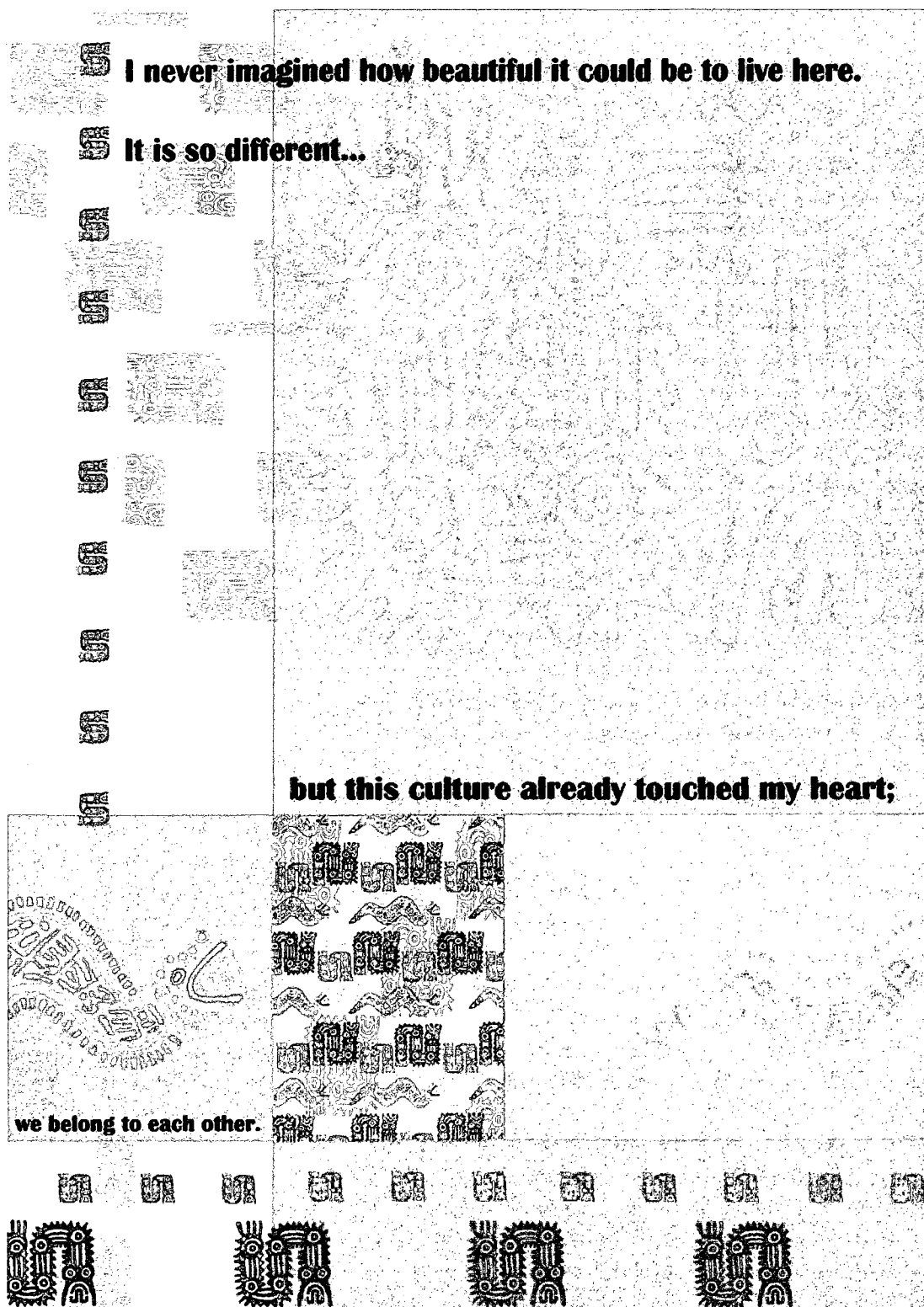
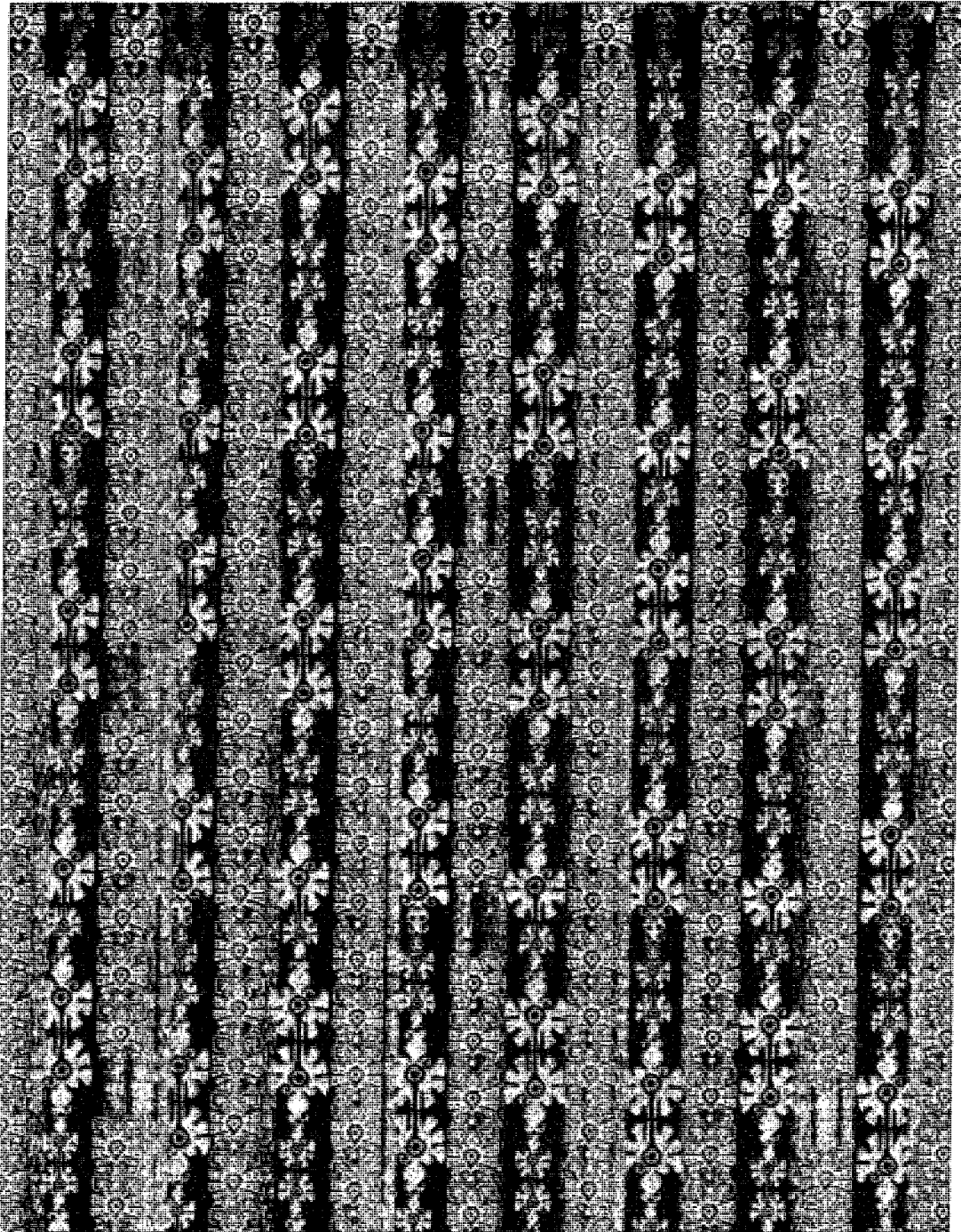


Illustration 4. Poster number 2. 34" x 48".



Introduction

This project is the result of a formal and aesthetic exploration of the visual culture from the Rio Grande Valley region in South Texas. It is the result of my personal commitment to the development of design as a discipline that integrates art, object, culture and community.

Illustration 5. Poster number 3. 34" x48"



Illustration 6. Poster number 4. 34" x48".

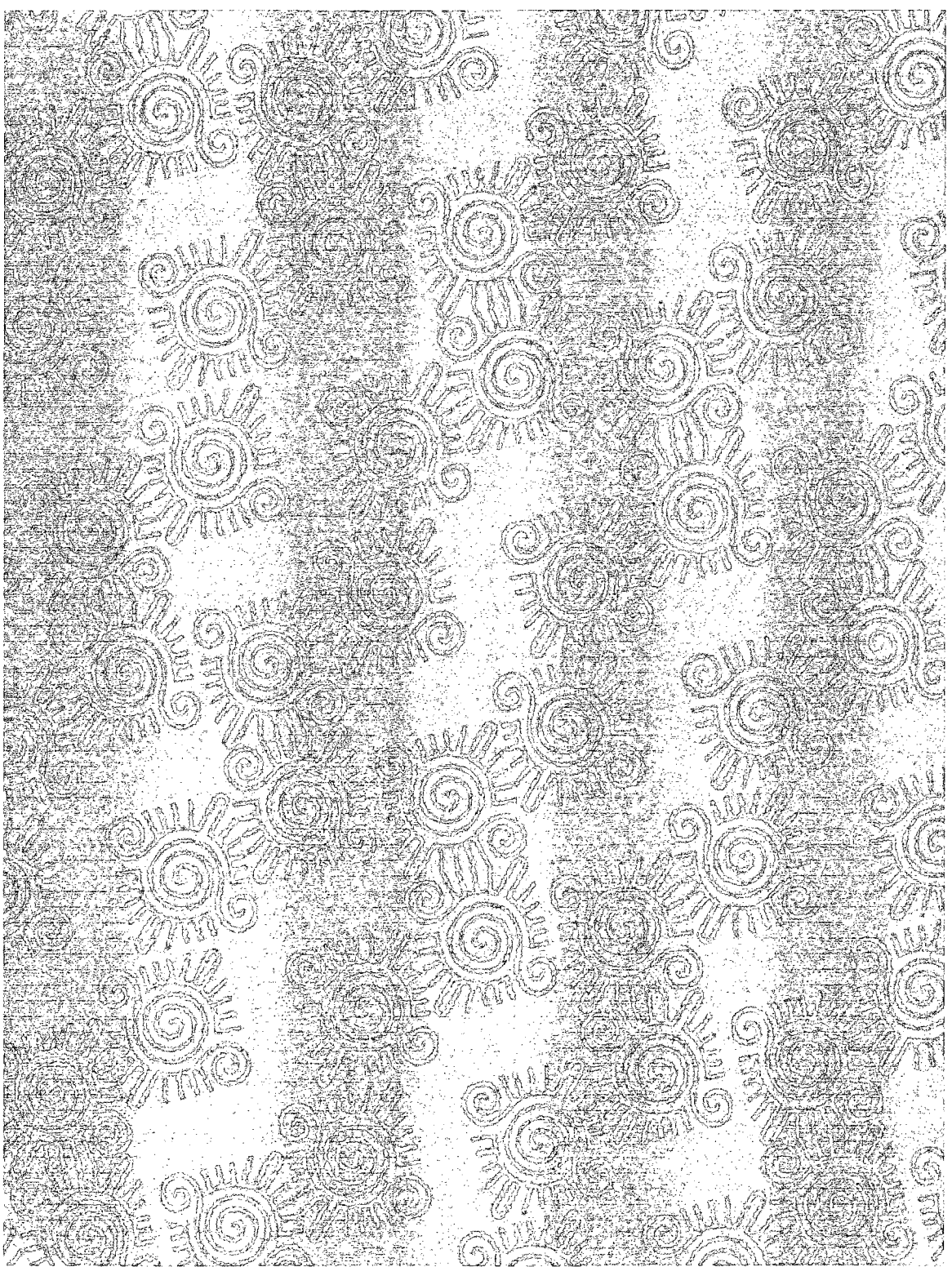


Illustration 7. Poster number 5. 34" x48".

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mirla González de Martínez was born and raised in La Habana, Cuba. She speaks English, Spanish and French and was admitted to the prestigious High Institute of Industrial Design in Habana where she received her degree in Industrial Design in 1994. She worked as a professor for ten years that includes the University of Fine Art (ISA) where she taught costume design and developed the program curricula for Basic Design for Set Design. She also taught at the Polytechnique Institute of Industrial Design and the High Institute of Industrial Design where she was selected to participate in the design evaluations of the Student Selection Committee and Thesis Committee.

Mirla has also exhibited her work in The United States and Cuba. Currently, she teaches Drawing, Basic Design, and Typography at the University of Texas-Pan American.

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