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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

a landscape holds you still

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Arlene Mejorado

Committee in charge:

Professor Teddy Cruz, Chair
Professor Nicole Miller
Professor Roy Perez
Professor Paul Sepuya

2023

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University of California San Diego
2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
LIST OF IMAGES.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS.....	vii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1. Breathing Exteriors (re)Placements of Memory.....	3
2. Desterrando Archivos / Unearthing Archives.....	11
3. a landscape holds you still.....	18
REFERENCES.....	30

LIST OF IMAGES

Image 1.1: Banner installation at my mother's former beauty school	4
Image 1.2: <i>My Mother Madonna</i>	6
Image 1.3: <i>My Cousin Ana's Apartment</i>	7
Image 1.4: <i>Living Room Dancing</i>	8
Image 1.5: <i>Swimming Pool Self Portrait</i>	9
Image 2.1: <i>Grandmother's Patio</i>	11
Image 2.2: <i>The Three Sisters</i>	13
Image 2.3: <i>Holding a Photograph of My Mother</i>	15
Image 2.4: <i>Curtain of Working Women</i>	17
Image 3.1: <i>Film Set Divider at Plaza del Valle</i>	20
Image 3.2: <i>Girl of the Valle</i>	23
Image 3.3: <i>I Remember Drawing on My Father's Back with a Ballpoint Pen</i>	25
Image 3.4: <i>My Mother Standing in a Pool and Re-embodying Her Childhood Photograph at a Beach in Mexico</i>	26
Image 3.5: <i>Portrait at the Median with the Family Baby Blanket</i>	29

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

a landscape holds you still

by

Arlene Mejorado

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Teddy Cruz, Chair

a landscape holds you still is the photography-based culminative body of work made during my MFA journey that is informed by a three year pursuit to understand how photography can serve as a vehicle for reconciling loss, foster a sense of belonging, and facilitate placemaking. My practice took on various processes that fill in the gaps of memory and personal archives through staging intimate gestures, engaging with elements of studio photography

outdoors, working in self portraiture, installation, and incorporating tactile documents such as archival materials. In moving between digital and analog and expanding in my practice that is grounded in creative documentary image making, I am materializing a new archive determined by shared agency and participation by family, community, and friends. The pursuit within three years began in my home town of the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, California then sprouted to my mother's homeland of Guadalajara, Mexico and concluded back in the San Fernando Valley where various methods were applied and expanded upon within each region resulting in different manifestations of these approaches and drawing out often unexpected sensibilities through photography.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will discuss three different projects made during the pursuit of my MFA degree at UCSD and how each, through the process of making, enabled me to expand on concepts around placemaking, performing memory, and the unplaceability of oneself while fostering a sense of belonging. Each project was site-specific and photography-based, folding in elements of performance, interventionism, tableau staging, and documentary photography. In my first year of the visual arts program I focused on vinyl banner installations that allowed me to place family photographs in significant landscapes, often being the place of origin where the photograph was made many years ago. This project, titled *Breathing Exteriors: (re)placements of Memory* became of series of landscape photographs in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley with installations that represent entanglement and sentiment in the location.

The tension of unplaceability and unbelonging in the pursuit of belonging led me to the second body of work made in my second year of the MFA. In asking myself where I've constructed an imaginary of home, or site of origin, I created the incentive to visit my late grandmother's home in Guadalajara, Mexico. It is there that I made *Desterrando Archivos*, a project around the speculative recollection of family stories in the home and the unearthing of fragments and clues from oral histories and objects to imagine who we were. As the work centered ideas of incompleteness and imagination, I was inspired to return to the San Fernando Valley where I grew up to understand how we pursue a restoration of belonging in a suburban land and its liminal sites. Each project is explained through inquiries of thought and process that are the act of "working through" the inquietudes.

After 6 years of working actively as a documentarian and photo-essayist I have pivoted towards inverting the lens and experimenting, leaning into familial research, and inquiring new questions about myself through my photography practice. Coming from a documentary and evidence-centered practice, I am moved by Toni Morrison in her essay, "Site of Memory": "the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence but truth cannot." (Morrison, 93) Morrison inquires us to consider how we define truth and think about truths that are felt viscerally, intuitively, and intergenerationally. Thus the act of staging possibility and letting go of control of what photographing "reality" is opened a new freedom to consider truth living in the body, in the happenstance, and in the newly imprinted moment.

Many stories passed around within my family carry an undercurrent of poverty, displacement, migration, racism, and various forms of violence and sexism which is implied more than it is explicitly verbalized. These challenges fracture memories, embrace forgetting, and complicate my sense of home. The stories that carry me through life begin to feel like the most consistent home, something to revert back to that lives in my body. Diana Taylor writes in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* that "Photography was evidence, proof not so much of the existence of the object of the photograph but of our own existence." (Taylor, 255) The story lives around the photograph more so than within the frame. We associate our photographs with our own survival and often they do outlive us, which is the objective after all, like dispatches for the future. Drawing threads together we try to pull a less opaque and unfiltered reflection of ourselves, piecing fragments and filling the gaps of absent information.

BREATHING EXTERIORS: (re)PLACEMENTS OF MEMORY

In the year of the pandemic, 2020, I was called to re-visit sites that have held a part of my memory and an arrested sentiment of the past in specific places around Los Angeles, specifically the San Fernando Valley. The pandemic was also a time to unbox family photographs and revisit albums, handling these materials in a manner that activates their information and revived their link to memories. Through the framing of my car window view during long quiet drives I began to pass by places that call me back. I began to project images from photographs upon the landscape in a phantasmagoric manner. Through this visualization I embarked on a project that was solitary as I did not photograph any people and instead allowed me to have conversations with past selves, and past moments evoked by family photographs. *Breathing Exteriors: (re)placements of Memory* was a project from 2020-2021 involving a careful selection of family photographs enlarged and printed as vinyl banners then installed in their “site of origin.” meaning the location where the photograph was originally made, or in some cases, as close as I could get to the original place.

I consider the gestures to be quiet intervention within the landscape. The photographs were carefully selected from my own collection and involved collaborative decision making with my mother, cousin Ana, and aunt Georgina who shared memories attached to these documents and could position the stories in a specific place. The selection of places becomes contextualized through the family archives and given specificity as it displays the interior life in the external space with the potential to shape a different relationship to public culture and placemaking through memory as part of the topography. The work inquires us to look at neighborhoods, alley ways, empty pools, or parking lots as more than vacant or blank spaces. In centering the banners,



Image 1.1: Banner installation at my mother's former beauty school.

we can read them momentarily as a window to the deep and complex history of family, placemaking, and community enclaves. This work is especially important in the Southwest where a “frontier” narrative persists and a dark legacy around landscape photography was used to convey these regions as open, available land ripe for claiming.

In revisiting these sites and hanging these banners, it becomes clear to me that I am photographing what was once there and also what is not there, creating a juxtaposition. The banners serve as a window into an intimate and personal scene onto an otherwise banal suburban environment. I look at presence and absence, grappling with the budding of loss over time as I reconfigure objects, pull rope and fish string to maintain banners in place just long enough for a photograph. I deter from the effect of nostalgia as revisiting the site of origin counters the romanticization of the past and places it in the context of a real and current environment that

doesn't offer completeness, permanence, or closure.

In working with photographs of my own mother, my aunt, cousin, and my younger self, I hold space for their story and invest in understanding and processing that experience which we as a family were directly impacted by. By internalizing the stories they share with me I am able to draw a deeper understanding of my own position in the family and more importantly, how we can be extensions of each other. “When a woman decides to leave her country, something quite miraculous happens in that they have to decide what to take out and leave behind in the archive of their self and what to salvage and carry forth because the memory is a limited archive and they have made the decision of what stories to leave behind and what stories do i carry across borders in trepidation in order to lend and gift to my children and grandchildren and by the time I receive these stories sometimes they are folklore sometimes they are personal stories but all of them were already beautifully crafted through hundreds of re-tellings.” (Vuong, Fresh Air interview)

My mother received the cultural dispatches of disco and pop as a young girl growing up in the 1970s in Guadalajara dancing to the music of Donna Summer, Diana Ross, and ABBA. When she arrived in the San Fernando Valley at 18 years old in 1984, it was an opportunity to reinvent herself and step into a womanhood influenced by stars like Paula Abdul and Madonna. My mother embraced the detachment from her past, entering the void of forgetting, and embodied newness and optimism that served to mend a heavy past. The photograph installed in *My Mother Madonna* was made in 1992 while we lived in a room in this home in Reseda shared with other families. It is almost visually juxtaposing to pair her portrait within the space of fallen tarps, collapsing fences, and unkept yard plants but to absorb her story is to understand she was never really separate from her environment.



Image 1.2: *My Mother Madonna*.

My Cousin Ana's Apartment is a photograph of a banner of Ana in her bedroom gazing back at the camera with clues into her interior life. It is framed with a rusted metal fence, curled barbed wire, and apartment stucco with rust and water stains. My cousin Ana opened her home archive that includes a rich documentation of herself as a teenager when she lived in an apartment complex in Winnetka. She took pride and care in her appearance, often styling her hair with a big *copete* and wearing baggy tees, cortex, and eyeliner. Nicknamed "*La Lazy*", she built supportive bonds with her many friends who were in party crews and gangs in the San Fernando Valley in the early 1990's. Ana was one of the first people in my family to participate in teenage life in Los Angeles and I looked up to her to know how to navigate my own adolescence. Ana described her room as a safe haven in her teen years among many challenges she faced and the work of installing and creating a new photograph became a gesture in honoring her.



Image 1.3: *My Cousin Anna's Apartment*

Living Room Dancing centers a New Year's eve gathering in 1992 at my late Uncle Manuel's house in Reseda where we as children danced while my abuelita Lala sits in the corner. It is the kind of memory I look to create a new document around and carry into the future to remember how we gathered and constructed blissful moments centered around dance and play. In order to install this banner, I moved objects in the yard around to create support for its hanging which resulted in an alteration in composition. This image was made at sunset with faint sunlight touching the banner and shadows from the trees project upon and around the banner. In the top right side of the roof the moon has become visible, indicating the time of day, right before the sun goes down.

Looking back at my younger self in archives is a process of becoming reacquainted with the child I once was. The struggle to remove some of the opacity around my past is propelled



Image 1.4: *Living Room Dancing*.

when I look at childhood photographs of me. *Swimming Pool Portrait* is a photograph on the gesture of looking back and I consider this as a kind of self-portrait that writes over the original gaze of the person that photographed me swimming. It was made during the pandemic when swimming pools around the Valley sat empty. The public swimming pool in North Hills was just a block away from the original swimming pool that I can no longer access. Using the emptiness of the space, I was able to make a very wide image, creating a lot of distance between me and the pool's wall. One can see the skateboard marks on foundation, hinting at the moment of being an unmonitored and unused resource. The structure of the pool and the direction of light at sunset enabled a vignette-like shadow. Along the rim of the pool's shallow end the tiles are marked with "3 ft" indicating the height of the wall, close to the height I must have been when the picture was made. It is a second chance to offer an alternative to the established archive and speak across time with a younger self.



Image 1.5: *Swimming Pool Self-Portrait*

To support my understanding of how communities make place in the urban landscape, I include Dr. Theresa Gaye Johnson’s *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds, and Solidarity: Music, Race and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* where she states “Spatial entitlement recognizes that for black and brown communities in LA expressions of collective entitlement to national membership have been an important site of resistance over time. The history of this resistance contains significant lessons for understanding not just how these claims are made, but why, as a culminate political practice, they form a counter-narrative to privileged constructions of public life.” (Johnson, xii) In the case of applying memory to the landscape, to let memory influence your understanding of cartography, we who reside in these respective communities can find creative ways to shape public space, neighborhoods, and our exteriors with a layer of testimony, of belonging, of entanglement that in my case, is ephemeral but is also marked through the

creation of a new photograph. I think about the unarchived, the non-documented, and sometimes the un-archivable that exist because we construct place out of space through our sentimental projections and memory placing upon the site. My inquietudes proceed into the next projects as I construct new works in places that call me back to them, letting photography be the incentive and the stage to do so.



2.1: *Grandmother's Patio*

My mother's childhood home was built in 1959 on a small plot of land in the central Guadalajara neighborhood of Independencia just north of San Juan de Dios, the largest indoor market in Latin America. When the lot was purchased, my grandmother planted guava trees that to this day spill fruit onto the ground and laced the air with a potent scent of fresh and fermenting guavas. Just like the memories the old house invokes, the smells can be a mix of pleantry and distaste but ever-so familiar. The house started as a single adobe room, handmade by my family, then expanded over the years brick by brick to becoming a proper house in what would become a proper city. Hilaria Vargas, or as we called her "*Abuelita Lala*" was my grandmother and she raised her children in this house and had home births with most of her children including my

mother. Abuelita Lala spent the latter half of her life in Los Angeles with much of our family that grounded themselves in the San Fernando Valley.

Today, the house stands empty like a cavity, remaining solid with thick stucco exterior facing the street. The patio's temporality is visible in the walls that enclose it with an adobe base, mixed concrete bricks layered on top and cinderblocks raise the height to keep up with the growth of surrounding homes that tower two to three stories above. Between the towering trees stand banana plants that keep the patch of dirt dense with greenery. In Nahuatl an *acatl* is a hollow reed which represents a life energy, an inner shadow. The *acatl* teaches us that hollowness is substance, not emptiness or vacancy but a vessel for knowledge, wisdom, potential, and aspiration. There is an incompleteness in our personal story, a dis-jointedness in our narratives and an ensemble of scattered memories that offer as much historical foundation as they do highlight the gaps and unknown. It is in the gaps where speculation and possibility emerge.

As I stood in the patio during my most recent visit, I photographed the banana and guava trees that continue to stand in the backyard giving fruit every day. As I looked down at the viewfinder of my camera my aunt Toña shared family stories, recalling the births of my cousins that also took place in the home. "We buried the babies' umbilical cords in the ground or sometimes in the walls." she said, which shifted my focus away from the camera and toward her. I asked "Who did this? Why?" She said "We all did this. It was tradition." As I brought this up in conversations with various family members it was confirmed that my grandmother buried the umbilical cord of each of her children, including my mother's.

With my practice I am most interested in centering women and femmes, often

photographing their gaze back into the camera framing them as powerful observers. I want to have an intergenerational conversation with the women in my family, including those that are not physically present. I wonder what it was like for my mother to walk through the rooms, to play on the patio, and eat *guayabas*. In my visits to the home, I invited family members like my niece, Lili to be a “stand-in” for my mother and her three sisters that grew up in the home so as to visualize the human presence and how this can possibly activate the space.



2.2: *The Three Sisters*

In a recent conversation with my oldest living Aunt, Georgina Vargas, age 70, she said “burying a belly button was like planting a tree.” There is no materialized record of our past family rituals such as this one. It's an Indigenous tradition in west-central Mexico to bury the

navel detachment of a baby in the home in order to root them to the land, to their culture, and with their community. My draw to this piece of land embedded in the city doesn't begin with me. Like a palimpsest I am writing over underwritings that exist—past stories that are imprinted but not conclusive. Some of what is legible is faint, other parts leave a defined mark for now but like banners in the sun, will fade over time. Overwriting is powered by those that are willing to look back. I welcome the shift in how I relate to existing photographs and the places that pull me by while writing with light anew each time.

Furthermore in thinking about the archive, practices of care within the family collection of photographs and heirlooms can carry an emphasis on safekeeping but not necessarily preservation and longevity. I am not working with items of prestige, or perhaps I am handling items before they have been deemed valuable by any historic institution. The nature of the tactility of photographs and ephemera is to be passed around. Sometimes photographs are laminated or stuck between album sheets but often are sifted through unprotected with withered edges and fingerprint marks. My art making responds to family stories, connection to geo-place, and the existence and absence of archives which can find a place within a constellation of family archives living in various family picture albums, living room walls, inside wallets and locket, digitally on facebook albums and timelines, instagram profiles, and iPhone camera rolls.

Working with the objects of the past is an exercise in my dissatisfaction with the present and hope for the future. Through my current practice I create a pretext to return to a place that will never be what I imagined but will always be a portal of speculation that helps me understand myself and reconcile with the unknowable. These challenges fracture memories, embrace forgetting, and complicate my sense of home. We associate our photographs with our own

survival and often they do outlive us, which is the objective after all: they are like dispatches for the future. My photographs can be poetic gestures reacting to the notion of incompleteness and resulting in incompleteness, a continuum of this positionally, in constant call and response with the viewer.



2.3: Holding a Photograph of My Mother

I make photographs as an act of futurity in a culture that does not deem me to be an investment of the future as a childless queer body existing in an ambiguous and unplaceable position in my family where traditionally those gendered as women are expected prioritize having children and anchoring a family above all other endeavors. Jose Esteban Muñoz wrote “Queers, for example, especially those who do not choose to be biologically reproductive, a

people without children, are, within the dominant culture, people without a future. They are cast as people who are developmentally stalled, foresaken, who do not have the complete life promised by heterosexual temporality.” (Muñoz, 98) My stake in the future is in constructing knowledge that can help others navigate the fringes of society and family. In this case expanding the possibility of the archive, performing the archive, playing with the archive and blurring the line where the archive ends and the body begins. Dr. Roy Perez writes on how Laura Aguilar used her art to foster a connection with others and stages a space for “group intimacy” (Perez, 308) in the process of photo-making. Through photography I am able to reconfigure the family structure, even if momentarily, by working with the youth, letting play into my practice, mixing roles, and undoing hierarchies for a moment.

Amalia Mesa-Bains writes “Characteristics of domesticate include an emphasis on ephemeral site-specific works. The emphasis arises from chicano survivalist responses to the dilemmas of migration, dislocation, and the impermanence of community celebrations.” Working with objects of the interior like intertwined with memory “breaks the monopoly of the established discourse to define what is real and true.” (Mesa-Bains, 125) The curtain is an individual image of my mother at about 24 years old working in an electronics factory or *maquila* in Los Angeles—like many women that left their homeland—her role as a mother was focused on being a provider, not a domestic figure. To the left she gazes back at us and is centered among many other immigrant women in a similar position, shaping the labor force in Los Angeles and shifting away from traditional roles. The curtain is a quintessential symbol of the domestic space—it veils a window or opening, one I can imagine in my grandmother's kitchen—a space my mother chose to not remain in evident in her choice to depart from the

household at the age of 18. I see the image as one that appears when you peer through a surface like a vision that projects in your mind that breaks through what is actually in your sight.

Through the making of the polyester curtain I constructed space to practice empathy with her choices, her new position and how she saw something different for herself outside of her given circumstance, outside of motherhood.



2.4: *Curtain of Working Women*

a landscape holds you still

“Who am I if I remove myself from the history of this country?” - Rafa Esparza

New topographics, a photography movement formed in the 1970's pointed towards the sight of human-made structures in otherwise vast and natural landscapes as well as banal architecture and environment. The suburban-urban valley, an environment that I was convinced in my adolescence as stifling my creativity and curiosity with its unimposing, neutral tones, bland streets left my mind vacant for the practice of cinematic interventions and dynamic illustrations brought forth by imagined narratives of a more vibrant and momentous life, a portal for spatial imagination. The Valley is often called the “no-place” and serves as the ambiguous backdrop to what we see on films and streaming television often set up to pass for other countries, fungible suburban neighborhood, and past eras from the 1960s, 70's, 80's and 90's with it's aging strip malls, classic liquor stores, and mid-century modern apartment complexes, and parking lots galore. It was the epicenter of the porn industry's golden years and captivated the imagination of teens from the 1980s onward with tropes of the quintessential “valley girl”.

The image “Reseda Sign Self Portrait with my Cousin Carlos” is a reference to Hollywood Hills, California, from the series East Meets West, made in 1979 by queer Chinese-American photographer Tseng Kwong Chi where he made a self-portrait in front of the Hollywood sign. His series is a humorous approach on "touristic America" and cultural tensions, posing in front of western landmarks such as the Disneyland Castle and Paramount Pictures.

I used a similar composition and posed with my cousin Carlos who works in the movie and TV studios on lighting, performing the labor behind the scenes. Growing up in the central part of the San Fernando Valley, we can remember white flight with each new neighborhood we moved into. Moving into North Hills in the early 1990s and later to Northridge, the neighborhood demographics quickly turned from white to predominantly Latinx, Asian, and Black. There were racist and xenophobic reactions to this shift. “During the 1980s, much of the 17% growth in Los Angeles overall was among the Latino and Asian populations. Swelled by an influx of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, Asia, and other parts of the world, Los Angeles emerged in the 1980s as the nation’s most multicultural city, adding almost 1.3 million Latino residents...leading to the creation of new immigrant neighborhoods, cultural identities, and social realities.” (Johnson, 130)

A feeling of perpetual foreignness and a fatigue of constructing a sense of belonging can be illustrated by seeming as a tourist in our own home through the composition of the photo and our sunny Californian sunglasses. This is paired with the Reseda sign from a closed down movie theatre, a neighborhood that has served as a film set for Paul Thomas Anderson, Quentin Tarantino, and movies like *The Karate Kid* and *Drive*. This Reseda sign matches the Hollywood sign as it is a "Hollywood landscape" but without the tourist interest or reputation. Moreover, the invitation to be photographed with my cousin Carlos is fitting way to bring him to the forefront as one who maintains the industry as part of the invisible labor force.

This image is paired with “Film Set Dividers at Plaza del Valle”, an image I made when I visited Plaza del Valle, a small outdoor mall in Panorama City. As I walked up hoping to eat at a local restaurant, I was unable to access the west entrance due to an active film set and large black

dividers covering the production zone. I asked a crew member about the production and he said it was a film with George Clooney and Brad Pitt for Apple TV where they play hitmen. These kind of dividers are commonly spotted in the Valley and serve as temporary walls that create privacy in the public space for exclusive projects and help the monitoring of production crew and pedestrians.



3.1: *Film Set Divider at Plaza del Valle*

This temporary barrier is one we residents of the Valley are very familiar with and reflects the kind of spaces and industry of exclusion that are in relation to the antithetical upspring of spacial entitlement that is created in the community predominantly by Black and brown people. Dr. Malik Gaines writes “I’m attracted to the term overrepresentation which the philosopher Sylvia Wynter used in 2003 to describe the ways in which European thought has

wrapped itself up in speciation, aligning witness with the category of human, and extending that scientism through the projects of sovereignty and conquest that constitute the West.” (Gaines, 30) Hollywood has been an important vehicle of white “overrepresentation” and the construction of the “other” that is consequential to Empire building.

After making photographs around the holding of my mother’s photographs while in Mexico, I turned to my cousin Ana and her daughters Natalya and Rachel to engage in a similar manner with their archives. Natalya and Rachel selected the images of their mother that they wanted to hold and pass back and forth to discuss. I photographed this exchange and performance. The site for this activity was selected by Ana. I asked her to choose a place that holds sentiment and memory where this session can serve as a reason to return. “What is a place that calls you back?” I asked. She said Winnetka Park is a place that has always welcomed her when she as a single mother had limited places to take her children. Ana has an impressive collection of photographs of herself in the 1990s. Her daughters are drawn to her photographs in her teen valley girl glory, and headshots, written dedications handwritten on the back, mostly wallet sized meant to be kept as a precious document. It is similar to the relationship I have with my mothers archive, a place of wonder and often a bridge of understanding for a girl before she was a mother. We hung a curtain on the chainlink fence in front of the baseball field. Her daughters passed photographs to each other and held up their favorite ones to the camera and I photographed the gesture.

Theorist Ariella Aisha Azoulay points toward “the untaken photograph” in the effort to undo the archive and question the ontology of photography and documents. In the archive the intelligibility and what escaped can be more accurate than legibility and what is in possession of the frame. What is most commonly lived isn't necessarily archived and often the obvious is the

most likely to be forgotten because it is not read as unusual or special. Archivist and scholar Dorothy Berry says “When something is so common people don't even write about it. Then you rely on that one piece of evidence to tell you something but it doesn't reflect the common knowledge.” The registering of the banal everydayness is precisely the interior life of working class homes, the intersections of the central and east side where immigrant businesses operate, and the sun-bleached topography. In this project I learn to see from inside. Moreover, in familiarizing oneself with the past archive we can begin to inquire how we situate ourselves when making new photographs to be more legible for those that handle the archive it in the future. Family photographs obscure and illuminate simultaneously whereas the representation in Media and Hollywood can shape a definitive hegemony of otherwise nuanced experiences, flattening life, and creating parameters when attempting to reflect our experiences. Should the making of photographs in our communities work against indexicalization of our characteristics and stories in an attempt to maintain agency and opacity?

Girl of the Valle is a portrait made in Winnetka park of my 16 year old niece Natalya who lives on the east side of the Valley in Sylmar. Natalya is simply herself in a calm posture during a superbloom season. A valley girl is a California persona and stereotype popularized in the early 1980's by teen films set in the westside neighborhoods of the San Fernando Valley such as Sherman Oaks, Tarzana, and Encino. Through films like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Valley Girl* (1983) and *Clueless* (1995) the Los Angeles suburban white affluent girl that “up-speaks” was canonized for the public’s imagination of wealth, naivety, overconsumption of trends, and white young femininity. The identity of a valley girl, often charged with stereotypes, deserves to be revisited through a contemporary lens and critique of exclusion and ignorance of race class and gender. The Valley extends far beyond the malls and boutiques along Ventura



3.2: *Girl of the Valle*

Boulevard as it makes up half of the of the city of Los Angeles. From Canoga Park to Van Nuys to Sylmar, we will find diverse diverse colloquial accents, cultural values, and experiences.

My father that was homeless for some time. Our memories together often took place when meeting at park benches, cafes, bookstores and movie theaters. These were the places that could hold us for a time to build a father-daughter relationship. I remember we were constantly looking for places to be, to dwell for a bit. A “dwelling” is a home. Dwelling also means to be

hung up on the past. Both meanings can be further described as “to remain for a time.” My father and I did not have cameras to document the father-daughter relationship and he always maintained a level of obscurity with me, just popping in and out of my life when he was well enough to do so.

Recently, I experimented in materializing a memory and re-embody it with the limitations of what I can access. My father ran a landscaping company when I was very young and a foundational memory I hold of him is when he would come home exhausted from work, he would hand me a ball point pen and invite me to draw on his back. As a 6 ft 3” man with a wide and porous bronzed back, I would enjoy writing on this vast canvas and he would doze off to the soothing pen upon his skin. It was a silent moment of connecting all the dots on his back like a blue-lined constellation map leading down his arm to his elbows. I remember the broadness of his body and I reflect today on how it must have been read as a vehicle of drudgery that can resist the sun. My father was Chicano from a bracero lineage through his grandfather, a complicated person with vocal disillusionment when it came to the American dream, the police, and the drudgery his people took on to prove themselves worthy of being in the U.S.

In sharing stories of my father my friend Freddy stepped in to re-embody a new version of an old memory. I drew on his back bits of illustration that remind me of my father including the name everyone called him, “Junior.” I chose to do this outside on a wall in a public parking lot because it was most easily accessible but also it connects to the progression of our relationship, unfolding in the exterior space under the sun embedded in the urban topography of hard cast shadows. The surfaces of the city hold the moments I have nowhere to place. Diana Taylor writes in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the*

Americas “If performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity.” (Taylor, XVII) As I moved my pen on his back I began to remember small details of these moments with my father. I reveled in the joy of how I would move the pen as a child, a knowledge held in my body, and I mourned the distance to the origin of the memory.



3.3: *I Remember Drawing on My Father's Back with a Ballpoint Pen*

In the case of *My Mother Standing in a Pool and Reembodying Her Childhood Photograph at a Beach in Mexico*, it is the first time I have taken the responsibility of making her portrait through my art practice. I needed to begin with her childhood photographs and move

chronologically to the present moment where I can see her as the complex woman that she is, a mother but not defined by it. My mother has taught me that the ordinary can be spectacular and despite circumstance, we can live in a parallel mindset of magnificence by constructing a life of embellished stories. Is there an ambivalence of what is accurate and true versus what vitalizes you and shapes your reality? The portrait re-embodies an image of her as an early teen standing in the shallow waters of a Mexican beach. In considering the water we can access in the Valley, we returned to the pool of an apartment complex we lived in in the 1990's. Hanging the backdrop was a meant to wash out the environment only partially and accentuating the awkward attempt to recreate a moment long past.



3.4: *My Mother Standing in a Pool and Re-embodiment Her Childhood Photograph at a Beach in Mexico*

The San Fernando Valley's street medians and dividers are concrete islands and channels that split the boulevards and avenues shaping a cityscape including the notable view we see often, Palm tree-lined boulevards. These awkward slabs of land also host patches of weeds, flower bushes, trash, and traffic signs including a common warning: "No Pedestrians Allowed" or "No Pedestrian Crossing." My cousin Emma shared a story about being a child and remembering a moment when she was playing on the block in front of her apartment building then crossed the street to play in the median's strip of grass. A restricted and contested patch of land was an extension of play for her. Naturally her mother was shocked when she found her there and took her away. As a child Emma saw the median as a place she could make a playground for a moment and although it was brief, she explained to me that she constantly returns to that innocent memory.

Eventually my process of documenting medians led me to a median in my old neighborhood on Parthenia Street and Burnet Ave. where I remember crossing often with my mom and brother. To mark the time I used the family baby blanket, one shared between my brothers and I as children that was purchased at a Raiders game by my mother when she would go see them play at the L.A. Coliseum. My friend Crista and her baby Fenix became stand-ins of this loose representation of my mother and younger brother standing in the median—a patch of land that is the antithesis of place but represents the discomfort and struggle of placemaking. The Raiders blanket is strategic as it is a historically and culturally charged symbol of 1990's racial tension and sense of pride for Latinx and Black communities in Los Angeles.

In the aftermath of the year 2020 I delved into understanding how residents in working class neighborhoods shape public life and culture through spiritual meditation, prayer, and ritual

while meeting many limitations. Significance and meaning is assigned to any given intersection, sidewalk, fence, or exterior wall through an installation of flowers, candles, photographs, and letters that respond to an event that needs to be marked, often a tragic death that processed through collective mourning. The street side memorials are the opposite of a monument or mausoleum. We can also see religious reliquary that is that is public facing in peoples front yards, and in murals that are not specific to an event but shape the semiotics of prayer in the landscape.

Dr. Gaye Teresa Johnson writes “In order to understand the importance of spacial entitlement, we have to do more than just recognize the ways people assert entitlements to new and different spaces. We have to identify how aggrieved groups invest critical meaning into the spaces and situate identities they inhabit in everyday life. Yet the critical value of these meaningful spaces is not always easy to distinguish, even by the members of the communities that contain them.” (Johnson, 123) Parthenia street and Burnet Ave. is a place my memory transports me to where my grandmother and I walked through almost every day. Many people must have a story or memories in the same place, in this stucco textured landscape. My grandmother passed but the eternal mourning is often ignited by the car window seat view passing through the intersection and neighborhood we walked through. In our relationship our lives played out in public, not only in our interior space and today I only have access to the public space that holds these memories. In making a flower sculpture for my grandmother and installing it in a particular wall I am marking the site with significance that otherwise is unknown but also working through the sentiments of that physical space and producing new meaning through the handling of the installation and making photographs.



3.5: *Portrait at the Median with the Family Baby Blanket*

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