

Who Sustains Our Tables?

by

Sara Serratos

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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a final project paper submitted by

Sara Serratos

This final paper has been read by each member of the following supervisory committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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Date

Chair:

Signature

05/23/2023

Date

[Redacted Signature]

Digitally signed by ebateman
Date: 2023.05.23 04:54:29
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Signature

5/23/2023

Date

[Redacted Signature]


Signature

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Art


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Date: 2023.05.23 12:03:31 -06'00'

V. Kim Martinez
Chair

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INTRODUCTION

According to Jean Baudrillard in *L'autre par lui-même (The Other by Itself)*, reflections and criticisms of our society reinforce the immune system of our thinking and, throughout history, test the social systems that govern us. How have these ideas manifested in and motivated my work?

Art in general, particularly contemporary art, is a form of knowledge. It often draws from social issues and is attentive to our history, engaging in a continuous critique of our behavior.

This text will address the inspiration for my thesis work and my experience as an immigrant, a woman, and an inhabitant of two cultures. Who am I here? I will always remember where I come from, and I can't let go of my origins, which implies repeatedly asking myself who I am here. This is one of the constant questions present in my daily life. The following text explores what happened to me when I entered the United States, when I found another cultural system and placed my identity in it.

When addressing these problems —and as Baudrillard pointed out— it is inevitable to criticize the society hosting me and see the country where I come from with different eyes.

This essay allows me to observe the past two years of work from a distance and reflect on what is behind my work and the ideas and feelings that have motivated me to make my artistic production during my MFA in Studio Art at The University of Utah.

I believe that it is a contemporary concern of art to be aware of what is happening now, because I think that art ultimately speaks to us about the present, about what happens in everyday life. To provoke a reflection that has a certain social utility, it is undeniable that our works directly or indirectly invite the viewer to that reflection. Here, several questions arise: Is art responsible for talking about the future? Educational systems speak to us about the past, politicians speak to us about promises for the future, and the role of artists is to speak about the present; however, it is necessary to see this trajectory and ask ourselves what will become of us as humanity.

GLOBALITY AND IDENTITY

Antonio Gramsci, in his writings from prison, was aware of the social deterioration produced by class divisions that are worsened by regional, cultural, and national differences; in addition to the different rhythms of development.

It seems that in order to be in contact with the identity of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, we have to visit the regional communities that were isolated from what we mean by contemporary “civilization.” By integrating into modernity, the traditions and ideologies of these indigenous peoples are diluted.

How can we deal with this problem today in the globalization era? Does national identity survive in our times? Do we want to be different from what we are? Art is a way of making visible and reflecting on this problem so that we can preserve the individuality of who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.

What is now left of these original identities? In Utah, the communities of indigenous peoples — Ute, Paiute, Shoshone, and Goshute— that we constantly thank for staying on their land, and maybe we do not even know what their traditions are when we continue with the comforts offered by contemporary industrial and mechanized culture. What do we rescue from those identities in our daily life and thinking? In some ornament, a dreamcatcher next to our bed or culinary art and handicrafts are what we have rescued the most from the traditions of the indigenous peoples in North America. It is common to enjoy culinary art from practically all parts of the world in big cities. At UNESCO, there is a movement that aims to treat culinary practices as intangible cultural heritage. The Government of Mexico offers the following description of Mexican culinary art:

Traditional Mexican cuisine is a comprehensive cultural model that encompasses agricultural activities, ritual practices, ancient practical knowledge, culinary techniques, and ancestral communal customs and behaviors. This has been made possible thanks to the participation of the community throughout the traditional food chain: from planting and harvesting crops to culinary preparation and the enjoyment of delicacies. The fundamental elements of this system are corn, beans, and chili peppers, as well as unique cultivation methods such as the *milpa* (crop rotation of corn and other plants with slash-and-burn techniques) and the *chinampa* (artificial island cultivation in lacustrine areas). Culinary preparation techniques include *nixtamalization* (corn hulling with lime water to increase its nutritional value), and special utensils such as metates and stone mortars. Native ingredients like various tomato varieties, squash, avocados, cocoa, and vanilla are added to the basic food products. Mexican culinary art is highly elaborate and rich in symbolism: daily staples such as tortillas and tamales also form part of the offerings made on the *Day of the Dead*.¹

¹ For more information visit the webpage Cultural heritage and Tourism of the Government of Mexico: https://patrimonioculturalyturismo.cultura.gob.mx/patrimonio_inmaterial/cocina_mexicana/#ad-image-0



GODALUPE, short film, 2023. Behind the scenes photography.

What contact do we have with nature, that is important in the identities of those primitive cultures? What relationship do we have with water, that is wasted every day? Accustomed to the immediate, we don't think about the future. Our daily contact now is not with nature: it is with plastic, petroleum products, microprocessors, etc. We replace our original gods with the oracles we find on the internet. In my reflection and in the last work I produced during these two years, a short film titled *GODALUPE*, I was attracted to the identity that we often intuit but do not know; only by traveling can we be in contact with the original communities, with their way of living and their thinking.

The new technologies kill the ancient gods and give birth to others.
—Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus*.

In the preproduction of my film, I thought about including sections of the archaeological zone of Calakmul and a *cenote*². In one of the selected locations, I had the opportunity to talk with Mauricio Hau, an inhabitant caretaker of the cenote, and other members of the Mayan community where we recorded. He told us about the origins and mysteries of cenotes, respect for water and its color changes, plants, roots, and the existence of mythological beings that govern their daily life, such as the *aluxes*. Mauricio is a person familiar with the Mayan culture, and he has been concerned with preserving their traditions. These conversations with Mauricio are recorded on video as research material. The *Yokdzonot* community saw their traditions at risk for letting the train pass (a current Mexican government tourist project), so they did not let that means of communication pass on their lands. They thought their lands, traditions, and customs were at risk if they joined this idea of progress through the presence of a railroad. This inspired me to adjust the script and to be able to adopt a spiritual approach in the film: no dialogues were

² A cenote is a spring water deposit found in the Mexican state of Yucatan and other parts of America, generally at some depth. From the Maya tz'onot 'well', 'abyss'.

necessary, and I tried to connect the viewer with the magic of those people, to rescue their identity. The protagonist leaves behind the comforts of the city and contemporary civilization; she moves to get in touch with her origins. She relates to what she is, with her roots, and ceases to be anyone in the middle of these low-income housing (where I come from) to become, through this journey, a goddess.

In my short film *GODALUPE*, magic and transformation are elements inherited from my journeys on the indigenous lands (Maya, Nahuatl, Otomi, Mixe, Zapoteco, and Chiapaneco) that I had the opportunity to know in Mexico during the last seven years. In this film, the protagonist appears walking, an act that allows us to get to know a place with more intimacy, wearing indigenous dresses from Zapoteco culture. Some objects that appear and have an intimate connection with the protagonist are a seashell, an obsidian mirror, a pineapple purse, and beaded earrings. The seashell that she intuited blows and announces events happening as a premonition. The obsidian mirror, which has traditional importance to the people of this area and other indigenous lands, allows her to see herself during her transformation on the same surface as her ancestors, a pineapple purse made with *rafia*³ that connects her to her community, and beaded earrings that remark her culture.



GODALUPE, 2023.
Stills from the short film.

³ Raffia comes from the segments of the leaves of the Raphia palm.

What has taken us away from our origins in the Americas? The idea of having a “happy world,” a “better world,” is also the idea of having a more comfortable world, being in communication with others. Typically, connecting and communicating with others through a screen. How do I know who I am in this confusion of data? How can we talk about national identity if, when we are thirsty, we want a Coca-Cola? This transnational identity is what consumer society sells us, it is an experience, not the object.

The origin of culture lies in community. (...) The more culture becomes a commodity, the more it leaves its origin behind. The total commercialization and commodification of culture leads to the destruction of community. (...) Community as a commodity spells the end of community.

—Byung-Chul Han, *Non Things*.

Then do we have to talk about a global identity? In my opinion, that doesn't exist. It is a construct as well as a national identity. Globalization grants the right to consume other cultures. Consumerism is the new cannibalism, where one can culturally devour another.

Globalization vs. Identity, identity is a personal matter, isn't it? In addition to the proximity of the two countries to which I belong: Mexico and the United States, a part of my identity is in Utah because my great-grandfather migrated from Mexico to these lands and died in an accident in a coal mine in what was once Rains, Utah. He is buried in Price, Utah.

Mexico's proximity to the United States provokes an exchange between the two cultures: during the live broadcast of the Super Bowl in the United States, tons of guacamole with tortilla chips are consumed, and we in Mexico are consuming tons of hamburgers or Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Currently, the national identity is blurred but when we work in arts, that original essence comes out; the work of art seems to acquire a therapeutic function, a healing effect that can relate us back to our roots. I have worked around this idea during my time in the MFA program.

Globality combined with what both Byung-Chul Han and Yuval Harari refer to as dataism, the religion of data, distances us from our identity. The issue of dataism makes it challenging to find our authentic selves; we dissolve into the data and the experiences of others.

In the artwork *Institutional Photography*, a video performance, I explore how my identity, represented through photographic images, becomes data for institutions: country of origin, sex, height, weight, race, ethnicity, etc.

For this work, I used my personal ID documents as a citizen of Mexico and a resident of the United States, two nation-states that organize, categorize and control bodies using the physical features of people's faces. Photography plays a role in this control and surveillance. I am interested in the particular graphics that institutions use by adding layers on people's faces, and using this manipulation as a way of recognizing that you are part of a sector.



Institutional Photography. Video performance, 2022.

Upon entering the United States, I became aware that a person's identity is partly based on their skin color, ethnicity, and race. In Mexico, however, we are constitutionally equal, and accepted with our diversity, and this realization surprised and provoked me to question my identity and sense of belonging. After migrating to the US and upon being involved in institutions such as education or health, the questions about race and ethnicity were common. The prospect of being labeled, according to such criteria as race, ethnicity, or skin color, made me think about why this information is relevant. The fact that institutions categorized me and turned me into data was the raw material for this reflection.

How can one define oneself solely based on race, ethnicity, or skin color? Shouldn't our identity be shaped by what we feel and think? The primary driving force behind my artistic creations has been this cultural transfer, which allowed me to preserve my identity in another environment and encouraged me to adopt a critical stance. I believe that art is a dialectical process whereby we must remain attentive to our thoughts and emotions, ensuring coherence between them and our actions.

From a technical standpoint, my experience in the studio has allowed me to experiment with the idea of collage and graphic design, using my personal archive of identifications as a Mexican citizen and a US resident, in addition to recognizing the broader spectrum of cultural and physical differences across the planet.

However, otherness has become a commodity, and these cultural differences have been exploited by capitalism. Works of art that address these issues have been turned into consumer goods, with art fairs dedicated to Latin American art, where most of the works presented revolve around this problem of what Western culture considers exotic, underground, a gaze into the unknown, and otherness. Another example is the work of Paul Gauguin, with his Eurocentric and impressionistic views of Polynesia, have taken advantage of the landscapes and everyday life of the region, portraying otherness as something exotic. The works of Afro-descendant artists like Paulo Nazareth in Brazil have also become commodities, even though their works critique the art market. From a cultural perspective, there is wide commercialization of handicrafts whose surplus value of product do not return to their communities.

Tahitian Women on the Beach,
1891, Paul Gauguin.
Colección de Musée d'Orsay.



Banana Market/Art Market,
2011, Paulo Nazareth, photo
printing on cotton paper, 30 ×
40 cm. From Mendes Wood
Gallery, which currently
represents his work.

Globalization, through technologies, has involved surveillance mechanisms over populations. The heightened computing power makes you trackable, knowing who you are and what you consume within a given location, through the network. The network knows us better than we know ourselves and has shown us that through its algorithms. Could it be that the new global identity is belonging to that flow of data? I am on the cloud, ergo sum. This is a consequence of a change in identity. We replace our roots and our original identity begins to mold itself into something else. We forget about our origins and start labeling with hashtags, a code interpreted by any cybernaut, regardless of their geographical location.

Globalization has an inherent connection with technology, as networks allow us to connect to the global data system making us part of something larger than ourselves, like religions. People simply want to be part of the flow of data, even if it means losing their privacy, autonomy, and individuality. As Yuval Harari states, we are turning our experiences into data: the new motto is, “If you experience something, record it; if you record something, upload it; if you upload something, share it.” We are busy transforming our experiences into data, it’s not a matter of being trendy, it’s a matter of survival.

With their large databases, the networks know how we feel plus a million more data points about us. Now we must stop listening to our feelings and listen to external algorithms. Like a mirage, we see images on our screens of what to buy and how to make ourselves feel better.

Art can be a form of resistance in the face of globalization.

CONSUMER SOCIETY

What's the point of freedom if you can't afford rent, study what you're interested in, pay for tuition, travel where you want, or even buy a car? (...) Liberalism perpetuates inequality and condemns the masses to poverty and the elite to alienation.

—Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus*.

Upon reflecting on my experience in a consumer society, I was surprised to find myself confronted with an economic reality different from Mexico's and, moreover, to discover that I am immersed in it. This term has been addressed by various artists and art critics throughout history, such as Arthur Danto, who argues that a work of art can generate reflection. Danto proposes a turning point through Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes, and when art moved from talking about a series of objects to addressing themes such as religion, which previously was the only way to express oneself. In this sense, there is a reflection on consumer society through art about art. This was my first approach to letting myself be seduced by consumption and accessibility.

In an economy where, according to the World Bank in 2012, there were one billion people worldwide earning less than one dollar a day, and another 1.5 billion earning between one and two dollars a day (which means that 2.5 billion people were earning two dollars or less per day).⁴ In Mexico and Global South, there is a survival problem, "*A ver cómo le haces*,"⁵ as a consequence, and ironically, there is no opportunity to have smooth skin. The first set of works seen from a distance is a critique not only of hyper-consumption and the seduction of those of us who come from another economy without access to all of this but also of ecological implications, such as the use of plastic. Another aspect is that in Latin America, we ultimately have a problem with little access to technology, but that is more than just a problem.

In *Beauty Secrets*, a video performance, I was able to use residual objects from “beauty” culture that I have collected since I migrated to the US. What is actually sold to us? Is it how to be more beautiful and prolong life and youth? Or is it a desire to look better and to appear as someone else? What are the promises of our contemporary society? How can we think about a better present and look toward a collective future?

⁴ World Bank, World Development Indicators 2012, Washington D.C., World Bank, 2012, p. 72.

Para información actualizada, visitar: <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/search/dataset/0037712/World-Development-Indicators>

⁵ "*A ver cómo le haces*" can be translated to "Let's see how you manage" or "Let's see how you handle it" (This is a common expression in Mexico that is used to express doubt about how someone will accomplish something.)

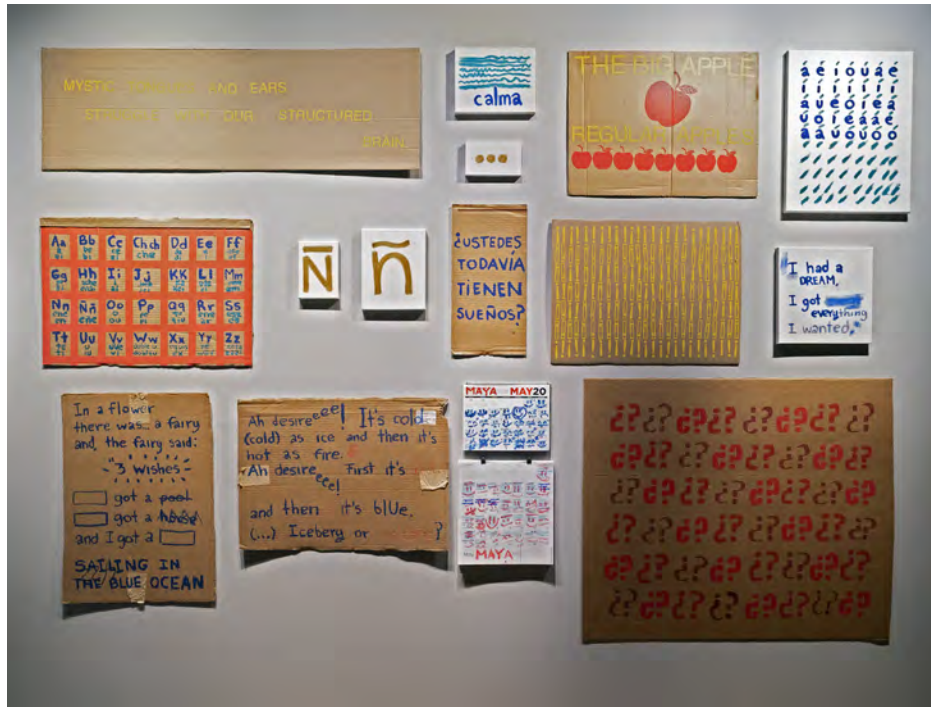


Beauty Secrets. Digital Photography, 2022.
Collection of beauty and hygiene products since I migrated.
Commentary to Vogue Beauty Secrets videos on YouTube.

Collecting has been part of my practice. I have been in relation with the ideas of collecting by Ana Maria Guasch. Putting theory into practice allowed me not only to experiment with the problems of working in the studio with lighting but also to give context to the problems of mass consumption of these products. At that moment, when I started that search, I pulled that thread, not knowing where it would take me; it was the starting point and it was visceral. While producing this video performance, I analyzed the beauty industry: a dominant culture's gaze on beauty, skin color and tones, the accessibility of trying these products, and the tons of disposable plastics.



Beauty Secrets (still from video).
Video Performance, 2022.



American Dream Wall, 2020-2021.

Wall calendars, canvases and collection of cardboard —from the package of items I bought online during the pandemic— intervened with handwriting and vinyl letters. Installation at Finch Lane Gallery during my solo exhibition *Mystic tongues and ears struggle with our structured brain, 2023.*

In the artwork *American Dream Wall*, which I started during the pandemic and finished in the first semester of my MFA studies, I explored my migratory experience and my first approach to online shopping. Being in another country, beyond being a tourist, led me to relive a mixture of first experience and approach to language, in my case English, approaching it more intimately, almost like the first experience with letters and numbers. I remarked what I missed about my mother tongue, Spanish. What happens when somebody moves between cultures and starts their life over again? One day, you find yourself transplanting your roots to a different place. Being a total stranger, you don't know anybody, and nobody knows you. Your mother tongue is not the local language. The color of your skin seems to be relevant to this society. What about your homeland? Are you escaping from something or someone? As time passes, you become accustomed to the land and the environment; your body is part of it now. Is this foreign space better than your previous home? Is this land still foreign to you? Is the adapting process worth it? There is a nostalgia of stopping time for a bit and asking ourselves: do we still have dreams? People migrate for a reason. People from Latin America might flee violent environments hoping to find a safer place to continue their lives. People have always migrated, and there will always be nomadic spirits. In our contemporary time, migration should be a human right. Let borders vanish! In addition to these feelings, I have sometimes remained isolated due to excessive work, lack of transportation and communication, winter, and then the pandemic. This prompted me to analyze my situation, which is very similar to that of many people and relatives that migrate that you surely have. This installation was hung on my bedroom wall for a couple of years.

MIGRATION

Que lejos estoy del suelo donde he nacido
Inmensa nostalgia invade mi pensamiento
Al verme tan sola y triste cual hoja al viento
Quisiera llorar, quisiera morir de sentimiento
Oh tierra del sol, suspiro por verte
Ahora que lejos yo vivo sin luz, sin amor
Al verme tan sola y triste cual hoja al viento
Quisiera llorar, quisiera morir de sentimiento
—Canción Mixteca

How far I am from the ground where I was born
Immense nostalgia invades my thought
Seeing me so alone and sad like a leaf in the wind
I would like to cry, I would like to die of feeling
Oh land of the sun, I sigh to see you.
Now that far away I live without light, without love.
Seeing me so alone and sad like a leaf in the wind
I would like to cry, I would like to die of feeling
—Mixtec song (Mexican song), performed by Ry
Cooder in Paris Texas by Wim Wenders.

During my stay in the US, I have had similar feelings about being far from my country as the *Canción Mixteca* “Immense nostalgia invades my thought.” In the artwork *Letter to Mexico, 2023*, a sculptural metal sheet, I wrote about my nostalgic emotions that I needed to pour somewhere outside of me.



Lunes, 06 Feb 23

Extraño a MEXICO: su gente, la comida, a mi familia, a mi mamá, a mis amigxs. Ya quiero ir, regresar para comer unos buenos tacos y un jugo de frutas recién hecho. Las tortillas que saben a maíz. Las salsitas: verde, roja, y morita. El agua de horchata. Los sonidos del pueblo y la ciudad. Espero reencontrarte pronto. Atte. Sara.

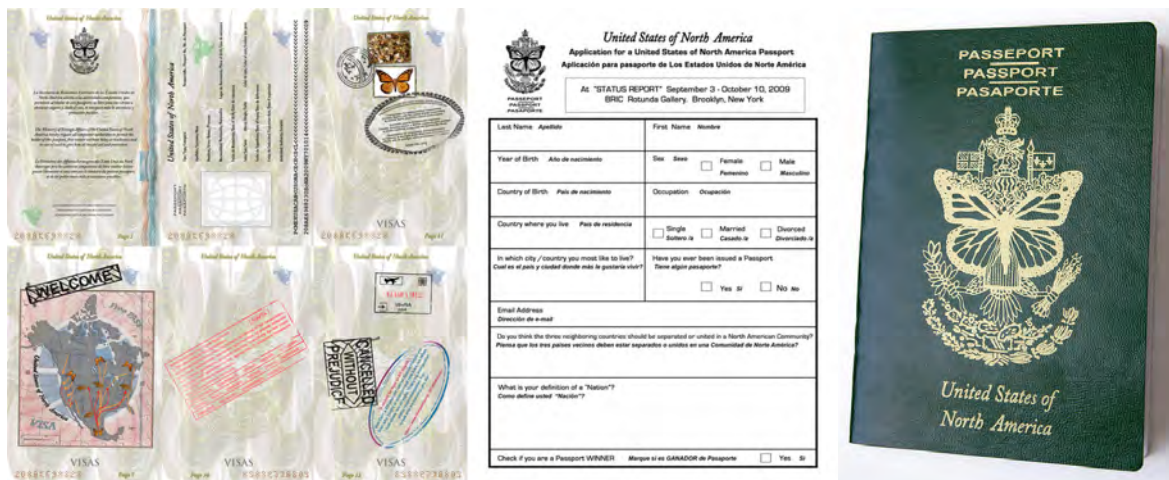
Monday, February 6th, 2023.

I miss MEXICO: its people, the food, my family, my mom, my friends. I already want to go, return to eat some delicious tacos and freshly made fruit juice. The tortillas that taste like corn, the salsitas: green, red, and morita. The horchata water. The sounds of the town and the the city. I hope to reunite with you soon. Sincerely, Sara.

Letter to Mexico, 2023.
Steel sheet intervened with text.

Why does migration occur? It happens in search of better living conditions for human and non-human animals. I believe a good example of migration is the monarch butterfly, in their journey to and from Canada to Mexico, where no one asks them for a passport or visa. In their southern journey, they sacrifice their sexual instincts to arrive in the oyamel forests of Mexico in a single generation.

Mexican artists like Erika Harrsch have addressed the issue of migration. *The United States of North America Passport* project reflects on the elimination of borders, specifically in North America, by creating a fictional passport for access among the three countries that make up the region: Canada, the United States, and Mexico using the monarch butterfly as a symbol.



United States of North America Passport, 2009. Erika Harrsch. Limited edition passport. Passport cover and pages. 5 3/4 x 4 inches / 14.5 x 10 cms.

What happens to our identity when we migrate? Do we preserve it or dilute it? In my case, I migrated to improve my quality of life and achieve economic independence. I have been living in a subjective space, especially during the pandemic when I lived and worked in my bedroom for a year and a half. During that time, I felt like my bedroom could be anywhere in the world, but when I stepped outside, I found myself in the United States. The U.S. has a tendency to treat everything artificially, especially the land. That's why in my artwork *Land Acknowledgement*, I used artificial grass squares to speak about artificiality and how nature is shaped and manicured. This piece was made with my own hair from two periods after I migrated: the first in September 2019, when I cut my hair, which was the longest it had ever been, to symbolize a new stage in my life, and the second in September 2021, after an accident, when I couldn't take care of my hair anymore. I was inspired to use my hair after visiting Native Voices, an exhibition about indigenous communities in Utah, in the Natural History Museum.

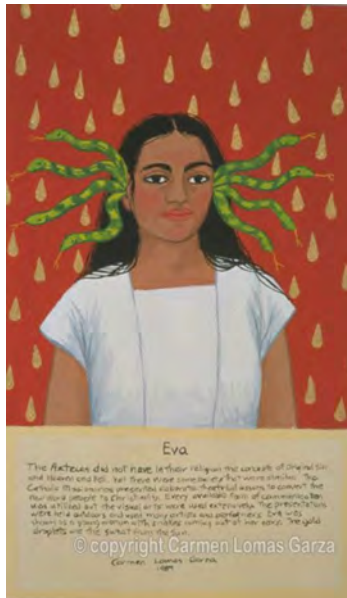
GODALUPE, video performance, 2022 and *Land Acknowledgment*, installation, 2022. During the MFA interim show *Living Document*, 2023 at Alvin Gittins Gallery.



In *Land Acknowledgment*, an installation, I wanted to talk about the U.S. and its history. The land where I am migrating is the land of indigenous people and descendants, afro people and descendants, settler colonizers and descendants, and migrants and descendants. I wanted to talk about my adapting process as an immigrant.

In the artwork *GODALUPE*, a video performance, I aim to communicate that there's an inner force of protection and resistance in mestizxs bodies. That force or energy lives in our bodies. I also wanted to address the difficulties in migration, especially in our brain structure while speaking another language, and cultural shock and assimilation: pre-Columbian era, the Spaniard colonization, the creation of State-Nations, Globalization, how there is an impact on language: Nahuatl, Spanish from Mexico, Spanglish from people who migrate, and English from Chicano culture.

For the artwork *GODALUPE*, I was inspired by two artworks, one from Chicano Art, the *Eva* painting by Carmen Lomas Garza from 1989, where we can see serpents coming out of the young woman's ears and the Aztec Sculpture from pre-Columbian art named *Coatlicue*, the Aztec Goddess, is made of two serpents forming the head of the Goddess and the skirt of serpents. The serpent is, for me, a symbol of power. In my video performance, we can see a brain that I took from the branches of a tree that I put on my mouth, addressing the complexity of thinking in a language that is not your mother tongue. I wrote a haiku with these ideas: *Mystic tongues and ears struggle with our structured brain.*



Eva, 1989. Carmen Lomas Garza.
Gouache on cotton Paper, 9 x 51/2 inches.



Coatlicue Statue, 2.52 meters.
Coatlicue goddess, (Nahuatl: “Serpent Skirt”)
Aztec earth goddess, symbol of the earth as
both creator and destroyer, mother of the gods
and mortals.

In the painting *Eva*, Carmen Lomas Garza explains how the Aztecs did not have in their religion the concepts of original sin and heaven and hell. Yet there were some beliefs that were similar. The Catholic Missionaries presented elaborate theatrical lessons to convert the new world people to Christianity. Every available form of communication was utilized, but the visual arts were used extensively. The presentations were held outdoors and used many artists and performers. *Eva* was shown as a young woman with snakes coming out of her ears. The gold droplets are the sweat from the sun.

After analyzing and reading the words in Eva's painting, I immediately connected with the Aztec Goddess, Coatlicue, who is made of serpents. I think that connection using the serpent symbol helped the Spaniards convert Aztecs to Catholicism, a European religion. With these two artworks, I was inspired and influenced to think about a contemporary Goddess following the ideas of Chicano writer Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Borderlands / La Frontera*, where she made a historical evolution in language and religion in Mexican culture. Starting from Coatlicue (Nahuatl from pre-Columbian Mesoamerica) to Coatlalopeuh (starting the Spaniard colonization) and ending in Guadalupe (Spanish), I imagined how in our contemporary and globalized culture, blended with English, a possible name would be Godalupe.



From Coatlicue to Godalupe, 2022.
Vinyl on cardboard.

FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE TO THE CITY

According to Yuval Harari in *Homo Deus*, in 1850, over 90 percent of humans were agricultural workers, and the future belonged to them. In 2010, only 2 percent of the people from the United States worked in agriculture, 20 percent worked in industry, and 78 percent worked as teachers, doctors, web designers, etc. Gradually, this change took place. Humans have two types of abilities: physical and cognitive. Machines have gradually replaced the physical capabilities of humans, reducing the number of people working in industry or agriculture. The number of workers has decreased. There is a reconfiguration of the economy and production. In the past, humans could do many things, but now robots and computers are replacing some tasks.

In the case of migrant agricultural workers, their work is undervalued and underpaid, perhaps due to the competition from the industrialization of agriculture, which makes their labor non-competitive. However, due to the poor living conditions in Central America and South America, there are people who migrate to Canada and the US who are willing to accept these unfavorable work conditions. These individuals are not considered citizens, they live in fear of being deported, they do not have health insurance and they are not receiving a livable salary. The situation in our Latin American countries is not very different; few people want to work in the countryside. It is poorly paid work, physically demanding, and many crops are seasonal, making them vulnerable to natural disasters that can result in the loss of their harvests.

The attractive part of the Latin American countryside is the richness and abundance of fruits and vegetables. The marvelous colors, textures, flavors, and scents. It is something astonishing; I couldn't imagine such perfect forms. Although ephemeral, they deteriorate over time, rot, and become compost to fertilize the land.

The pleasure, the connection with these particular flavors, which also reach the United States through trade, remind me of my homeland, Mexico: the fields, the landscapes, the wonderful people who dedicate themselves to farming, who have this contact with nature and can see these fruits and vegetables grow.

All these sensations that here in Utah, the consumer may not imagine and perhaps only associate with the supermarket and their kitchen, are what I wanted to rescue in the exhibition space of my MFA thesis exhibition. I want to coexist with fruits and vegetables in a different way, with the presence of fruits and vegetables in the gallery I think there is a direct connection with their place of origin, their land. This is accentuated by the support of projected photographs of cactus leaves plantations.



From the series: *Cactus leaves plantations*, 2023.
Medium format color film.
Analog photography.

The relationship of Mexicans with the countryside is, to a certain extent, close. In Mexico, in addition to supermarkets, we have street markets called “tianguis” that allow us to interact directly with fruits and vegetables. We are accustomed to this array and diversity of colors and smells, experiencing it at least twice a week, even in cities. It is a coexistence with agricultural products, transported to the city with less industrialization, fostering a more direct relationship between the producer and the consumer, with fewer intermediaries involved.

To some extent, the interaction with fruits and vegetables in the streets of the city is something that I miss here in the United States, and in my MFA exhibition, I wanted to share this reflection and sensation with all attendees.

Camioncito, 2023.
Cargo truck from a street market in Mexico City.
Digital photograph.



Tianguis, 2023.
Street market in Mexico City.
Digital photograph.



In the individual artwork *Who sustains our tables?*, and the entire body of work, it was important to address historical events that I consider the reminiscences of colonialism and modern-day enslavement as a result of low wages. My intention was to make visible that the people who work and continue to work on the land are of Afro and Indigenous descent. In the United States, those who work the land typically come from Latin America. Fruits and vegetables come from the soil, nurtured by the people who take care of them

I wanted to incorporate the trucks that transport fruits and vegetables from the countryside to the city. In the case of the United States, trailers go from the field to the distribution center and from the distribution center to supermarkets, such as Walmart.

In this piece, the small trucks are traditional Mexican toys, the last ones crafted by an artisan who immigrated to the United States, to integrate into a system where they are exploited, perhaps harvesting produce, cleaning toilets, washing dishes, or in a range of low-paying jobs.

From an emotional perspective, the table legs that shape this piece belonged to my first table when I migrated to the United States and the tabletop belongs to my current table.



Who sustains our tables?, 2023.

Installation: fresh fruits and vegetables, table legs, tabletop, and wood trucks toys.

From a conceptual standpoint, I believe this work invites us to reflect on what happens daily. In this case, the consumption of fruits and vegetables. Often, we don't think about what is behind it all. We approach these foods from a nutritional standpoint, rather than a socio-economic one. We worry about nutrients, proteins, fats, but we don't worry about the effort that people who cultivate these products put in. We don't think about the economic and supply chain implications. Beyond nutritional properties, there is a financial imbalance between the consumer and the producer.

For example, during my trip to produce my short film, I was able to have a dialogue with the pineapple producers, and the relationship was not about buying hundreds of thousands of units but just one unit. It cost me 0.25 cents of a dollar, while in the US, it costs 5 dollars. We're talking about a 20-to-one ratio. This difference implies an inequality that concerns me as a Latin American because we are fighting in our countries for a more equal distribution of wealth. Mexico is a country rich in these products, but it is one with a very low per capita income. Some examples of agricultural wealth include avocado, pineapple, melon, mango, orange, tomato, and banana.

In the artwork *Nopales*, using aluminum, I wanted to reflect on how changing the material of vegetables and fruits, their value might grow. Additionally, how we use metals, especially aluminum, to preserve some fruits and vegetables in cans, for example, peaches in syrup or peppers in vinegar.



Nopales, 2023.
Aluminum casting.
(Photo by Amy Walchli.)

In the United States, labels with barcodes identify the origin of fruits and vegetables that are common in supermarkets, allowing their identification and purchase of these entities converted into products. In the *Fruits and Vegetables Stickers Sign* artwork, I wanted to increase the size of the labels to emphasize the origin and the names of fruits and vegetables, since in our daily life, we may not even know how long our product had to travel or who planted them and took care of them to be on our tables.



Fruits and Vegetables Stickers Sign, 2023.
Aluminum and galvanized metal sheets coated with
spray paint, hung on an aluminum structure.
(Photo by Amy Walchli.)

In the *Banana boxes pyramid wall* and the photographs of plantations, I wanted to show the labor that it takes to have fruits and vegetables available at the supermarket, as well as show the packing of how they travel.



Banana boxes pyramid wall, 2023.
Installation made with banana boxes and analog photos of cactus leaves
plantation projected on the wall.
(Photo by Amy Walchli.)

The artwork *Niches for Fruits and Vegetables* reflects ephemerality: the decay of banana leaves and fruits, of colors, of matter. It generated new meanings and changed the formal aspect of the work that I had not considered during the production of the artwork. It opens a path for reflection on deterioration and change, which is related to us, to aging, to how we transform, and how everything transforms, especially the organic matter that loses its vitality.

We are accustomed to seeing fruits and vegetables piled up in supermarkets, but when we hold a fruit or vegetable in our hands, there is a one-to-one relationship with these entities. I find spirituality in fruits and vegetables, and my purpose in creating altar-like spaces for them is to elevate the work of the hands of agriculture workers and cease to see fruits and vegetables as disposable products. They transform into spiritual sustenance, nourishment for the eyes, noses, and mouths, with their vibrant colors, enticing aromas, and delightful flavors—a ritual for the senses, transforming them into religious figures.

Regarding the design of the niches, I decided to avoid references to European religions, considering that Catholicism is the dominant one in Mexico. Instead, I wanted to connect with the popular culture of Mexico. For instance, people create their own altars in the streets to remember someone who died in a violent manner on the street or road, known as cenotaphs. These improvised altars feature offerings that reflect the deceased's preferences. I consider these niches to be more closely related to cenotaphs than churches. Additionally, I wanted to incorporate an element of home cooking, so I used wooden cutting boards, where we prepare these fruits and vegetables to eat and nurture our bodies. The cutting boards I used belonged to my family, these boards range in age, some are 30, 20, 10, and 5 years old.

Culinary art, which sometimes happens in our kitchens, and families share recipes from generation to generation, completes the cycle we have discussed, encompassing the cultivation of crops and the preparation of food using traditional ingredients, local fruits, and vegetables. This entire process, from the labor in the fields of the agricultural workers to the food that reaches our mouths, is an intangible heritage. It is a part of gathering with our roots.

I used aromatic cedar in the artwork *Niches for Fruits and Vegetables*, which reminded me of religious spaces and I decided to show their natural aspect and color. With this project, I was able to experiment with woodworking, which led me to reflect on precious woods and their origin.



Close up to a niche of the installation:
Niches for Fruits and Vegetables, 2023.
(Photo by Amy Walchli.)



Niches for Fruits and Vegetables, 2023.

Installation: aromatic cedar, family archive of kitchen cutting boards, banana leaves on brick, and fresh fruits and vegetables (chayote, corn, dragon fruit, and serrano pepper).
(Photo by Amy Walchli)



Niches for Fruits and Vegetables, 2023.

After two weeks of installation.
(Photo by Amy Walchli)

ARTIST STATEMENT:

Sun, soil, seeds, water, wind, light, night, leaves, flowers, bees, insects, pollination, fruits, vegetables, land, agriculture, hands, to work, to sow, to plant, people that work the land, history, plantations, enslavement, roots, inequity, injustice, low wages.

In this body of work, I am interested in vegetables and fruits as a product, nourishment, and religious figure.

I am portraying the mass production of vegetables and fruits, their importation and exportation. To fulfill its purpose as a product, the produce has been cataloged and categorized with a bar code that shows how much they cost. We can see their value, what country they come from, and their name on the stickers attached at the supermarkets.

In this interchange of produce with currency, I want to emphasize who has worked the land. Since the colonization of the Americas, the exploitation of the land by the Europeans and now by the governments of the state nations and private corporations, the people that worked and continue to work the land are predominantly indigenous, afro-descendant, and mestizos. Once they worked the land without freedom and now there is a new enslavement, low wages without health insurance and benefits. Is it freedom working without having a livable wage?

Produce is vital for our existence, our nourishment, and our diet. No matter where, if it is the supermarket, the markets, or even the streets, we go and bring them home weekly. Produce is part of our homes, our recipes, our history, our ancestry, our memories, and our family.

Produce comes from fertile land with the right humidity and amount of sunlight so it can grow. In the Americas, the produce comes from the plantations ranging from Canada to Chile. I live in Utah; I live in the desert. I live in a land with extreme weather conditions. These fruits and vegetables come from where I am from, Mexico.

My personal relationship with fruits and vegetables is one on one. I see each of these entities as completely perfect even though they are out of their own norm, irregular sizes and forms. I could not imagine more perfect figures, textures, colors, and tastes. I found spirituality and holiness in fruits and vegetables.

In my attempt to avoid any relation with the exotic, an approach to the eccentric, a gaze of othering, and what is not “regular”, “normal”, or “out of routine.” I decided that the produce that deserves to be in a niche are those that already have a religious connotation in pre-Columbian cultures and religions —such as corn for the Maya culture which is stated in the Popol Vuh, the sacred book. I am Mexican, I would like to focus on Mexico, the produce that is part of the identity of the country. The cactus leaves appear in the flag of Mexico, the legend of the formation of Tenochtitlan —the capital of the Aztec empire, which is now Mexico City, and are part of our daily diet. The produce that is part of the Mexican diet, such as the avocado, the

tomatillo, the poblano pepper, the pineapple, the lime, the bananas (female and male), and the squash chayote. Finally, the produce that is a weapon itself, such as the squash chayote, the cactus leaves, the pineapple, the dragon fruit, and the serrano pepper.

CONCLUSIONS

The remarkable opportunity to further advance my artistic career during two years abroad and amidst my migration journey while studying at the University of Utah provided me with an invaluable experience to explore and experiment with previously unfamiliar techniques and supports. While venturing into the lighting studio, I delved into various mediums, including film, metal, and woodwork. This diverse range of mediums enabled me to contemplate concepts through a fresh perspective. Although my primary goal was to enhance my photography skills, I eagerly seized the chance to participate in these workshops that were unavailable to me at *La Esmeralda*, fully embracing the opportunity for artistic experimentation.

I have never abandoned analog photography, as I felt I did not have the support to work with it during this program or at *La Esmeralda*. However, I continued to work on this line independently, buying a scanner, developing film, and working with color and slide film, which presented different possibilities in chromatic performance. In my professional work with analog photography, I continued to work on it at home.

During the MFA program, I was introduced to Chicano Art and Latin American Art, specialized courses I had never studied. When I studied Art in Mexico, the academic approach that permeated the courses and the one I selected was focused on the U.S. and Europe. I found insightful the Art History classes I attended here at the University of Utah regarding Latin American Art, especially the course focused on Afro-Latin American Art from a social movement and research perspective. Since it helped me connect with my roots within the art and culture sphere and motivated me to talk about themes that I feel connected to and feel I have, if not the right, the duty to research and to make visible what has been invisibilized. If I have in the future the opportunity to continue my studies in research, I would love to attend a Ph.D. program in Latin American Art Studies or PreColumbian Art.

What's next? Concerning my artwork, I want to continue exploring and working on the photographic project I started at the end of my MFA, focusing on plantations, labor, and the people that work the land across Mexico and the US.

I also want to keep building my career as an independent filmmaker. I would like to fully develop the second script I wrote at the end of 2022, the project I named *The Tlicue Sisters*. I would love to have those ideas on paper transformed into moving images on a screen and have the opportunity to experience the process of making the film with collaborators and see how we manage to bring the images I imagine to a screen.

I am reflecting on how to use the research material in video and photography that I created during the opportunity to visit archeological sites and communities in Mexico during the last seven years. I have conversations with inhabitants of regional zones, such as the wonderful stories and conversations with Mauricio Hau.

Additionally, I aspire to continue my growth as an educator. In the last semester of the program, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to teach. While this experience presented challenges, I firmly believe that each class I will teach will contribute to my development as a professor, allowing me to kindly impart knowledge and methodologies to future students as time progresses.

I am excited about my future as an artist. I would love to keep making art and be involved in other art spheres like teaching, curating, and researching.

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ATTACHMENTS

Short film credits

GODALUPE

Short-film, 2023

Written and directed by:

Sara Serratos

Performed by:

Carmen Serratos

Camera:

Andrea Di Castro

Sara Serratos

Postproduction:

Andrea Di Castro

Music:

Jorge Reyes.

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PRODUCED AT THE FILM AND MEDIA ARTS DEPARTMENT,
UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

Special Thanks to:

Cooperativa ZAAZ KOOLEN HAA'

Mauricio Alberto Hau

Also Sisters

Filmed in Yucatán and Campeche

México 2023

Godalupe is a journey through the magical world of the Mayan lands, which allows the character to get out of her everyday life and have a change. On her journey through these places and upon meeting her origins, she has a kind of transformation by acquiring a series of powers; the trip culminates with the purifying water from a cenote that turns her into a goddess.

MFA Thesis Exhibition Poster



MFA thesis exhibition
SARA SERRATOS

April 24th - May 5th, 2023

Artist talk: April 26th; 5PM, RM 158

Opening reception: April 26th; 6PM

Alvin Gittins Gallery
University of Utah
375 1530 E, SLC UT 84112

With the support of SACPC/CONACYT

APPENDICES

MFA Thesis Exhibition *Who Sustains Our Tables?* Photo documentation



Title of exhibition, 2023.



Portrait of me in the gallery after my artist talk next to the artwork
Fruits and Vegetables Stickers Sign, 2023.

1. Section: Nourishment



Letter to Mexico (left) and *Who sustains our tables?* (right), 2023.



Who sustains our tables?, 2023.
Installation: fresh fruits and vegetables, table legs, tabletop, and wood trucks toys.



Close up *Who sustains our tables?*, 2023.
Installation: traditional Mexican toy, serrano peppers and table legs.
(Photo by Amy Walchli)

2. Section: Spirituality and Religious Figures



Nopales (middle) and Niches for Fruits and Vegetables (right), 2023.



Nopales, 2023.
Installation: aluminum
casting and cactus leaves.



Niches for Fruits and Vegetables, 2023.

Installation: aromatic cedar, family archive of kitchen cutting boards, banana leaves on brick, and fresh fruits and vegetables — chayote, corn, dragon fruit, and serrano pepper—.

(Photo by Amy Walchli)



Niches for Fruits and Vegetables, 2023.



Close ups *Niches for Fruits and Vegetables*, 2023.
(Photos by Amy Walchli)

2.1 White Box



From Coatlicue to Godalupe, 2022.
Vinyl on cardboard.



GODALUPE, 2023.
Short film installed at exhibition.

3. Section: Labor and Product



*Fruits and Vegetables Stickers Sign (left) and Collection of fruits and vegetables stickers (middle), 2023
(Photo by Amy Walchli).*

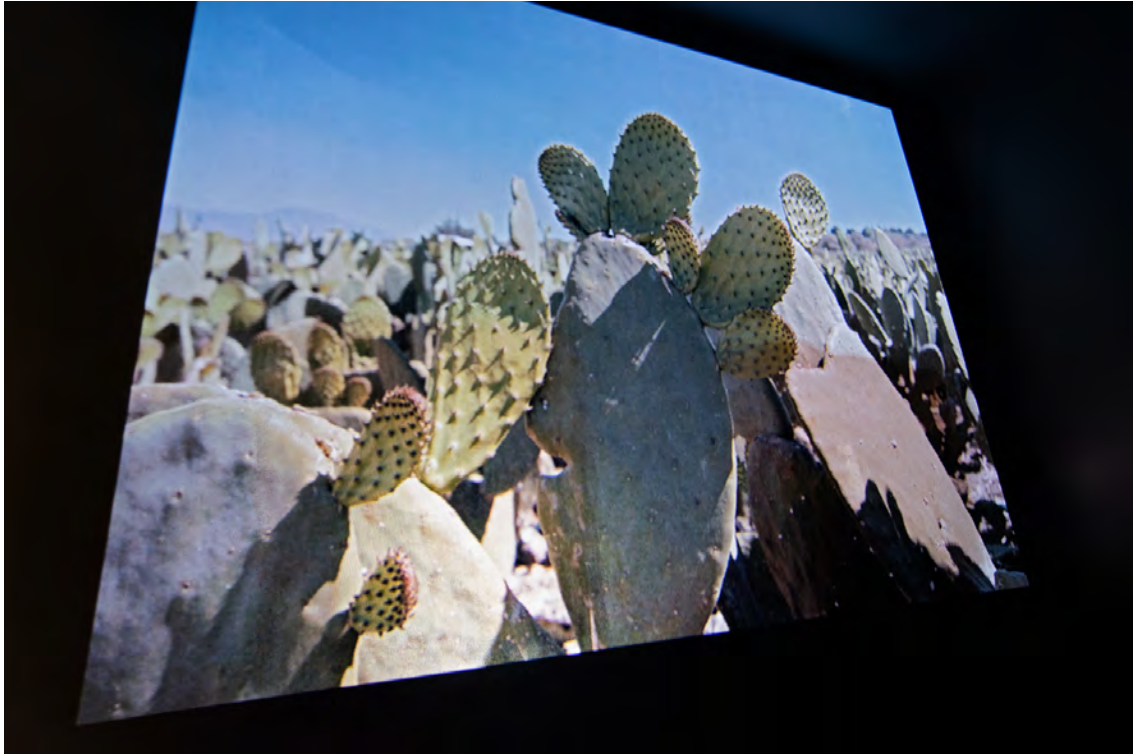


Collection of fruits and vegetables stickers, 2023.
Fruit and vegetable stickers on cardboard.

3.1 Black Box



Banana boxes pyramid wall and Cactus leaves plantation, 2023.
Installation: banana boxes and analog photos projected on the wall.
(Photo by Amy Walchli.)



Close up *Cactus leaves plantation*, 2023.
(Photos by Amy Walchli.)