

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Hecho a Mano

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By

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Dedication

To my family, Mom, Dad, Albert, Rafael, Esteban, Moi, Miguel, Alex, Gaby, Conchita, Carmen, Anna and Monica. To my talented friends Blanca Guerra, Lourdes Jimenez, Farnaz Sabet, Thomas Dang, Matthew Pritchard, Parker Boales, Christina Sanchez, Garrett Pointer, Alex Jimenez and Erika Ostrander. To my amazing Professors Patsy Cox, Lesley Krane, Michelle Rozic, Christian Tedeschi, and Rebecca Ripple. Thank you for all your help, kind gestures, friendship, support, and guidance.

Table of Contents

Signature Page	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	v
Introduction	1
Generation Gaps	2
Dominant Exposure to American Culture	4
Mexican Culture and Traditions	5
Mexican Cooking Traditions	6
Hecho a Mano	7
Form and Function	9
Conclusion	10
References	11
Appendix	13

ABSTRACT

HECHO A MANO

By

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My Mexican heritage and family traditions inform my work through narratives about the distance between today's Mexican societies and their cultural history. Using traditional tools and processes can be labor intensive, and many people prefer the convenience of purchasing tortillas at the grocery store rather than performing the labor required to make each tortilla by hand. Traditions are lost as a result of this convenience, and American culture becomes homogenized. I create clay-based objects to celebrate these customs in an effort to prevent the collective forgetting and loss of history. My work attempts to embrace, preserve, and honor these traditions.

Introduction

Ceramics has permanence; it is a tangible means to learn about ancient cultures. I borrow on the beauty of these traditions making lasting objects that hold cultural information for future generations. The forms I create represent the practices of authentic Mexican cooking and the imagery emphasizes a history associated with objects. By creating these enduring forms, I celebrate the culture by showing this work. The imagery I use is preserved for permanence on each piece. A vintage, handwritten family recipe that will deteriorate over time is photocopied and transferred to clay for posterity. This object will provide information and a visual narrative for future generations.

Generation Gaps

Authentic Mexican culture has progressively faded from my own family's practices through the generations. My Mother was first Generation Mexican born in the United States and my Father immigrated to the states when he was a young man. This makes me part first generation and part second generation. Having grown up in this family, I learned that American culture was the more dominant influence. I was taught more English than Spanish and went to school where I learned the history of America. The dilution of our culture with an American one created a palpable distance. We were encouraged to fit in as educated young students who could do more than hard labor by living the American dream.

The cultural distance that I felt between successive generations also played a part in weakening our connections to our heritage. "Indeed, behavior patterns of Mexican Americans are more likely to resemble those of non-Hispanic Whites the longer their generational tenure in the U.S." (4). I was the ninth of my parents' twelve children. As our family grew, the ratio of English speaking children to my fluent Spanish speaking parents changed over time, and the younger children grew up with more English than Spanish. "An important consequence of cultural assimilation for intergenerational family relations is that of language acculturation--progressive weakening through the generations in the proficiency with which native language is spoken and understood" (4). Along with this battle of languages came a diminishing of ancestral traditions due to our adaptation to the world around us. I struggle to discover and maintain the language, heritage,

and culture. In addition to my work celebrating a culture that has been fading from my world and others', the objects I make allow me to learn more about my family's history.

Dominant Exposure to American Culture

Exposure to American culture has led to an erosion of traditional practices, values, and language of Mexican culture. "...Younger members of immigrant families will be more likely than their elders to adopt the values and behavior of the dominant culture" (4). American lifestyle, language, philosophy, values, pop culture, cuisine, technology, businesses, economics and politics all influence other cultures. American films and television shows are most popular in the world's media markets. Most of the top global brand names for products are American, including Coca-Cola which is often viewed as a symbol for Americanization. "As a consequence of increasing cultural exports and the rise of cultural multinationals, the same music, movies, writers, pop stars, and art styles are known around the world. Cultural globalization is thus central to the everyday experience of globalization from within" (5).

Another symbol of this Americanization includes fast-food. Modern conveniences, such as "Mexican" fast foods like Taco Bell or Chipotle, have contributed to the deterioration of traditional Mexican cuisine. "We're not trying to be authentic Mexican food," says Rob Poetsch, director of public relations at Taco Bell. "So we're not competing with taquerias. We're a quick-service restaurant, and value and convenience are our core pillars" (1). Expediency and ease results in homogenization of fast-paced American culture.

Mexican Culture & Traditions

Dia De los Muertos is a Mexican holiday to remember and pray for beloved individuals who have died. Typically, altars are made for and dedicated to ancestors; the altars are decorated with colorful images and objects and food as offerings to ancestors. The objects I make function as a tangible form of remembrance and attempt to preserve the ancestral lineage. The functional vessel in *La Historia de las Ortegas (Figure 1.1)* is a traditional tortilla warmer that uses symbols from Dia De Los Muertos altars and offers warm tortillas to my ancestors whose images also populate the surface; a traditional Mexican papercut flag reveals a skull, common in Dia De Los Muertos iconography. The rosary beads and prayer card next to the imagery signifies my family's Catholic observance; the crocheted yarn pays homage to my grandmother. The distressed appearance and torn edges of the images, and the broken rosary and unraveled yarn suggest the passage of time as well as the loss of my family's traditional culture and heritage.

Mexican Cooking Traditions

My work explores the setting of authentic Mexican cuisine. “Connections between cuisine and identity--what people eat and who they are--reach deep into Mexican History” (6). Food plays a large part in Mexican culture and brings a family together. The way food is passed down the length of a table informs the purpose of the objects I make: they pass down cultural information for future generations.

“There is an old saying whose origins are unknown that states, ‘The hundred percent Mexican lives on corn, rice, beans, and chile’” (3). Authentic Mexican cooking includes the use of tools such as a *Molcajete*, an *Olla*, a *Molinillo*, a *Metate*, and a *Comal*. A *Molcajete* is the Mexican version of a mortar and pestle made of stone. It is used to crush spices and prepare salsas and guacamole. An *Olla* is a big pot traditionally made of clay for *Frijoles de la Olla* meaning “beans from the pot.” A *Molinillo* “...is a utensil with a certain flair, used for centuries to whip up a foam on hot-chocolate drinks in Mexican and Central American kitchens” (2). The *Molinillo* is made out of wood and carved with intricate designs. A *Metate* is a three-legged stone with a roller for grinding corn into masa (dough). A *Comal* is a round flat griddle usually used to cook tortillas.

Hecho a Mano

Through my own lens with a contemporary twist, my ceramic work simultaneously explores tradition and modern day utility. I draw on traditional Mexican cuisine, highlighting its societal importance by creating both utilitarian and sculptural vessels. Utilitarian objects such as *Molinillos* and *Molcajetes* have become unfamiliar to modern Mexican American families; I incorporate imagery on these forms to illustrate my family's traditions in order to sustain them. These conventions have become points of departure, and my forms are a chronicle of the processes and tools themselves.

a. El Molinillo

“At first glance , the curious implement--a carved, hand-painted wooden stick, 11.5 inches long, with a slender handle at one end and a knob at the other-- appears unprepossessing enough. Yet the kitchen tool, represents the history of a culture and the epic story of a passionately desired product. The molinillo, or stirrer...is a utensil with a certain flair, used for centuries to whip up a foam on hot-chocolate drinks in Mexican and Central American kitchens” (2). I try to communicate this sense of history and culture with my ceramic mugs *el Molinillo* (*Figure 4.1*). They have exaggeratedly illustrative foam dripping over their rims and contain fragments of my grandmother's handwritten hot cocoa recipe.

b. El Metate

El Metate is a lava stone slab used to grind corn into dough. The dough in *El Metate* comes off the slab in an exaggerated way, as if the dough has been continually rolled out over time and transformed into a dramatic length. The elongated dough suggests a timeline, and the imagery embedded into the dough narrates a history of multiple generations and cultural influences.

c. El Comal

A *comal* is similar to a griddle and is used to cook tortillas. In this piece, the *comal's* size is also exaggerated. The tortillas cooking on the comal contain imagery and symbols of a vast and rich history of Chicano folklore and customs. Tortillas are a staple in Mexican cooking and the quantity of tortillas emphasizes the importance and variety of customs in Mexican Culture.

d. The White Tortilla

The White Tortilla is a large stack of tortillas that fade to white, suggesting the fading of Mexican culture and the “white wash” stereotype. The tortillas are stacked inside a tortilla warmer that contains imagery of past generations. The lower tortillas will be rich in natural colors and represent undiluted culture; as the tortillas climb generations to the top of the stack, their color fades to white.

Form and Function

The scale of my forms emphasizes the importance of commemorating this history and these fading practices. Therefore exaggeration of dimension plays a vital role in the purpose and meaning of each piece. Monumental *Comals* and inflated lumps of dough provide visual punctuation and function as mnemonic devices bearing images from the past.

Conclusion

Americanization of Mexican cultures has effectively added to the loss of local customs and ideals. My work addresses and comments on my struggles as a Mexican American trying to identify with her traditional culture as it becomes dominated by an American one. My work embodies Americanization, recalls the history of Mexican Culture, and functions as a reminder of the value of traditions; it paints an authentic picture of my family's heritage and gives permanence to cultural artifacts.

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Appendix



Figure 1.1



Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2



Figure 2.3



Figure 3.1



Figure 4.1