

LA COSTURA, SEW WHAT?

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Abstract

As a child in the 1970s, I wore shorts and shirts made by my mother from Simplicity patterns. My childish eyes gazed longingly at the cool clothes in the local Kmart, but instead I resolved myself to wearing hand-sewn apparel. Years later, as an artist in my studio, I am sewing; my hand grasps a small needle and moves in a choreographed fashion in and out. I sit, weaving images of feminism and gender into socio-cultural observations. “Te voy a hacer tus calzones” is a line from the Mexican standard *Rancho Grande*. The entire stanza is “There was a little rancher-girl who - happily used to say to me - I will make your pants - like the ones the rancher wears.” (Creager, n.d.). The use of sewing as an artistic medium by contemporary Mexican-American women artists is a by-product of cultural influence interwoven with personal mythology. The Latina artists examined herein delve into their individual personal histories for imagery, context, and meaning. Straight machine-sewn lines and craggily hand-sewn lines, embroidered organic shapes and tailored geometric shapes comingle on canvas, mylar, felt, and vinyl. The process of using thread and needle to create or embellish images corresponds to cultural background. Sewing, as a functional craft form, has a long history in Mexican-American culture. Its handiwork can be seen in many forms within the community such as quilts, huipil and quechquémitl. Through the examination of my artwork and the artwork of my contemporaries: Candace Briceño, Margarita Cabrera, Emily Donjuan and Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, socio-cultural influences will be revealed that subsequently trace back to the Mexican roots of each artist.

This presentation will incorporate the origins of thread-embroidered clothing documented in recorded art history, traditional folk needlework techniques in Mexico versus contemporary sewing methods, and the rise of domestic crafts to fine art. Domestic handicrafts have been

regarded as women's work and not considered *high* or fine art; however, during the 1970s, the Women's Liberation Movement caused feminist artists to resurrect women's craft and decorative art as a viable artistic means to convey the female experience. These Latina artists are part of a dual genesis of Mexican-American culture and female history; they embrace the art form of sewing with all its inherent ideological complexity. The seam es una linea visible de union entre dos partes. (Translation: The seam is a visible line that unifies two parts.) In a metaphorical manner the seam is the hyphen in Mexican-American. Latina artists are sewing la costura (the seam) and conjoining two cultures. La costura, sew what?

For Mexican women my mother's age, threading a needle is like waving a light saber: it saves the day and mending equals small miracles. She was the go-to-person for patching jeans, hemming slacks, fixing small tears at the eleventh hour. Back then my mother received the "wages of love" from her children. Today, the women in the maquiladoras garner scant wages and toil in poor working conditions. Sewing may be one of the oldest textile craft forms, but it is a skill that is undervalued. It does not matter what term you use: needlework, patchwork, stitching, darning; raising the craft from women's work to *high art* has been a difficult undertaking. In the 1970s feminist artists' adopted domestic crafts as part of their art-making in order to challenge the invisible dividing line between *high art* and *domestic handicraft*. How did a craft form like sewing transition and evolve from a cultural tradition, to a feminist torch, to a contemporary art medium embraced by Latina artists?

Historical Cultural Overview

Born and raised in Texas, I have grown up seeing Mexican craftwork in my immediate surroundings and on annual summer trips to Ciudad Acuña across the border from Del Rio, Texas. As a result of the overexposure to Mexican handicrafts, I subsequently became

desensitized to the laborious handwork which went into making these objects. As a ten year old, I bargained in the street markets of Mexico to buy handicraft items for less and less pesos.

Cultural globalization made an impact on me in the 1980s: the huipil Mexican dress found popularity in the Anglo fashion world and knock-off variations of the huipil cropped up at local department stores. I could not feign composure and the dismay on my face was blatantly visible at the suggestion that I should wear a huipil dress to school. The situational irony was not lost on me: an assimilated Mexican-American high school girl wears a Mexican peasant dress to her American high school. My familiarity with the handicrafts of Mexico had affected my desire to achieve ordinariness, to assimilate, and unfortunately, to disconnect from my culture. I temporarily turned a blind eye to the rich, cultural tradition of folk arts from Mexico. Handicraft forms of Mexico include weaving, needlework, ceramics, and sculpture. Weaving is an ancient Mexican craft form; for instance, the oldest fragment from a loom dates back to 900-200 BCE (Holmgren, n.d.). Traditional fibers found in Mexican folk art include bark, agave, and cotton; after 1521 the Spanish introduced wool and silk (Holmgren, n.d.). The regional clothing of Mesoamerica was woven and embellished with exquisite needlework: the traditional woman's dress consists of the huipil, a quechquemitl (poncho), an enredo (a seamless length of cloth used as a skirt), a belt, and, in some cases, a colorful headdress while the traditional men's attire is pants, a shirt, a ceñidor (wide sash or belt), and a jacket (Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art, n.d.). The basic indigenous weaver's tool is the backstrap loom which is still used today by women to make narrow panels of cloth (Holmgren, n.d.). Today, textiles are the main visual art form of the Chiapas Maya; painting and sculpting are part of their artistic repertoire, but there are over a million women who weave or embroider in Chiapas (Waterman, 2013). "The Maya of Chiapas spin, set looms, weave, and make measurements based on units of 20, the foundation of

ancient Mayan mathematics” (Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art, n.d.). Their hand woven fabrics incorporate designs passed down from generation to generation; they preserve the myths and history of their communities. In retrospect, the fine handiwork done by Mexican craft artisans and the elaborate line work in the designs did make their way into my subconscious mind, but it would be years later before I too, would pick up a needle and *coser*.

Feminist Overview

Needlework and weaving have been part of Mexican handicrafts for centuries; these same craft forms found a new meaning and voice in the 1970s feminist movement in North America. At the time, women artists were searching for new methods for making art and they deliberately turned away from art forms, like painting, entrenched in a patriarchal history. “The idea of using fabric as an art material both summed up the iconoclasm of the 1970s and established context within which to mount a feminist challenge to the way art history honored certain materials and certain processes instead of others” (Chadwick, 2012). One artist, Miriam Schapiro, embraced the craft of domesticity: needlework. Miriam Schapiro coined the term "femmage" to describe works she made in the 1970s that combined fabric, paint, and other materials which she would sew, cut, and appliqué together (National Museum of Women in the Arts, n.d.). Schapiro adopted the decorative conventions of quilting and embroidery consequently she accepted women’s cultural traditions. Eventually these feminine art forms would find themselves reviewed by new curatorial eyes: they were freshly stamped as respectable, thereby, catapulting them to the status of *high art*. This turn of events would garner these so-called feminine art forms focused exhibitions in the 20th and 21st centuries. In January of 2014, the National Museum of Women in the Arts presented an exhibition titled *Workt by Hand: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts*. The

exhibition encompasses two centuries of women's work and the myriad ways they have been historically valued or devalued.

“The term ‘Workt by hand’ is common in quilting parlance and refers to the distinctive skill and personal connection a craftsperson brings to each object. Through patterns and styles — including “barn raising,” “log cabin,” “double wedding band” and “crazy quilts” — the 35 works from the 18th to 20th centuries act as a stand-in for larger questions of art vs. craft, authorship and anonymity, and the relative weight of women's labor and influence during specific cultural moments” (O’Neal Parker, 2013).

Ward Mintz curated *Art/Sewn* for the Asheville Art Museum in 2012. The artworks in this exhibit all have the commonality of sewing, yet these contemporary artworks are presented to the viewer in a variety of forms: quilts, assemblage, hangings, embroidery on cloth and paper, among others; they consciously blur the distinction between fine art and craft (Glass, 2012). In the 21st century, artists have a choice: they can employ or appropriate handicrafts and present them as *high art*, or they can walk a fine line between *high art* and craft. The choice -- is all theirs.

Contemporary Latina Artists

Chica Chica Boom Chic! Latina artists are making noise; they are sewing. Paying homage to their Mexican cultural roots and flipping two thumbs up to the 1970s feminist artists, Candace Briceño, Margarita Cabrera, Emily Donjuan, Consuelo Jimenez Underwood and myself are creating contemporary artworks which blend craft traditions, neo-feminist ideology, and *naco-Mex-Tex* perspectives into a boiling pot of artistic menudo. The following is a discussion on these four contemporary Latina artists. For these women sewing is a means of production, an instrument of self-expression, and the vehicle for conveying imagery and meaning. Sewing is

tied to their cultural identity, but each artist arrived at sewing as an artistic medium through divergent routes. Emily Donjuan and Consuelo Jimenez Underwood learned to sew as children. Donjuan was taught by her grandmother; she remembers being instructed on an old sewing machine. This ability stayed with Donjuan over the years; she considers it to be a big part of her life. Donjuan says, “Sewing has been a form of craft that has helped me understand the power of femininity and family. Sewing for me allows me to channel the energy and strength that my grandmother represents in our family.” (E. Donjuan, personal communication, January 14, 2014)

Candace Briceño accidentally stumbled upon sewing as an art form in graduate school when an advisor suggested signing up for a fiber class; at the time her paintings dealt with abstracting textile patterns and designs. Initially, Briceño was horrified when she thought she was being pushed into the fiber world-- she considered herself a painter with a capital “P”. She was self-conscious about her lack of sewing skill; her rudimentary knowledge of sewing merely amounted to admiring and selecting fabrics for special dresses. Like my mother, Briceño’s mom was a knowledgeable seamstress who made clothes for her family. Briceño explained that in graduate school she was going through a self-discovery process: why am I here, who am I being trained to be, who is my audience, why did I chose this path? At times she would sit and reminisce about family, particularly her grandmother; by and large, she contemplated how the “language of art”, her artistic training, and the new direction of her artwork might cause an estrangement with her grandmother. In recalling the miniature wood sculptures and beautiful hand-sewn table cloths which her parents collected, Briceño realized she had spent her life observing her parents collect handmade objects. Eventually she stopped struggling against the fiber class and fused newly learned techniques into the familiar domain of painting. Her studio practice was reinvigorated and Briceño was able to honor her grandmother. Her ideology, art is a democratic form of

expression, remained intact. The foreign sewing techniques triggered childhood memories of women in her family sewing clothing, mending garments, and stitching blankets; the new language of art she was learning in graduate school was actually an old familial one. (C. Briceño, personal communication, December 28, 2013) Candace Briceño was at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago studying for her Masters of Fine Arts degree and Consuelo Jimenez Underwood was pursuing a Masters degree at San Jose State University; both artists made the switch from traditional art media to sewing while in school. Underwood explained, "Every time I saw a sewing machine I felt drawn to my past, my history and heritage. My indigenous ancestors were great weavers." (Rodriguez, 2013). Underwood's father who is of Huíchol heritage was a weaver from the age of 6 (Kho, 2012). By the late 1980s, Underwood had abandoned paint and brushes. Instead, she took up different instruments for creating her art: the loom and the sewing machine. Donjuan, Briceño, Underwood and I can trace the handicraft of sewing back to our respective families. Margarita Cabrera said there were no craft makers in her family, however, she feels craft making is a big part of Mexican culture. Cabrera travels to places in Mexico where people are making crafts, and she studies the old traditions in which they work, learns about their beliefs, and reconnects to her culture. The materials she chooses to work with are connected to traditional craft makers, yet her stitched vinyl sculptures of everyday objects are sewn with a machine. Cabrera says, "People aren't paying the worth of the crafts and don't value the work. Crafting is the heart of any country, when that is at risk the culture is at risk. Traditions are being lost; we need to bring artisans together to somehow make an economy" (Werthmann, 2012). Margarita Cabrera works on solo and collaborative projects with an emphasis on contemporary art practices, indigenous Mexican folk art and craft traditions. Similar to Candace Briceño, I have recollections of handiwork in my family history. In the 1990s, I was creating large wall

drawings with black conte when an artist friend casually commented that my line work resembled hair; this impromptu remark caused me to reflect on the nature of line, the concept of line quality and acknowledge hair as a viable source of line. With this in mind, I began a period of trial and error application of my hair as a drawing material. My skill level with the domestic craft of sewing was similar to Briceño's, yet, I decided to challenge myself—therefore, I began to clumsily and hesitantly sew. I regarded the embroidered pillow cases, the crocheted dollies and handmade quilts in my home with new respect; my mother had handcrafted these items. Coincidentally around the same time period, I picked up some postcards of religious icons on a trip to Spain; the postcards were embellished with thread to simulate the pattern and texture of their clothing. My sewing dexterity began to progress, and I was threading my needle with my own hair and stitching value patterns across figurative forms. The more I sewed, the more my confidence grew.

The aforementioned artists share a similitude in the same artistic medium, sewing; however, they approach the sewing process through a variety of modes. Candace Briceño uses hand dyed felt, acrylic, wool, and thread on canvas to create collage-like pieces. In addition, she creates drawings and soft sculptural works. All of Briceño's artworks underscore the importance of line. The line can be machine-stitched, painted, or embroidered around a soft form. It can also create a sharp edge along an otherwise amorphous shape (Douberley, 2006). Briceño's paintings contain minimalist elements of ghostly graphite lines juxtaposed with thin veils of acrylic paint. These modernist surfaces are punctuated by pattern felt work with elegant, wandering hand-stitched lines. Discussing her artwork, Cabrera says: '...when you have the line of the sewing machine going; I see that as a kind of drawing' (Bergstrom-Katz, n.d.). Cabrera is known for her oversized soft sculptural works sewn out of vinyl. These surprisingly large works are

painstakingly crafted in a way that amplifies their handmade qualities. “Stitches and seams have threads hanging from them, revealing their ingenious construction and individual attention” (Johnson, 2007). Cabrera leaves long threads dangling in an overt manner in her machine sewn artworks, while on the other hand, Briceño cleverly mimics the regular spacing of a sewing machine needle by leaving punctured holes in her drawing *Invisible*. The emptiness of the holes delineate fragile floral outlines in Briceño’s drawing; Cabrera’s extended threads emphasize the physicality of a flaccid form and its ability to unexpectedly unravel. Emily Donjuan creates soft sculptural works like Cabrera and Briceño, yet she also makes two dimensional works with a focus on pattern and hand-painted cloth. In Donjuan’s artworks: made out of fabric, yarn and thread, pinking shears make a zigzag pattern around squares; buttons act as subtle embellishments and loose threads shoot out like roots. Her hand-stitching outlines abstract figures. In other areas, the stitching marks act as an accent and suggest emotion. Donjuan is utilizing sewing in a painterly manner. “Working in this way has also allowed me to slow down and really think about my mark making through thread and fabric.” (E. Donjuan, personal communication, January 14, 2014) Both Briceño and I have tedious preliminary work to complete prior to sewing: Briceño laboriously hand dyes felt and I collect and sort my own hair. Like my comadres, I am incorporating sewing into my artistic practice. However, I am stitching with my own hair. The neutral color strands of hair are delicately stitched into canvas, mylar, assorted art papers, and sometimes cast in resin. The sewn line closely emulates the academic drawing techniques of hatching, cross-hatching, scribble, and stippling. As the length of my hair on the needle decreases with each stitch and I near the end, I trim my hair from the tied knot so the excess hair dangles lengthwise and protrudes from the canvas. This method of ending a sewn area adds an ephemeral quality to the artwork. Consequently, the hairs, animated and alive, snake

outward, break into the viewer's space. This labor intensive handiwork is done with small embroidery needles which seemingly leave no holes in the canvas. Similar to the previously discussed artists, Consuelo Jimenez Underwood is approaching the sewing process in a contemporary manner by combining traditional textile materials with those not commonly utilized like barbed wire, plastic coated wire and safety pins (Gualala Arts Center, 2010). She is known for using traditional loom-based Huíchol weaving techniques, in addition to, incorporating silk-screened images, stitching barb wire and weaving unconventional fibers (San Jose State University, n.d.). Consuelo Jimenez Underwood weaves and sews her eye-catching and controversial creations from all sorts of cloth, thread, leather and even paper (Rodriguez, 2013).

The physicality of labor is another shared feature among these artists. The process of sewing my hair into a surface has a meditative quality to it. There is a regular rhythm to the in-and-out motion of the needle. Sometimes sewing becomes a feat of endurance as I strive to complete hair drawings for an exhibition. The long sustained hours of sewing leaves my thumb and middle finger callous and precipitates the flare up of carpal tunnel syndrome. Candace Briceño's work deals with intimate details of the landscape. For her the repetition and labor is like a long conversation versus Consuelo Jimenez Underwood who describes the sewing process as weaving "corridos," songs about political and physical strife (KQED, n.d.). Briceño says there are moments when the labor becomes so overwhelming that her fingers become raw from sewing and the physical aspects of the activity becomes a challenge (Whitehead, 2010). Cabrera equates the work of the maquiladora to her meticulous, personal process of morphing hard industrial objects into softened, sewn replicas. By utilizing so-called women's work, Cabrera pays homage to the nameless women of the maquiladoras. She conjoins domestic with factory labor and allies

herself with both (Lindenberger, 2003). All of these artists relive and reinvent the domestic labor of women whether sewing with a machine or by hand. Paying homage to past cultural influences, these artists re-examine and contemporize the notion of what is a handcraft.

Sewing as an artistic medium holds these Latina artists together, but their artwork reflects disparate imagery from landscapes to consumer products to flags and figurative works. Candace Briceño's artwork presents quirky abstract landscapes to the viewer. She is fascinated by the elusive element of time and its subsequent impact on landscape. Growing up on a small ranch afforded her the ability to study one section of the property and observe a plurality of changes in nature such as color, light, erosion, germination, and evanesce. She acquires noesis and inspiration out of visiting counties in Texas and driving around with her camera and sketchbook (Whitehead, 2010). Her pictorial landscape paintings contain rendered paint stains acting as shadows, puffy appliquéés turning into abstractions of flowers and trees, and pom-pom flower tops blossoming from pipe cleaner stems (Ward, 2010). Briceño's observant eye takes in the multitude of unseen details in nature from the big picture to a tuft of grass. She has also constructed soft sculptures like *White Head & Sod* out of felt and thread on wire hoop. Conversely, Cabrera fabricated soft sculptures out of vinyl. Two well-known large sculptures by Margarita Cabrera are the vinyl Hummer and VW. An announcement about the discontinuation of the Volkswagon Beetle in 2003 was the impetus leading Cabrera to focus on the VW as a subject (Bergstrom-Katz, n.d.). In Mexico, taxis, ambulances, police cars, and delivery vehicles, are all VW Beetles. Many families own VWs; the car is a national icon in Mexico. By contrast, the Hummer is representative of power, excess, and consumerism. The history of the Hummer spans from early origins as a military vehicle to its rise as a civilian high-end vehicle. Cabrera considered the Hummer to be a status symbol of success: the ultimate trophy of the prosperous

American family. Cabrera's juxtaposition of the two vehicles is a commentary about societal values and materialism. Both Cabrera and Underwood are interested in sociopolitical topics; they examine issues about border relations and immigration. In Underwood's piece, *Frontera Rebozo's Noche/Día*, the viewer is confronted with the repetitive screen-printed image of a family running. "Underwood uses this symbol to represent her own history as a migrant agricultural worker, signifying her hybrid culture as well as the arbitrary lines that divide her homes." (Román-Odio, 2011). It is a common image found on the highways along the border between the United States and Mexico; the symbol on the crossing road sign serves as a warning to motorists that people and families might be running across the road: Caution! Held together with safety pins, hundreds of fabric swatches form a rebozo (KQED, n.d.). The rebozo is a long straight piece of cloth typically worn as a shawl or scarf in Mexico. Instead of sewing the pieces of fabric together, Underwood attaches the scraps of cloth with safety pins. As a practical device, Underwood says safety pins come from the ghetto of textile arts, hence even the safety pins become symbolic of our subconscious categorization of people who run across the border (KQED, n.d.). The *Triangle Flag* quilt replaces stars with flowers to signalize the four southern border fence states. Underwood is concerned with the construction of a wall-border and how it will impact the landscape of the borderlands. "The border is one land, always has been and always will," Underwood says. "The plants, animals and flowers know this." (Rodriguez, 2013). She grew up in a migrant family who worked in Calexico and live in the sister city across the border of Mexicali; Underwood spent her youth crossing the border on a daily basis. Like Cabrera and Underwood, I also have an interest in sociopolitical issues, but those referencing gender issues and feminism are more pertinent to my artwork. Working within a serial manner, I create works addressing topics like what it means to be a wife, evolution of body image in mass

media, and the impact of violence & sexuality on femininity. My artistic studies are focused on female history and its impact on social structures, whereas, Cabrera creates a comparative relationship between body image, and a more mechanical world of systems and structures (Paper Veins, 2000). My work is figurative from fragments to whole figures. The body communicates to the viewer in a provocative language; it speaks about sexism, ageism, eroticism, and maternity. My figurative work is representational and Donjuan's figurative forms are abstract. Emily Donjuan's art documents her family history. She tells stories that span from her grandmother's childhood to the birth of her son. These Latina artists introduce multidimensional ideas via imagery which is varied and complex, but the descriptive language of thread and needle conveys their artistic message in a tactile and meaningful manner.

Conclusion

Gustavo Arellano from Ask a Mexican!, a nationally syndicated column, wrote this reply to a reader who posed a question about sewing and Mexican culture,

“... While I'm glad that hipster chicks have gotten into sewing, crafting, and that whole Etsy chingadera over the past couple of years, it's old sombrero for Mexican mujeres, all whom know how to sew, stitch, weave and do miracles with cloth, strings, and needles. Can't tell you how many quinceañera dresses my tías made from materials bought at textile stores, or how many torn jeans my mami patched up over the years, or cuffs on khakis she created when cuffs were cool, and took off when they weren't” (Arellano, 2011).

While Arellano's column “Ask a Mexican!” is tongue-in-cheek, there is truth in his sarcastic and humorous answer. On a more serious note, Amalia Mesa-Bains coined the theory of “Domesticana,” a feminist-meets-Chicano approach that situates Chicana art production in the domestic sphere (Ibarra, 2008). The five Latina artists discussed: Briceño, Cabrera, Donjuan,

Underwood and I, produce artwork using the handicraft of sewing as part of our artistic toolbox. The sewn marks mimic the drawn line but instead of graphite we use thread, hair or yarn. Sewing has a long history in the Mexican culture. It serves a practical function within the cultural domain. These artists are part of a social nexus of thread and needle. Briceño, Cabrera, Donjuan have all created three dimensional soft sculptural works which engage the viewer with their playful and whimsical forms. Donjuan, Underwood, Briceño and I all relate the craft of sewing back to our personal family history. Together, we all decorate, join, and fasten cloth together to examine political issues and manifest personal mythology. Stitching, these artists are fastening together the past -- and the here & now.

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