FROM INSIDE THE HOME: A PORTRAIT OF
MEXICAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN

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For the past two years my artwork has focused on the cultural issues of a Mexican immigrant community in Fort Worth, Texas. The primary focus has been women and the way in which their homes reflect their blending of two cultures. The occupants of the homes are people that I know personally, including my immediate and extended family as well as friends of my family. Undocumented women usually have the most difficulty in adjusting. Although some do work outside of the home, many of these women spend countless hours inside due to their inability to speak English or drive. These women have little hope of returning to their homeland because their children are being raised in the United States. In order to feel more at home, the women make every effort to re-create the Mexican culture in their new houses. Thus, acculturation takes place with very little cultural loss. Instead of previous strategies of total assimilation, these women blend the two cultures, making it easier to adjust to their new lives.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

For the past two years my artwork has focused on the cultural issues of a Mexican immigrant community in Fort Worth, Texas. The primary focus has been women and the way in which their homes reflect their blending of two cultures. The occupants of the homes are people that I know personally, including my immediate and extended family as well as friends of my family.

In traditional patterns of Mexican migration, men cross over first to find work and a place to reside. As Grace Halsell stated, “Formally, only undocumented Mexican men came to the States. They left their wives and children back at home. They had to do so. They were often without jobs or food. When they worked, they sent money to their families back home” (Halsell 46). Both single and married men sought to earn enough money to take back to Mexico and live a better life with their families. The economic crisis in Mexico during the 1980s had a dramatic impact on migration, increasing the number of women and families that now form a large portion of Mexican migrant communities. Some undocumented families had no intention of permanently residing in the United States. When families are reunited, partial assimilation begins to take place and as children are born in the United States many families choose to stay.

Undocumented women usually have the most difficulty in adjusting. Although some do work outside of the home, many of these women spend countless hours inside due to their inability to speak English or drive. These women have little hope of returning to their homeland because their children are being raised in the United States. In order to
feel more at home, the women make every effort to re-create the Mexican culture in their new houses. Thus, acculturation takes place with very little cultural loss. Instead of previous strategies of total assimilation, these women blend the two cultures, making it easier to adjust to their new lives.

In a previous project, I decided to document the home interiors of some of these women to show the acculturation process. The photographs were made in a *documentary style*. Walker Evans coined the term *documentary style* in a 1971 interview, stating that, “The term should be *documentary style*. An example of a literal document would be a police photograph of a murder scene. You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never a document, though it certainly can adopt that style” (Evans 364). Like Walker Evans, my artwork was made in a documentary style. The photographs were not merely documents of the people, but subjective and personal. What made this documentary project different was that I, as an artist and a Mexican-American, made decisions that set it apart from being merely a typology of homes. What to include in the photographs and how to juxtapose items within the images were among those decisions. The images of the homes became poetic images that served as a portrait of the women who take it upon themselves to maintain the Mexican culture in the United States. The environments, then, illustrated the efforts of these women adapting to the American culture through the decoration, organization, and functionality of their personal spaces.

**Statement of Problem**

One of the major problems I had with the work in the past was making it less anthropological. The work was not about documenting the culture as a whole but rather
to show the beauty of these often run-down houses. Through the passion for their culture, these women invoked new life to their homes. Although extremely personal, I felt the photographs were not enough to convey the sensibility. For this reason, I wanted to incorporate sculpture with the black and white photographs. I wanted the work to speak out and capture the emotions, of loss, hope, joy, and fatigue that dominate the lives of these women. Therefore, I took a few significant items out of the existing photographs and made them three-dimensional. The most important thing was that the work remained poetic, and that this was captured in the three-dimensional objects.

Another problem I had was photographing the individual women. In previous work, I photographed the women in social spaces such as their living rooms. For this project, I asked the women to change into their best clothes and took their portrait in the room they spend the majority of their time—the kitchen. In order to solve these issues I asked the following questions of the project:

1. What is the most effective manner of installing the portraits that will reinforce the context of the photographs?
2. What aspects of the work are openly subjective and reflect my point of view as an immigrant’s daughter?
3. Which items do I take out of the photographs to make three-dimensional forms?

Methodology

Throughout my career as a graduate student, I tried to photograph the women many times. I felt I had tried everything. First, I had little luck in persuading them to have their portrait taken. Since many had never had their portrait taken, they felt self-conscious
and timid. Many times, they were not in their best clothing, and they preferred to be photographed when they had enough warning to bathe and primp. Although I did photograph a few, I was unsuccessful. Secondly, I could not figure out in which space, within their homes, to photograph them. Whether I should take them in the bedroom, living room, kitchen, or even outside became a huge dilemma. When it was time for my problem-in-lieu-of-thesis, I knew which problems I could address. Since I had completed the interiors and had more time to concentrate on the portraits, I decided to take on the project. In order to answer these questions, my goal was to produce a body of work that would be put together and viewed as an installation. These pieces, along with the new portraits, were to complement the already existing black and white photographs of the interiors. The women that I photographed were the same women who had allowed me to photograph in their homes. These women were my mother’s friends and co-workers. Every Saturday, my mother made my appointments and I photographed at least three women. While there, I tried photographing them in different situations all within the kitchen area. Since some of the kitchens were extremely small spaces, I was forced to move a few of the women into the dining room (if they had one). In order to capture the best possible image, I tried different angles and viewpoints. Each week, I documented my experiences in my journal and finally summarized the issues related to my work to complete my problem-in-lieu-of-thesis.
CHAPTER II
DISCUSSION OF WORK COMPLETED

The Portraits

The first challenge, and no doubt the most difficult, was persuading the women to be photographed. After much contemplation, I realized that in previous visits to their homes, the proud women were not in their best clothing and were not willing to be photographed, (after all, very few would). I didn’t want the viewer to see them as merely housewives, but as the strong individual women that they are. After going back to several of the same homes, I asked the women to change into their best clothes. This time, they were more than willing to pose for a portrait.

The next problem I had to solve was where to photograph the women. I decided to photograph them in the kitchen. The reason was simple. When I visited these homes, my mother and I were hosted in the kitchen. The kitchen became the social space for the women rather than the living room. Usually the living room was reserved for either the children or the men (if they were not outside). I felt that the kitchen was an important space for these women since they spent most of their time there. When I arrived, most were usually in the kitchen preparing some kind of food, even on a Saturday afternoon. When the women did not object to me photographing them in the kitchen, I felt it was because it seemed natural to them.

Another obstacle I had to overcome was making the women look relaxed. The main problem was how they positioned their hands and bodies. In most of the portraits I had taken in the past, the women seemed uncomfortable. For that reason, in the first
portraits attempted, I decided to have them hold a familiar object from their kitchen (i.e. a tortilla warmer, food, or a birdcage). In figure 1, Amalia is holding a taco fryer in which she has placed several tortillas. This image seems warm because Amalia is a mother, and a wife, who is welcoming the viewer into her home. She holds the platter with pride. This is one of the more successful images with an object. Another image that worked with an object is figure 8. In this image, Alicia is holding a kettle. This image works because her body has taken on the shape of the spout on the kettle. Thus, the vessel becomes a metaphor for the woman in the kitchen. Alicia appears comfortable and natural. Most of the first portraits were not successful because the women began to look awkward holding an object that appeared unnatural and very posed. In figure 12, Nena holding the object appears artificial and forced. She is holding an object in the back of her kitchen. It is definitely posed. Under normal circumstances, she would not hold the object in that manner. Although I like this image for different reasons, it was not one of the more successful.

One of the more favorable images has to be figure 2. This is the first image attempted without an object. In this image, the pattern on Evelia’s dress is very similar to the wallpaper in her kitchen. There is no doubt that this is her kitchen. She appears confident and proud. I intended to have her holding an object, but she set it down next to her while I was setting up for the portrait. She looked great when I looked up from behind my camera. It was at this moment that I decided I did not need an object in the photograph in order to have a successful image.
Photographing different types of women also became an issue. Although they are all Mexican immigrants, they are each different in their own way. Some have been in the United States longer, some speak more English, and of course there are different age groups and income levels. This is apparent in figure 6. Although Araceli has not been in the United States a very long time, her young age helped her adapt to the new culture faster. It was easier for her to learn some English and to adopt the American ways. Even though she has partially assimilated into the culture, there was still evidence throughout the home of her Mexican background. Age was an important factor in how much Americanization occurred. For example, Raquel, in figure 10, has been in the United States for many years, but does not speak any English and does not have a job outside of the home. Her daughters are grown and have children of their own. She never had to learn English because her daughters could learn instead. This made it easier for her to keep her Mexican customs. Little to no cultural loss occurred with Raquel because she never had to let them go.

After completing the portraits, the next problem I had to address was question one of my Statement of Problem. The goal was to make the women look powerful in their homes. Asking them to dress in their best clothes and stand in a powerful manner helped reinforce the concept. However, what could make them stand out from the interiors? The answer was to print the images larger than the interiors. For the installation, I decided to hang the images of the women throughout the gallery surrounded by the images of the interiors. Although the interiors are significant to show the acculturation in the homes,
making the women appear larger than their spaces would reinforce my belief of their strength.

An Immigrant’s Daughter

In question two of my Statement of Problem, I asked what aspects of the portraits were openly subjective and reflect my point of view as an immigrant’s daughter. Even though I was born in the United States and may be forgetting the Spanish language, both of my parents immigrated illegally in the 1970s. I still have a connection to these women because my mother is one of them. All of the images I take are personal and subjective because I identify with these women. In *Looking at Photographs*, John Szarkowski wrote about the portraits of August Sander. He too had taken portraits of people that were subjective and not just formal. Szarkowski stated:

His concept is almost a caricature of teutonic methodology, and if it had been executed by a lesser artist the result might well have been another dreary typological catalogue. Sander, however, was a very great photographer. His sensitivity to his individual subjects—to expression, gesture, posture, costume, symbol, habitat—seems unerringly precise. His pictures show us two truths simultaneously and in delicate tension: the social abstraction of occupation and the individual soul who serves it. (Szarkowski 102)

Like Sander, I have sensitivity for my subject matter. I want to show the beauty of the culture and not merely make a “typological catalogue”. For this reason, I make several choices when photographing the women rather than simply photographing them in their homes. I asked them to dress in what they considered their finest clothing because I
wanted them to look their best. I did not want the viewer to look down upon them. These women are strong and are by no means inferior to anyone. Photographing them from a low angle so that they would be forced to look down at the camera helped make them look superior. After spending these past three years with the women I have found that they are happy with what they have and with their being. I feel close to these women because I can identify with them.

While both my mother and I were there, we spoke with the women informally. Very little we said had to do with the shoot. We talked first, then I would scout the house for a location and finally I would set up my camera. Scouting for a location helped me to find the perfect spot for each of the women. Since they are all individuals, I wanted to find a place within their home that was unique to each. In most cases, I found the area I wanted to photograph and placed the woman there. I may have developed this habit when I shot my interiors. Although I wanted to have an interesting background, I wanted the women to be the most significant subject matter. What was it I wanted to say about the individual women? In figure 7, I began to use the background to my advantage but still framed the portrait in a manner that would not interrupt the background. In this image, Celia is to one side of the door that leads into the dining room. Although out of focus, the background, which is important to the photograph, is not blocked. While every detail in the photograph is about Celia, she is still the central figure. In this image, she has placed one hand on her hip, which makes her appear self-confident. She is a strong woman and this is evident in the photograph. The background is important because it not only shows her spotless dining room; her children are in the back room playing video games. This is
the first portrait in which a second figure was introduced. Since Celia is a mother of five children all within about one year of each other, it is important that they are featured in the photograph. They are the biggest part of her life and the photograph would not make sense if I had not included a hint of them. However, Celia who is standing strongly in the foreground, is still queen of her domain so only a reference to the children was necessary.

The Three-Dimensional Works

Each of the photographs has little details about the individual women that are significant. At the beginning of the project, I was not sure what items I would take out and make three-dimensional. I did not want to be too cliché but I also wanted to use items that were commonly used by the women. My first thought was to use the same objects the women were holding in the portraits. Of course, this failed when I decided not to photograph objects anymore. I finally came up with a few items that I felt were representative. The *molcajete*, the *carpetas*, and the Virgin Mary were among the items I chose to work with. The *molcajete* is a tool used to make salsa by hand. I found one in every household, no matter what the age group or how many years they had been in the United States. The *carpetas* or doilies were used in every home as decoration in the living rooms. Although I worried about a Virgin Mary being cliché, I still decided to use the well-known icon. Since she is significant in the culture, I thought I could use her metaphorically.

After choosing the items, my next dilemma was finding a way to display them. This was a challenge. Again, I did not want the objects to seem trite. For the *molcajetes*, I determined that I would put them on pedestals and spread them out in the gallery.
was representative of the amount of *molcajetes* I found in the homes. They are so common that they appear in several images (figures 2, 5, 6, and 9). Each of the *molcajetes* is slightly different, yet essentially the same. They are made of a strong and durable material, stone. This is true to some extent of the women I photographed. They are each different in their own way, yet they are all strong Mexican immigrant women.

For the *carpetas*, I chose to bring in a real sofa and spread them on there just as I would find in an immigrant home. The women like to keep what is most precious to them protected. For this reason, women put plastic over the sofas and carpet in order to keep it new and clean. In figure 11, Mela has put her wedding memorabilia in a bookcase and wrapped it in plastic for safekeeping. In the case of the Virgin, I decided to put a plastic covering over her to show that same kind of protection. It is to be kept pristine because it is considered a valuable possession. I also determined that I would put plastic runners over the floor so that when people view the images, the floor stays clean. This gives the viewer a feeling of being inside the homes.
CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

In order to have successful images, I had to study each of the images carefully and critically for both aesthetic and technical qualities. Once I determined which photographs worked (figures 1, 2, 8, and 12), I cut up my contact sheets and carried those images with me to every shoot. In addition, I bought Polaroid (instant film), in order to review the compositions before I shot actual film. With this option, I was able to determine whether the women seemed comfortable or unnatural. Finally, I made enlargements of every photograph I thought might work and hung them up in my studio next to the existing final images. Reviewing these for a week, gave me the opportunity to take notes in my journal and write down what needed to change or stay the same at the next shoot. This is where technical problems, such as insufficient lighting, could be solved.

When a photograph did not work, for various reasons, I either re-photographed the same women, or photographed new women with the changes in mind. Since I wanted the women to be evidently powerful, it became important to review the images over and over again. Although there is slight humor in the images due to what may be considered unusual customs, they are not funny. They are serious images of strong women often overlooked.

Lighting became an important factor in whether a photograph worked. Since they were portraits it was important to have the women well illuminated. In figure 9, Reyna is backlit due to a window over the kitchen sink. Fortunately, there was a door on her left side that I could open to help light up her face. Since there was no other place I could...
move her, I was forced to take the photograph even though her right side was getting too dark. The same problem occurred in figure 5. Yolanda had a small window behind her but several huge windows to her left that helped illuminate her face. Therefore, I was able to use the image. If a kitchen did not have at least one window, I could not photograph. Beautiful light was a necessity in order to have beautiful women.

After taking several photographs, carrying the contact sheets, using Polaroid, and living with the artwork in my studio, I was finally able to distinguish between what constituted a good photograph and what was simply not working technically. Critically reviewing each of the photographs for aesthetic qualities was crucial in determining which images were to be used. In the end, I was able to photograph each of the women successfully. The images are about strong Mexican immigrant women who will probably have to live in the United States until well after their children are grown. Because many have no choice in the matter, they are bringing customs with them in order to feel more at home. These women have the strength to keep them going every day. In the future, I would like to continue to show the power of women. This project was the beginning of a series I would like to pursue on Mexican women. I am a strong woman and feel that it is due in part to these women. For this reason, I pay tribute to them. They have made me who I am today, and who I will become.
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