

INDUSTRIAL TENDERNESS

MEXICAN-AMERICAN
ORNAMENTATION
AS A PLURIVERSAL
DESIGN LANGUAGE

ELBERT L. GIRÓN

Colophon

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Forever Under Construction
Si Dios Quiere

Thesis Advisory Committee

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Industrial Design in the Department of Industrial Design of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

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Abstract

Industrial Tenderness surveys the relationship between visual language, cultural expression, and diasporic practices through the design of functional sculptures. These designed objects seek to communicate cultural legibility, or intuitive cultural belonging, to Mexican-American peoples by challenging legacy notions of design language. Through a proposed design language framework and designed objects, Industrial Tenderness seeks to affirm a pluriversal practice of industrial design.

Legacy industrial design confines design language to a heavily prescriptive canon, resulting in a stark monocultural language that is unrepresentative of perspectives outside of a legacy dominant white eurocentricity founded in thinking from the Bauhaus and Ulm schools. Through ethnographic research, studio talks, introspection, and making, the pluriversal design practice of ornamentation has been identified as a way of cultural signaling and challenging design homogeneity. These learnings have informed functional sculptures that blend American industrial materials and form languages with Mexican ornamentation practices. This blending of visual languages seeks to affirm the liminal hybridity of Mexican-American material culture as notably distinct.

This research uses terms and thinking from the field of linguistics to construct a more apt framework for a cultural design lexicon. This framework considers how semiotics, semantics, syntax, and localization can offer a richer approach to considering design language and cultural contexts. This body of research is laid out into sections titled Expression, Abstraction, Canvases, Ornamentation, and Unspecific Memories, which explores the design theory and processes that informed the design of the functional sculptures. It is through this publication and set of designed objects that Industrial Tenderness affirms the strength of Mexican-American pluriversal design language in opposition to assimilation.



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Big whirls have little
whirls that feed
on their velocity,
and little whirls have
lesser whirls and
so on to viscosity.

Introduction

Foundational Statement and Core Thesis Question

I am using a cultural design lexicon to design functional sculptures that affirm the pluriversal power of Mexican-American ornamentation.

How can expanding the meaning of design language affirm material cultures and aesthetics from outside the traditional Western canon?

Who I Am

My name is Elbert Lucilo Girón. Elbert was a noble attempt at anglicization of Alberto, after my great grandfather. Lucilo after my father, as well as Girón, though the tilde was lost with migration. I was born in Salem, Oregon to Lucilo Girón Santos and Imelda Leonor Girón, both Mexican immigrants from Oaxaca. My earliest memories include listening to banda in Oaxaca during the festivities, playing Pokemon on a gray Gameboy, selling gum in the strawberry fields, and going to church. Spanish was my first language, and quickly became my worst, but it's been getting better in adulthood. I never participated in Ash Wednesday, but had a strict religious upbringing regardless. I grew up with equal parts Los Tigres and the Strokes, thanks to a dad who loved Norteño and too much time watching music videos. I had no idea how colleges function, and still don't, but knew that was the end goal. I was taught how to work hard from an early age, and was never taught what rest was.

I am a designer and artist. My commercial work includes spatial design, accessory design, apparel design, and furniture design for clients primarily in the fashion and design industries. My conceptual work focuses on consumption, material culture, and labor looking to highlight stories that are near to my heart. At the core of it all is passion for the power of visual language and identity. I am a person.

Why I'm Doing This

The ethos behind this project started when I was 18 at a university with a high population of international students. Frequent talks about ethnicity, nationality, and cultural identity, both where those converge and diverge, led me to search for a deeper understanding of my own cultural upbringing. It was a fish in the water moment where I was able to recognize the richness of my cultural upbringing. The hunger to find out more specific details about my family's histories was reminiscent of a scene from Aziz Anzari's *Master of None*¹ that depicts a conversation between children of immigrants.

“You know stuff about your dad’s backstory?”

I mean, I know the big points.
He was poor. He was in another country.
It was tough. Then he came here.
I mean, you know, I got the gist of it.

Well isn't that the gist of every immigrant's story?
That it was hard?”

But I wanted to understand the stories and contexts around my parent's immigration stories in detail, not just the gist. I wanted to know how they felt, their apprehensions, their challenges, their victories, their reflections. The more stories they shared, the greater my own understanding of how that shaped my environment and my upbringing.

Then this past summer, there were two texts that could not escape my mind. The first was a research article by Jason De León from the *Journal of Material Culture*² that highlighted the border crossing marketplaces and migrant journeys at the Arizona/Mexico border. The visual narrative of the images within the paper struck my heart, both feeling remorse for the loved ones that never made the journey and feeling immense gratitude for the sacrifices my parents made and the consequent impact that had on my life. The second text that stuck with me was an article from the *LA Times Image* by Julissa James³ titled *What Would the Visual Identity of L.A. be without landscape artists?* which highlights the role immigrant landscapers have in shaping Los Angeles. The pride in celebrating that work made me reflect on the many times I felt embarrassed to



work landscaping alongside my dad, realizing that the hard work and attention to detail from those experiences have ultimately shaped the ethic and eye I take in my present design work. Sharing narratives and challenging how we think of visual language was something I wanted to do, and I felt a responsibility to do so for my Mexican-American culture.

So this thesis is meant to serve as an affirmation of Mexican-American material culture and design language as being strong, beautiful, and resilient. Of being capable of creating worlds that aren't represented by legacy design, but are worthy of attention all the same. Industrial Tenderness is meant to highlight the ethic of making something beautiful with limited resources and a will to work. This ethic and practice is expressed through ornamentation.

The Current Landscape

Cultural representation in product design is lacking in every sense of the word. The ability to sell in mass quantity takes precedent over cultural resonance or considering what representation actually means. Though efforts in representation for more people of color in design positions have been made, we are still preaching Eurocentric design standards through imitating Dieter Rams and reciting Bauhaus principles in a repetitive drone. To quote Albert Borgmann, "design in its objective sense [is] the excellence of the material culture"⁴. If that is so, the objects should not be a monoculture, and should not subscribe to a singular design history as being archetypal. They should instead be representative of the many cultures and realities within the world. We must recognize the freedom from homogeneity that cultural design agency can offer.

There are great movements occurring within the fine art world. The work of artist and curator Ozzie Juarez at Tlaloc Studios is getting momentum in highlighting voices, themes, and imagery that has long been deserving of space. Work at NYU's Latinx Project is pushing forward spaces and resources for diasporic Latin Americans to create art and foster crucial discussion around identity. Design, being historically at the will of the market and the pitfalls of capitalism, is slower to catch up. My hope is that this work is amongst others in pursuing a design that is more representative of a pluriversal world where hybridity is celebrated over a monoculture. A pluriversal world where anything from the object to the environment can provide solace to many people instead of a presupposed universal person. This is an effort amongst many.



Presentation of the Work

This book is laid out into 5 chapters, those chapters explore the concepts around cultural visual language in Expression and Abstraction, the making process through Canvases and Ornamentation, and the synthesis of this research through Unspecific Memories. Expression explores meaning-making and lays out a cultural design language used for the output of visual communication. This language forms the conceptual foundation for the project. Abstraction looks to the liminal nature of diasporic cultures, highlighting the pluriversality that comes from spaces of understanding. This chapter focuses on room for interpretation as a culturally generative dialogue. Canvases outlines the American form languages and references that have become monocultural archetypes, serving as both a critique of these legacy languages and description of the initial making process. Ornamentation reflects on different forms of ornamentation and their role in transforming existing structures into something culturally legible. Unspecific Memories is the culmination of the earlier chapters resulting in objects designed around three vignettes, synthesizing my research through design. Within each chapter is an essay exploring each respective theme, with supporting images, graphics, and quotes.

Each chapter contains an essay describing the core principle alongside imagery from my research. Each chapter closes with visuals that elaborate on the essay, sometimes in the form of graphic frameworks or in the form arrays of photography or in the form of literature. The final chapter, Unspecific Memories, takes a more personal approach in both the essays and the imagery serving as the actualization of the research and theory shaped throughout the earlier chapters through the lens of my perspective. In the spirit of Mexican-American visual language, there are fun surprising moments breaking this layout throughout the book.

1. Master of None. Season 1, Episode 2. Directed by Eric Wareheim, created by Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang. Netflix, 2015.
2. De León, J. (2013). Undocumented migration, use wear, and the materiality of habitual suffering in the Sonoran Desert. *Journal of Material Culture*, 18(4), 321-345.
3. Los Angeles Times. (2023, May 15). What would the visual identity of L.A. be without landscape artists?. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/image/story/2023-05-15/paisaboy-celebrate-los-angeles-landscapers-as-architects-of-beauty>
4. Borgmann, A. (2019). The Depth of Design. *The Design Philosophy Reader*.

Glossary

Abstraction:

The act of communicating, through art and design, ideas that are not representational of something in the natural world or built environment, often focused on communicating a concept, idea, or value over realism. In the context of this project, the focus is on communicating emotive qualities.

Assemblage:

A non-destructive grouping of things, inclusive of art objects, broader material culture, and people that holds a different meaning as a collective. Used within this thesis to refer to curated groups of objects, whether curated subconsciously or consciously, and subgroups within a larger cultural group.

Arrangement:

Used in the sense established by D4SI's Ideas-Arrangements-Effects with hard arrangements referring to spatial proximity and positioning while soft arrangements refer to social expectations created by cultural constructs. In the scope of this thesis it is most used in exploring the context around cultural entanglements and the adoption of objects from other cultures.

Cultural Agency:

Cultural agency refers to a cultural group's agency to express their identity in the way they see fit at the individual and group level. In this thesis, it is used to refer to the agency of individuals and cultural groups to express themselves in the manner they wish, indifferent to xenophobia or assimilation.

Cultural Design Language:

Similar in the sense of design language or design identity being a directed set of visual components, cultural design language includes visual language, context types, and purposes that contribute to the formation of broader material culture.

Cultural Legibility:

References, details, stories, and icons that are understood by members of a cultural group that an object, place, or people have ties to their culture. Distinctive from stereotypes in that these markers are subtle and less known by outside groups. Cultural legibility differs from the idea of cultural authenticity in that it functions as a fluid group of signifiers instead of a static criteria as is often the case with authenticity.

Design Semiotics, Syntax and Semantics:

These terms from linguistics are how I am opening visual design language to consider broader material culture and cultural aesthetics. Object semiotics is exploring the potential objects have as cultural symbols or signals, while semantics refers to visual design elements and syntax refers to the context, purposes, and arrangements of design elements.



Glossary, cont.

Material Culture:

Often used within anthropology to refer to any object made by or used by humans. In the scope of this thesis project, I use material culture similarly but also include the realms of fine art and design (often specifically industrial design).

Pluriversal Design:

A practice that approaches design as a way of world and reality building, especially alternative ways of living not represented by majority or dominant cultures. This project is particularly inspired by Arturo Escobar's approach to pluriversal design.



A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal”.

Expression

Imbuing meaning into anything, everything, something, and nothing.

Design semiotics, semantics, syntax, and localization. Or in other words, ways of communicating meaning through cultural visual languages.



Above:
Amish pressback chairs in the dining
room of our little yellow house on
Hummingbird Street in Salem, OR.

On Abstraction

Both the extremely tragic and extremely euphoric experiences in life always have a deeper meaning than just their face value. Cancer eating away at someone was just life challenging you, or an enemy's brujeria. High points in life are either blessings from working hard and consistently, or symptoms of greed or selfishness, depending on how we feel about that particular person. We never share those high points publicly because of,



Above:
Celebrating my little cousin's birth-
day, Amish pressback chairs present,
in rural Hubbard, OR.

you know, the implications. From my interdisciplinary (or amorphous mess of a) perspective, this is the same as design semiotics in that it is engaged with seeing the meaning behind experiences, objects, and symbols beyond their face value. Blending my Mexican-American upbringing with exposure to the transcendentalists,

and having had a rigid religious background, I feel a pull to insert as much meaning into everything that I am engaged with, especially design. Thus

my gravitation toward design semiotics.

I see the potential for design semiotics to be more than its current application in icons, symbols, and indexes—as a natural extension of how we use visual design language. Building on traditional principles of design and design semiotics as it stands today, I propose the consideration of the use of semantics, syntax, and localization (terms borrowed from linguistics) as principles to capture a richer design context. I am not proposing this as a

Below:
My father working on paperwork for his landscaping business while sitting on an Amish pressback chair in my childhood home.



new way of making or designing, but rather an articulation of practices that are already occurring within Mexican-American communities.

Below:
Family gathered around the table after my uncle's face was pushed into the cake. Amish pressback chair again present.



Semantics refers to the role of visual design language in communicating sense and implications. Specifically, I see the role of semantics as using visual language to refer to memories, emotions, and experiences that hold meaning to a common group. In the context of Mexican-American

culture, I think of the prevalence of the Amish pressback chair in my own home and the homes of family members with its distinct floral carving paralleling the floral embroidery that adorned these spaces, its dark brown wood that shares its tone with Mexican colonial furniture, and its geometric turned spindles sharing a craft commonality with Oaxacan artisan goods. These elements of patterning, color, material, and shape are individually engaging senses and making references within an object

While semantics is involved with the use of design principles like color and shape, I see syntax as the arrangement and structure of visual language through context in pursuit of a legible message. Though the Amish pressback chair is not Mexican, in a diasporic context there are familiar elements that recall memories and past experiences with Mexican furniture and this is because the specific visual language used within the chair facilitates this recollection. These elements in addition to the purposeful



arrangement of these objects through a chair in a domestic family context communicate specific memories tied to related emotions and experiences. Through the syntax of specific object and memory contexts, the semantic



Right:
An Amish pressback chair at a garage sale in Canby, OR.

elements are no longer unstructured visuals but hold a legible meaning.

Localization comes into play as we consider the hybridity of cultures and its role in adapting visual languages to develop a diasporic pluriverse. In the linguistic sense, localization is preoccupied with retaining the author's voice, communicating cultural nuance, and considering regional norms. As applied to design and Mexican-American migratory context, localization would look at the cultural demands of an object, the adaptations and adoptions that would occur, and the availability of objects or materials. The Amish pressback chair is a good example of localization as it meets the needs of social gathering and visiting together, it is adopted into a new cultural context, and is readily available secondhand. Localization can also be seen in Mexican neighborhoods throughout cities in the US. If you look at the Oaxacan Corridor in Los Angeles' Koreatown, you can see how spaces can represent this adoption through how the walls of buildings are ornamented with murals, tagging, or



banners. Woodburn Oregon's Front Street is similar in looking at the painting, lettering, and signs that help communicate that the downtown area is home to Mexican immigrants. Chicago's Little Village tells a story of how a Mexican immigrant community made an Eastern European neighborhood their own through adorning and adopting the buildings.

The combination of semiotics, semantics, syntax, and localization is how I see design language being used to imbue culturally legible meaning. Beyond the traditional design principles we have been taught, I see the potential of a consideration of the cultural intangibles that communicate meaning that does not get its flowers in contemporary design discussions. I also see this framework of design language as being inclusive of design and art practices that make up how diasporic people make objects and spaces their own through a mixing, bleeding, or exchanging of things. Exchanges that make Goku or Yakult or Ruth Morehead illustrations or Herbalife or The Smiths or Amish pressback chairs part of a Mexican-American experience.

Within this cultural design language framework, I am proposing semantics as the building blocks that begin to express feeling through visual elements. I am proposing syntax as the emotional, social, and utilitarian functions that turn semantics into a legible meaning or message. Finally, I am proposing localization as physical and temporal contexts that allow objects to sit in fluid cultural dialogues.

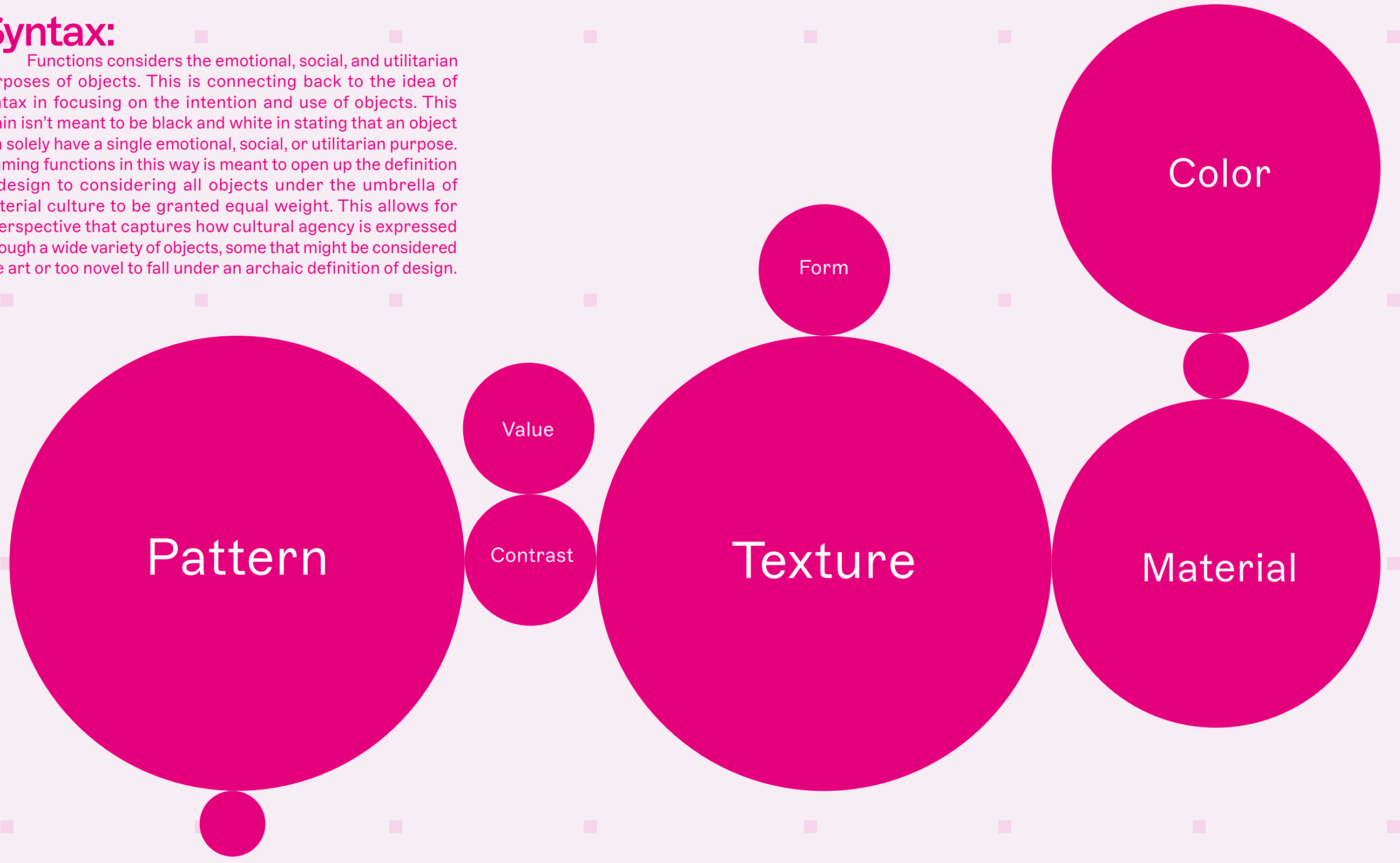
Semantics:

Connecting back to semantics as the core visual building blocks that form a cultural design language, I am proposing form, color, material, texture, contrast, and pattern as the essential visual elements I am using within this project. Of course, there are visual design elements beyond those included in this framework and the intention is not to prescribe what is necessary but how I am operating.



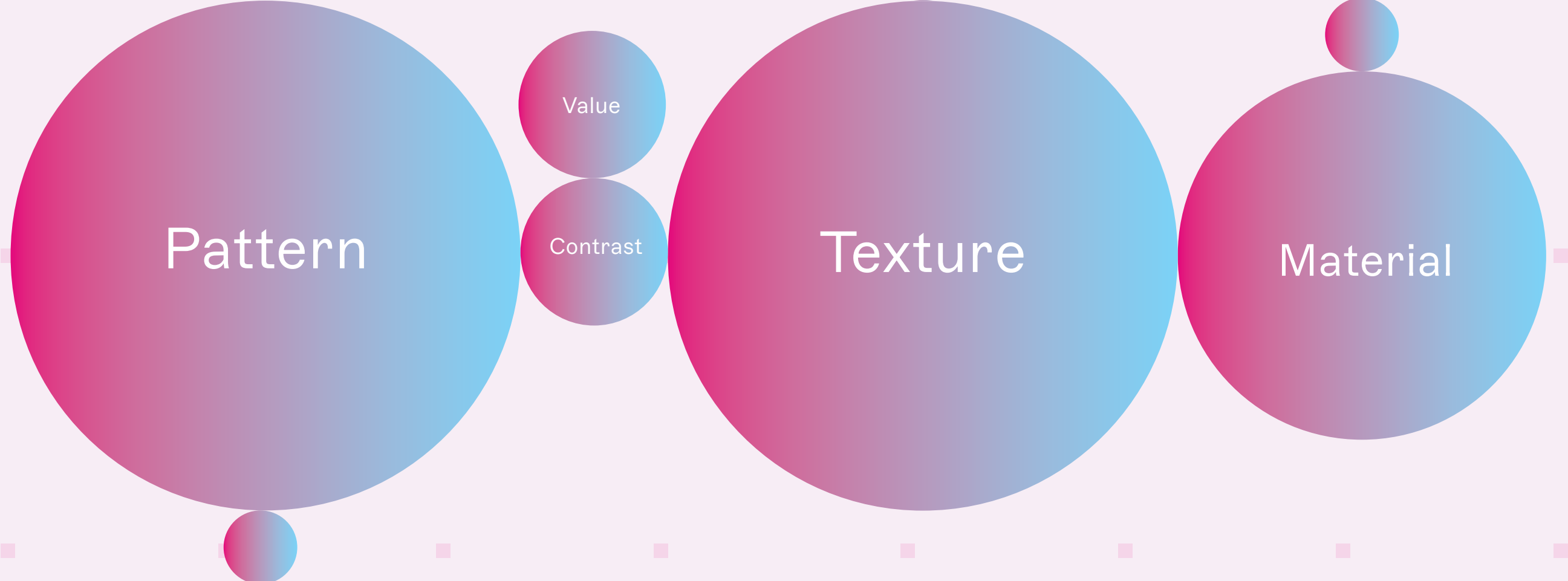
Syntax:

Functions considers the emotional, social, and utilitarian purposes of objects. This is connecting back to the idea of syntax in focusing on the intention and use of objects. This again isn't meant to be black and white in stating that an object can solely have a single emotional, social, or utilitarian purpose. Framing functions in this way is meant to open up the definition of design to considering all objects under the umbrella of material culture to be granted equal weight. This allows for a perspective that captures how cultural agency is expressed through a wide variety of objects, some that might be considered fine art or too novel to fall under an archaic definition of design.



Localization:

In thinking about the assemblage of objects, I wanted to present two pathways that fall under localization. The first is focused on memory, or exploring how an object can evoke distinct experiences. This presents a language centered around communicating the atmosphere of a memory. The second path is focused on the physical arrangement of objects in space and their spatial relationships with other objects. Objects can take on different meanings and functions based on these types of context, thus influencing the world a object creates or operates within. Both pathways at their core consider the how an object sits in dialogue that varies based on the physical and temporal spaces it occupies.



Reliving those moments in my life... It's important for me to repaint them in a very specific way. It's not just perfect... A lot of the imagery is taken directly from those mom and pop stores... It's primarily really strong here in South Central... They love painting Mickey Mouse in storefronts... If your art can be understood locally and also take it to Deitch, and those patrons can come in and get it too. They're probably getting it in a different way... but they know it's from somewhere.

Ozzie Juarez & Alex 2Tone,
Why Goku is Art History,
Powerful Truth Angels

Abstraction

A freedom to interpret and embrace the undefined and nonrepresentational.

Understanding is fluid and shifting based on your own state. Memories themselves are a biased recollection of a specific lived experience.



Above:
A variation on prayer candles, this time in honor of the saint of death, or holy death, instead of the typical Catholic saints. These candles sit somewhere between Catholicism and Mexican folk traditions.

Below:
Prayer candles from a New Orleans company, found in the same Mexican market as the candles on the left.



If I talk about the way a cuchara for mole is made, the language and points of reference create a world where we are mutually understood. While

On Abstraction

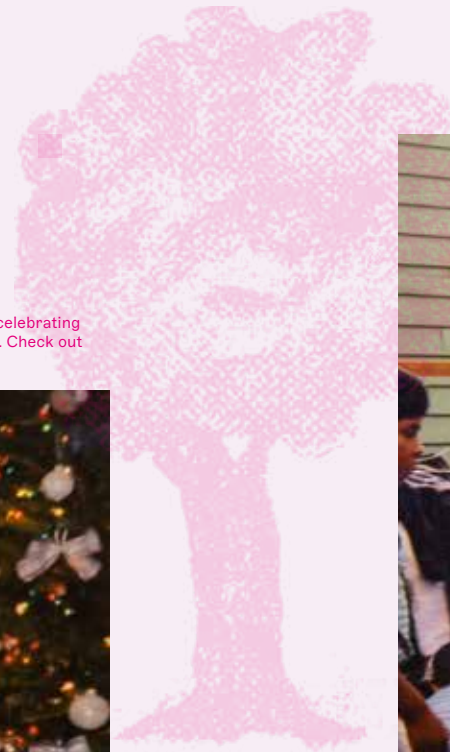
Visual communication becomes pluriversal once a community starts to engage with the design. To be understood is not to state something to the world, but to have your words interpreted and comprehended, and in that space of understanding is a new pluriverse created. If I'm rambling on about design affordances and the theory behind them, it does little good to my aging grandparents that lose point of reference within two seconds.

my views on expression are a bit structured and somewhat formulaic, I view the role of understanding and interpretation as being more fluid and based in loose representation, thus the term abstraction. There needs to be a space to evoke feeling over specificity to allow for cultural agency and cultural legibility. My view

of an object's interpretation contrasts that of Donald Judd's prescriptive objectivism, emblematic of the cold brashness of an American detachment, and strict adherence to distinguishing the realms of art and functional object. If it belongs to a material culture, then it exists in this liminal space that needs no explicit definition.

In contrast to Judd's Specific Objects, I propose the concept of Unspecific Memories. The term Unspecific Memories is a bit of a contradiction in

Below:
My mother and father celebrating New Year's circa 2004. Check out those Norteño boots.



Above:
Summer family gathering in the backyard of the house on Hummingbird Street.

that memories are a biased recollection of an experience, but I feel that term fits well in that objects can possess a potent, but amorphous, sentiment to be interpreted by a group. That imprecise space for cultural meaning, or cultural legibility, is core to how we interpret the cultural significance of an object. Though Unspecific

Memories is a chapter exploring the works produced for this project, I highlight it here to connect the role of abstraction in the design process.

Fitting within the concept of cultural agency, people ultimately determine what matters most to them and so culture changes. Takuaches and Trokiando is a departure from classic Chicano lowrider culture. Yet a slammed Ram 1500 single cab truck is just as much a component of broader Mexican-American material



Above:
Slammed single-cab shortbed RAM 1500. Via Jose L. Jimenez Jr.

culture as a candy painted Impala. These subcultures illustrate the call and response qualities of assemblage. They are assemblages in that they are



Above:
Rural truck culture as seen through modified Ford pickup trucks in Hubbard, OR.

unique and distinctive within broader Mexican-American culture, but are able to contribute to the aesthetics of the cultural community as well. Subcultures like these are at the same time individually distinctive and contributing to the broader community aesthetics. Parts of Mexican culture and parts of American culture blend together, exchanging and influencing each other while respecting their individual qualities. This is visible in the assemblage or arrangement of things within the Takuache subculture



Above:
Truck culture as seen through a Ford Bronco in Woodburn, OR, a city with a large Mexican population.

fluidity of cultural hybridity. The experiences of a Mexican-American person raised in East LA, Chicago, or Texas will differ from that of someone from Minnesota, Idaho, or Georgia. Despite the differences, there is still a threshold of shared experience whether it be one's relationship with Spanish or indigenous language, one's experience as a minority, or one's development and understanding of identity. This gradient of cultural experience provides a foundation for expressive meaning to be culturally legible.

Below:
My childhood bedroom with an assorted set of vinyl records from Los Tigres Del Norte, Vampire Weekend, and Jimi Hendrix

On Next Spread:
Globalized pinātas in a Mexican market in Woodburn, OR

like square toe boots that bleed out Norteño and Southwestern cultures, or American pickup trucks that are ornamented with aftermarket parts to become something new and distinctive. As someone outside of this subculture, there are enough recognizable sentiments within the Takuache subculture that I can interpret the cultural meaning. I still grew up listening to Norteño music and driving a F150, so there are things that I can relate to beyond a surface level visual engagement.

Abstraction captures the distinctive



The following is a model for cultural legibility. This is coming from my spatial research of Mexican-American places in Oregon, Rhode Island, and Los Angeles, California. The model is meant to illustrate the process of adopting spaces and objects into Mexican-American material culture. In particular, it observes the role of ornamentation in adopting forms into a living, changing culture.

Stark Minimalism and Modernism imposed as the dominant American cultural visual language



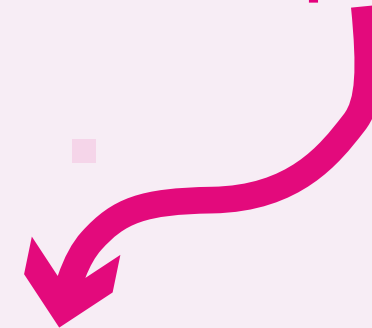
Mexican diaspora move in to these coldly designed environments



Living leads to ornamentation that transforms these spaces



A hybrid material culture and visual language is formed (pluriverse)



Cultural visual language shifts and evolves along with people over time

For today, Modernism has lost any claim it may once have passed to modernity. It finds itself in the positions of an aging dictator whose power, influence, and credibility have already failed, and from whom international support has fallen away. Modernism resembles a teetering oligarch in another way, too. It has always tended to re-interpret the past from its own perspective, even when that necessitated the most willful misrepresentations.

Peter Fuller,
The Search for a
Postmodern Aesthetic

Canvases

A foundation for inserting expression and points of views otherwise absent.

Imposed design language and form archetypes create a monoculture. The moment this happens, the opportunity is there to challenge it.

On Canvases

Part of the immigrant experience is working with the circumstances you find yourself in and doing your best with it. This is true both conceptually, and when thinking about the built environment. Before Chicago's Little Village was a predominantly Mexican



Above:
Mural ornamenting an otherwise stark building in Los Angeles, CA.

neighborhood, it was settled by Central and Eastern European immigrants. The newness of a place and experience grants a starting point to work from. It



Above:
Parking lot of multiple Mexican-owned businesses where murals, signage, and paint give life to otherwise cold geometric forms in the Oaxacan Corridor in Los Angeles, CA.

is at both times an exciting opportunity to start fresh, and a daunting challenge in the vulnerability in announcing your otherness to an intimidating world.

Within the context of this work, the canvas I am working with has been the long tenure of modernism and minimalism as the dominant language in the United States. A fanaticism for industrialization means concrete faces with no expression, rectilinear forms void of anything but a disdain for expression, geometric shapes meant

to fulfill human needs in as sparse a way as possible. It is the 'normal' standard that becomes a contrast against the warmth and texture of visual languages from the global south. The normalization of sterile forms leads to a larger complacency in broader American culture where a blindness to the cold and gray reduces the color of everything. It is this rigid complacency that I want to highlight.

The process of making these chairs has been starting with making

Below:
Rusty corrugated sheet metal near a sidewalk.



Above:
Graffiti ornaments rusty sheet metal turning something cold and industrial into something warmer.

a modernist furniture piece, focusing primarily on communicating the stark language of the cold bare forms. This has meant I restrain myself from injecting the pull to insert Mexican-American ornamentation through the forms these canvases take. Of course these forms still communicate a cultural meaning despite the restraint and

reduction as they espouse the values of the culture they originate from. The approach isn't to design a furniture piece in the same way Donald Judd,

George Nelson, or Florence Knoll did with a functional design brief or industrial manufacturing process in mind, but instead to articulate the industrial and harsh language that present modernism evokes. In that sense, they reflect the harsh American canvas that works in opposition to the warm Mexican ornamentation to come.

And so the making process begins with creating a cold machine as a canvas. The forms are extremely rectilinear, recalling the rigidity of present American modernism. The materials that make up these canvases are mainstays in American material culture, which in the scope of this body of work is primarily plywood and aluminum. Construction is largely influenced by the archetypal designs of the earlier mentioned modernists and minimalists like Judd, Nelson, and Knoll, as well as Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Frank Gehry, Normal Bel Geddes, and Charles Pollock. This assemblage of references articulates what has become the imposed standard for how things should be designed. Broader American culture venerates

the language of these designers and the movements they represent. This veneration has canonized forms and processes that do not capture the cultural design language of those on the fringes of American culture. At this point in time beyond the inception of modernism, they are simply outdated and do not represent the reality of the world they exist in. And so these canons operate as a basis from which to critique the dominant American cultural design language.

Below:
Various flag murals on the side of
brick walls in East Los Angeles, CA.





Left:
Nelson Platform Bench by George Nelson for Herman Miller originally produced in 1946.
via georgenelsonfoundation.org

Below:
Lounge Chair by Florence Knoll for Knoll produced in 1954.
via hivemodern.com

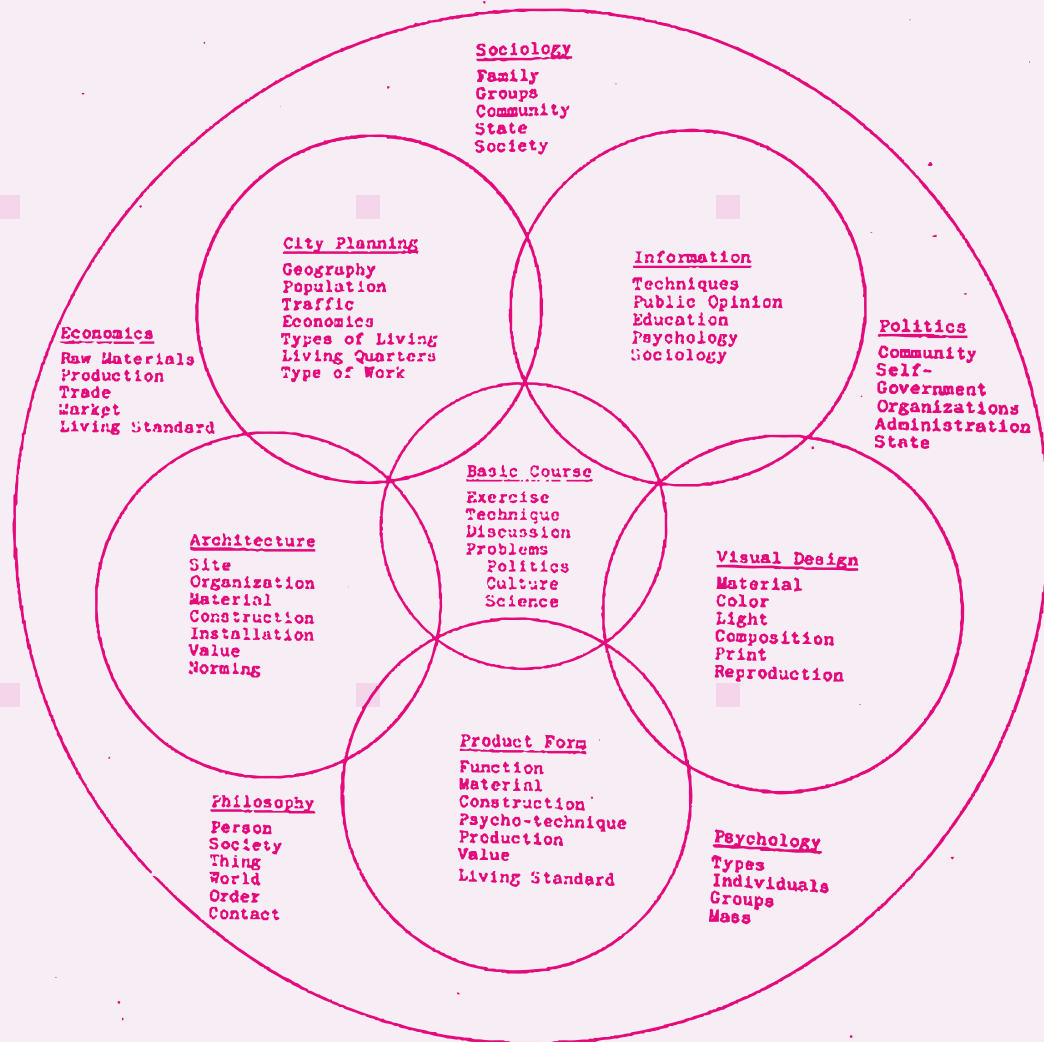


Top:
84 Chair series by Donald Judd designed in 1982.
via artsy.net

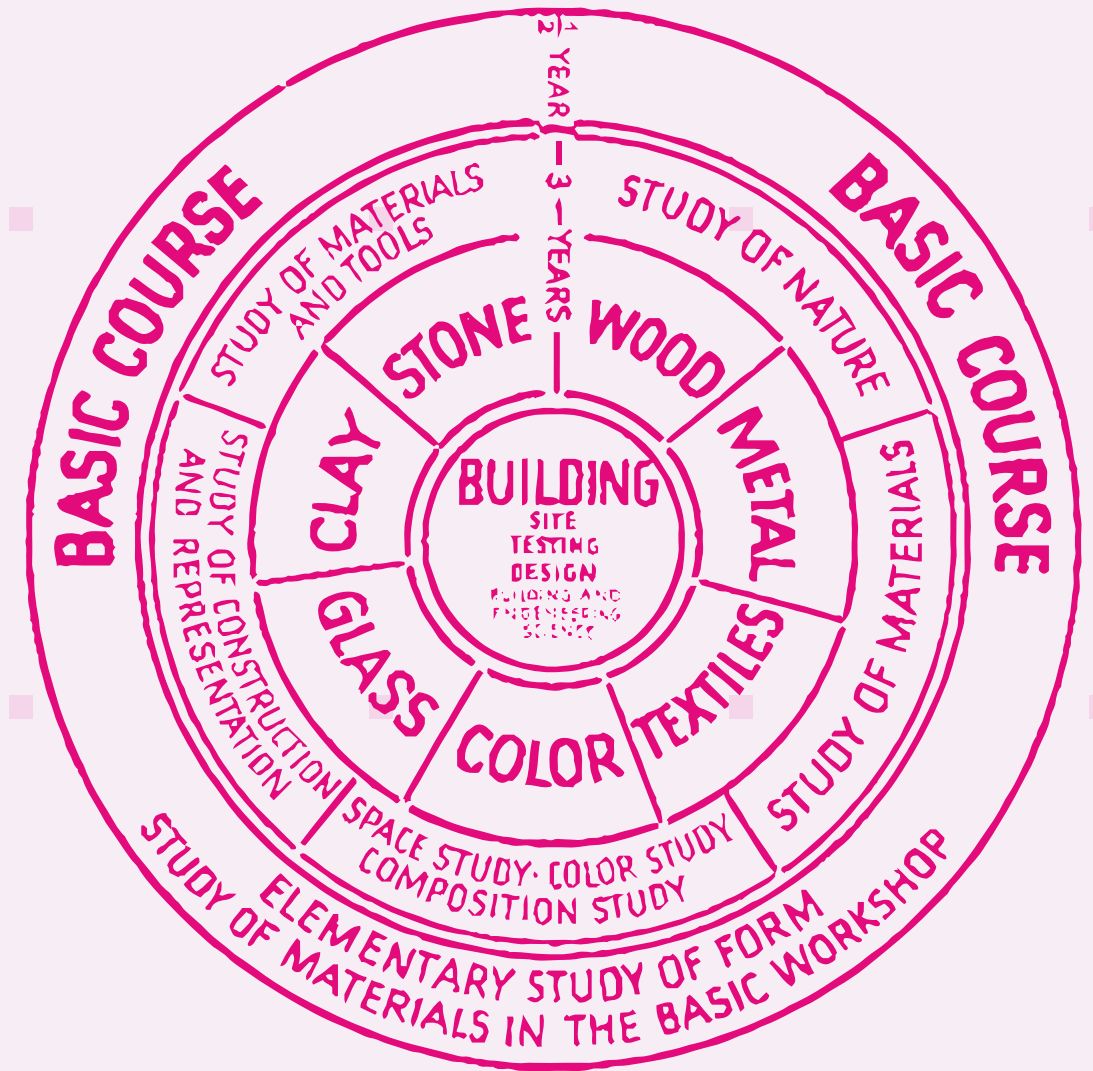
Right:
623 Lewis Coffee Table by Frank Lloyd Wright produced in 1956
via architonic.com



An Aging Curriculum for a Eurocentric Design Perspective via the Ulm School



An Aging Curriculum for a Eurocentric Design Perspective via the Bauhaus



He argues, against Adolf Loos, that the destruction of ornament within the modernist movement was 'one of the cultural crimes of our age', and makes the parallel criticism that modernism is fatally compromised by its espousal of the idea that 'progress' is synonymous with an increase in the quantity of manufactured goods... 'black box' aesthetics were simply a new version of an old problem: what values should any product express?

Ornamentation

Creating worlds and realities through expressively altering existing objects and spaces.

Aesthetics are more than an afterthought. They shape and communicate culture and peoples.

On Ornamentation

Adorning a space is a pluriversal practice. Murals, tagging, vigils, papel picado, loitering, sign painting, banners, stands, decals, wall painting. These are all forms of adopting readymade spaces and creating something culturally distinctive. These practices challenge physical arrangements, especially those that prescribe a way of being. It is through ornamentation that diasporic people are able to carve out a space for themselves

Below: A mural and graffiti give life to a flat wall in Los Angeles, CA.



Above: Mural honoring Kobe Bryant, in addition to graffiti, adorning an otherwise blank flat wall.

and have the agency to live as they wish within a new environment. Ornamentation is a design practice of articulating one's freedom to be.

These practices range and vary from more readily accepted forms that engage with commerce like artisanal weaving, embroidery and metalwork

or the more globalized, but still culturally legible, typographic signs and advertising banners. Less readily accepted forms of ornamentation

like tagging and graffiti strongly communicate a cultural legibility, and through their traditionally criminal nature favor cultural agency over complying to dominant cultural norms. Murals, though more socially acceptable, follow this ethos in being expressive and representative of the communities they exist in. I see this in murals representative of the migrant farmworkers that make up a foundational part of the Mexican community in Woodburn, Oregon. I see the celebration of Oaxacan culture in Los Angeles' Oaxaca Corridor from the murals to the signage of tienditas. In these different forms of ornamentation, there is a process of overlaying that occurs. Weaving requires material to envelop itself to form something new. Embroidery requires a puncturing of a medium to complete an image. Metalwork requires physical transformation to create new shapes and symbols. Tagging and graffiti require a canvas, whether building or train or any other physical object, for their murals to exist.



Above:
Mural and graffiti representing the local community of Woodburn, OR.

In the following objects, my approach to ornamentation was to pull inspiration from three distinct contexts to influence the type of ornamentation taking place. This is taken very literally in having “in memory of” murals influence the use of spray paint to ornament a chair. This takes a more conceptual turn in the Pilas chair that takes inspiration from the staining that comes from picking berries in crop fields for hours. The deep stains are translated into berry-like screenprint inks that

were hand mixed until they stained my hands the same way blueberries, blackberries, and strawberries did when I picked them. The Niñez chair sits in the middle finding inspiration in the cake decoration of birthday cakes from Mexican bakeries, having the ornamentation come through impasto painting applied through frosting bags.

Below:
Mixed screenprint inks tested on my skin for accuracy.

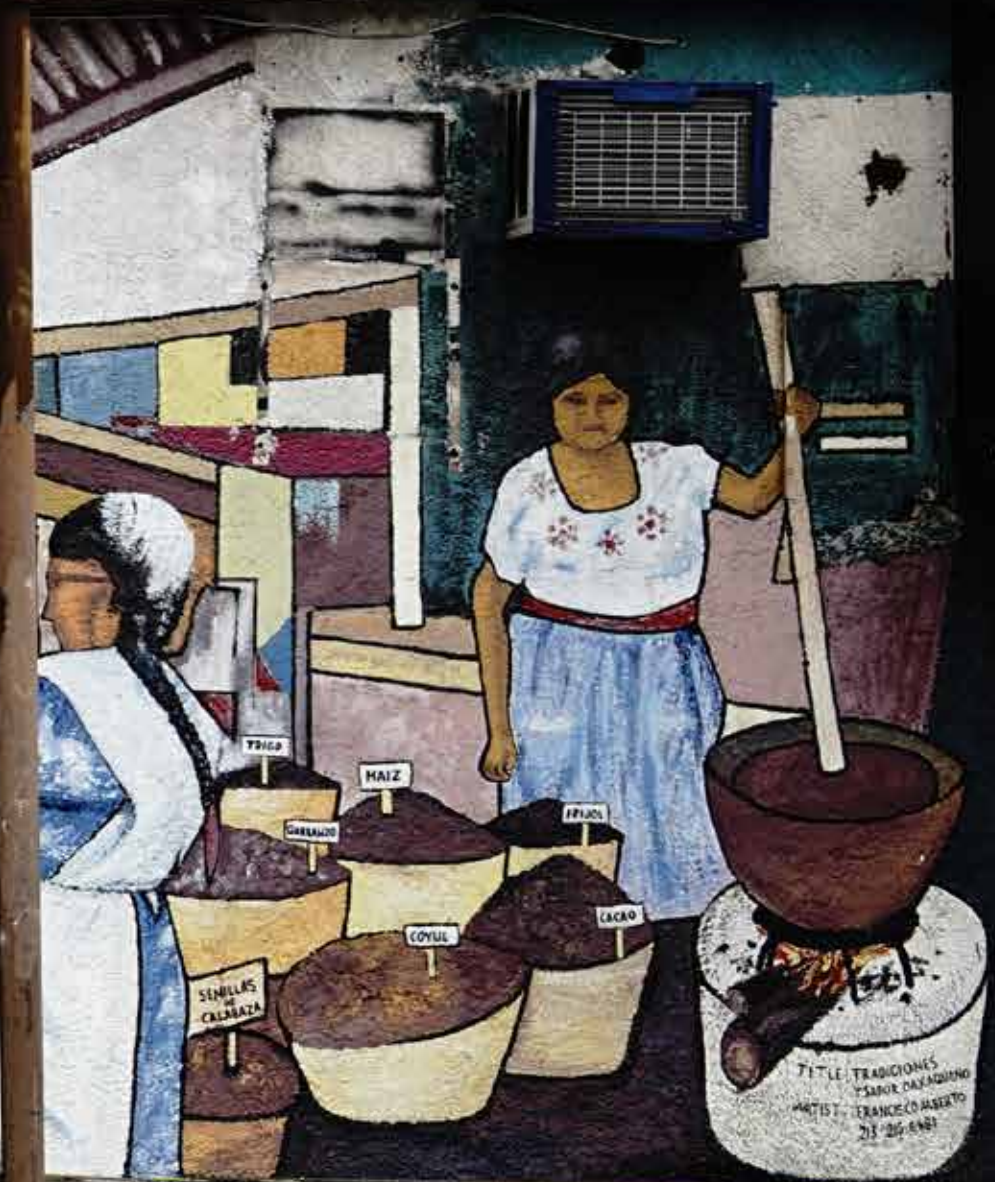
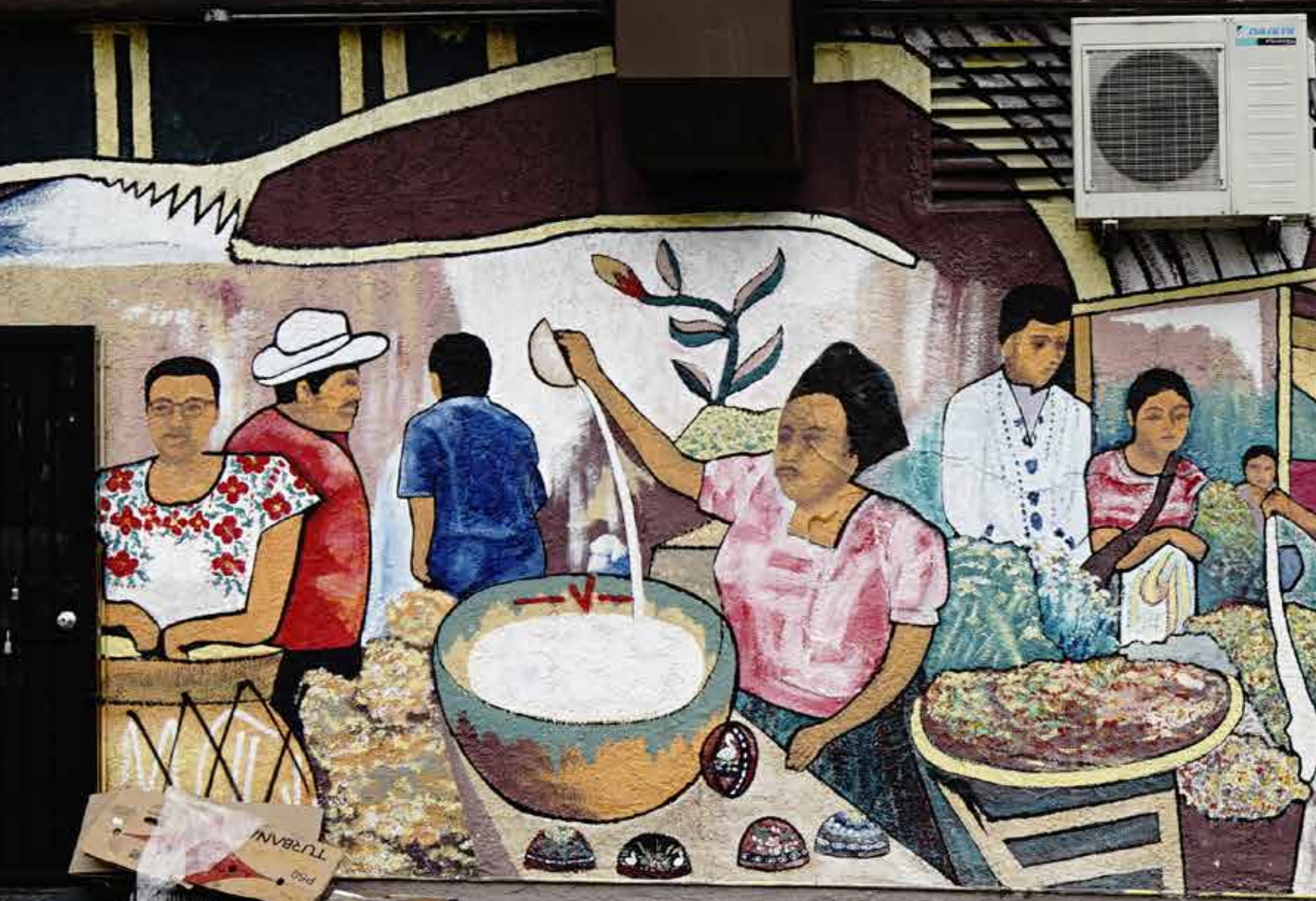


These three distinct memories use forms of ornamentation that vary in their literal interpretation of Mexican-American ornamentation. While the

reference to cake is more literal, the reference to agricultural labor is more abstract, with the reference murals and altars sit somewhere in the middle.



Right:
Cake consultant Anna Glass ices a chair using a frosting bag filled with a mixture of acrylic paint and extra heavy gel medium emulate cake frosting through impasto painting.



7111 TRADICIONES
SABOR DEL ANQUIÑO
ARTIST: FRANCISCO HABERTO
215 215 6881



Prior Page:
Rural depicting the Oaxacan
community near the Oaxacan corridor
in Los Angeles, CA.

Top Left:
Metal fencing in the style of papel
picado near the Museum of Latin
American Art in Long Beach, CA.

Top Right:
Papel picado as seen at Plaza de la
Raza in East Los Angeles, CA.

Bottom:
Papel picado as seen at Plaza de la
Raza in East Los Angeles, CA.



Top Left, Below, Bottom:
Layers of paint, graffiti, and signage
over the face of a closed building in
Koreatown, Los Angeles.

Following Page:
Printed signage outside a
cornerstore near Tlaloc Studios in
South Central Los Angeles.





This visual language is a translation of how I speak with my family. The mixture of Spanish and English, the spaces between and the vocabulary outside of them. The imperfectly formed and perfectly emotive language that captures our excitement, insecurities, and the entire gradient between the two. The fragments, gestures, pauses, mezcla and all.

Unspecific Memories

Focusing on communicating social ritual, emotiveness, and memory.

The intention of these functional sculptures is to evoke familiarity that is both intimate and imprecise.

On Unspecific Memories

These are imprecise and intimate memories that I am presenting from my own upbringing. These aren't meant to paint a complete picture of the Mexican-American experience. It barely scratches the surface. In sharing these memories through three object vignettes, the hope is to provide a gradient of understanding the power of ornamentation.

Reiterating parts of the Abstraction chapter, Unspecific Memories is a critique and challenging of Donald Judd's idea of Specific Objects. Objects have room for interpretation, both through understanding and misunderstanding. Objects do not possess a concrete prescribed meaning as they sit in a variable dialogue with the people that engage with them. Within these Unspecific Memories, I have chosen three distinct vignette's meant to engage with memories of the Mexican-American experience at different levels of specificity. The Niñez chair evokes memories of childhood and the rituals around birthdays, which can



be vaguely understood by a broader audience beyond the Mexican-American community. The Pilas chair is hyper specific in its reference to agricultural labor on the West Coast and even more precisely the picking of berries in the Pacific Northwest. The Flores chair is based on the aesthetics of the Virgen de Guadalupe, a universal icon adopted into, and heavily present in, broader Mexican visual culture.

Each chair is designed using form references from American modernists/minimalists that have become archetypal. These references are made to parallel and communicate the established dominant visual languages found in the United States. The materials that make up these chairs are in reference to American industry, primarily looking at birch plywood. Peripheral textiles objects follow suit, with the addition of Tyvek and nylon ripstop both being materials of American industrial origin. The ornamentation that makes up these chairs are in reference to processes outside of the traditional CMF of an industrial

design object. These processes being impasto painting in reference to cake decorating, silkscreen printing in reference to the ink like stains from agricultural work, and spray painting in reference to in memoriam mural painting. Each chair contains a void, or window, that houses contextual objects tying into the idea of arrangement as an essential aspect of design.



Three Unspecific Memories:

Niñez

Pilas

Flores

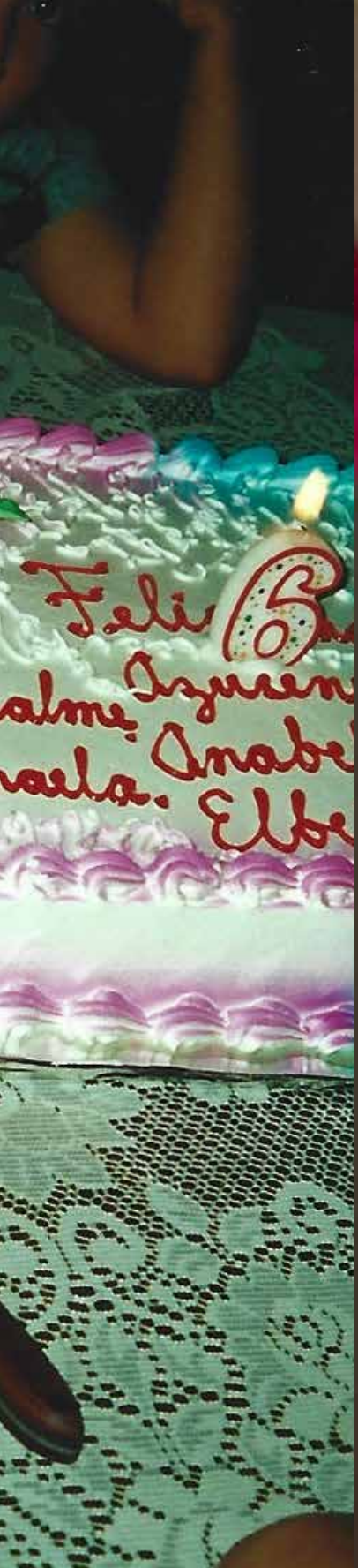




Nirñez









Bader
ena.
bel.
bet.



Niñez: Textures from Childhood

For the longest time, we were at least two families in a home, with family friends always a few blocks away. That's just part of being able to survive as migrant families. It takes a village to raise children, and it takes a village to survive life in a new country. It wasn't until I got older that I realized that most of my aunts, uncles, and cousins weren't by blood, but just part of the community that allowed us to flourish.

Below:
Family gathering (meaning blood family and close family friends) in the backyard of my childhood home in Salem, OR.



As I look back at family photos from my childhood, I can't help but notice what has happened within a generation with an eye of nostalgia and gratitude. Little glimpses of running around the little yellow house on Hummingbird street under the summer Oregon sun after a morning of work. Playing in the ravine. Hitting beehives and sprinting away. Buelito Pancho sneaking us a few dollars to grab blue Gatorade and Doritos. Eating tomatoes that we planted months ago. Split oranges covered in sugar and POG from concentrate.

The photo on the left was a common way of celebrating all our spring and summer birthdays. Family would come up from California so we could work the berry fields, which meant after that 4am-1pm workday we could celebrate and relax together. Music loud enough to cause hearing damage. Enough Tecate and Modelo to question whether it was a kid's birthday party or not. Pozole in the summer and getting choked out by the smell of seared peppers. Practicing gritos with

slightly drunk uncles and getting a few dollars for shouting out a Tigres song.

A generation has passed, and I realize how much has changed for better and worse. I don't celebrate my birthday anymore, but whenever a niece, nephew, or little cousin has a birthday I make sure to go out of my way. It was those little moments of care and celebration even though we had little that meant a lot. Family gatherings now are coming less from a place of survival or need now, but from celebration and love. It takes more effort now for my generation of kids that are flowing out from the west coast to the rest of the United States to take advantage of the opportunities our parents worked so hard for, but we'll still show out for weddings. Things are different now, but I see the impact of these childhood memories. I've passed by parks while other Hispanic families have been celebrating children's birthdays and think about how important and foundational those memories will be.



Process

This chair was designed as an abstraction of several American chair designs, notably Frank Lloyd Wright's Arm Chair designed for the Francis W. Little home, Charles Pollock's 657 chair for Knoll, and Florence Knoll's Lounge Chair. These forms make up an archetypical American chair, serving as a referential foundation to add ornamentation on. Sticking to construction materials reflective of the American built environment, the chair canvas is constructed of birch plywood and covered in white primer with the exception of the edge grain. The ornamentation for this chair is directly influenced by the cake frosting in the above picture with its rhythmic floral forms, pastel gradients, and soft cream textures. Using a style of impasto painting heavily inspired by the work of Yvette Mayorga, the frosting is made up of heavy body acrylic paint and extra heavy gel medium.









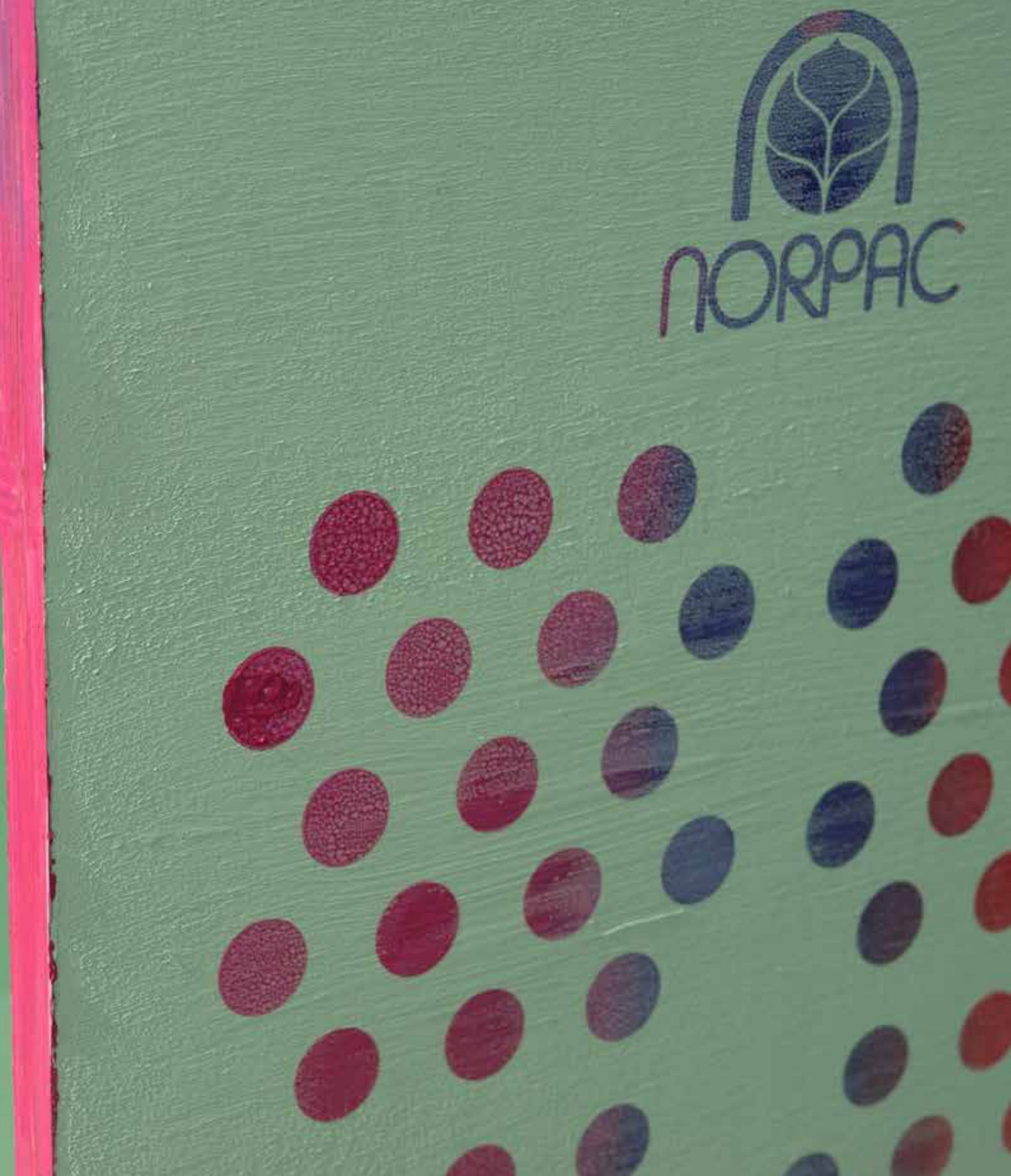


Pilas











Pillas: Imprints from Labor

I've been working for as long as I can remember. My first job was picking raspberries. My second job was selling gum and drinks during my break in the raspberry fields. My third job was landscaping, and from there it kind of gets blurry. There was that one time I did roofing. There was the Doman farm where I would feed their horses and cows with my dad. An assortment of agricultural work (shoutout to loose labor laws), until I got my first on the table job at 16 working retail at Adidas. That shit was easy! Then there was working in insurance where I had to fight to stay awake, but got paid \$25 an hour which beats minimum wage or getting paid by the pound. Being encouraged to and having to work hard from an early age really set in stone that famous immigrant work ethic. I didn't have to cart around barkdust or be bent over at a 45 degree angle for hours at a time anymore. Everything else moving forward has been light work.



There was that time I worked retail in the morning, worked for a music publication in the evening, and then repaired guitars on the weekend. In college, I was working in the library special collections in the morning and interning at a start-up in the evening. Then there was working as a designer, university instructor, and research assistant before starting at RISD.

No photos for this one. Makes sense because when we're working, we're working.

Even now as I write this for my all-consuming thesis, I have three active freelance projects I'm working on. The forty hour a week thing isn't

shit when your parents taught you that labor is an integral component of life. There's that quote that is always associated with Tom Sachs about the reward for hard work being more work, which always sat weird with me. Seeing how much my parents worked and the importance of work they instilled in me taught me that the reward for living is more work. Definitely something destructive in there about working yourself to the bone and learning to shift from survival mode to enjoying stillness, but to be Mexican-American is to know hard work.



Process:

This chair is designed in reference to Donald Judd's 84 Chair series which themselves are reduced forms of other iconic chairs such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Side Chair. Judd's own minimalist practice is an expression of the cultural design archetypes that influenced him, which is a language I view as a white American expression of what the foundational chair is. The chair is constructed from birch plywood and painted with a base of house paint. This chair, being focused on Mexican-American labor, references the aesthetics of la pizca, or fruit picking. The ornamentation here is not as literal as cake decoration. The ornamentation here is the imprint that agricultural labor has on the laborer, in this case being the deep berry juice stains in the skin that come from working in berry fields. Using silkscreen printing methods and hand-mixed specialty inks, these stains are present through overlaid dimensional graphics in patterns referencing filled berry pallets and crop fields.

Ya se asoma el sol
Dejó de llover
La jornada va a empezar
Muy contento voy
Al amanecer
Cruzando el cañaveral

Campesino soy
Y es mi obligación
Trabajar de sol a sol
Ni cansado estoy
De satisfacción
Pues campesino yo soy

Así como yo
Era mi padre
Mucho trabajó
Para enseñarme
Aquí vivo yo
Y pienso quedarme
Ya tengo mi amor
Voy a casarme

Ya se oculta el sol
Ya va a oscurecer
La jornada terminó
Muy contento estoy
Tengo que volver
Donde me espera mi amor

Same way that I am
So was my father
Hard work in the land
Like no other

Así como yo
Era mi padre
Mucho trabajó
Para enseñarme
Aquí vivo yo
Y pienso quedarme
Ya tengo mi amor
Voy a casarme

This land is my home
I'll live here forever
Now I found my love
We'll make it together

Same way that I am
So was my father
Hard work in the land
Like no other

Cuando haces las cosas con cariño y con pasión, desde lo más básico, lo más simple, a los más grande — por ejemplo, cuando usted mira las rosas bien bonitas, bien pulidas, hasta el zacate bien verde, bien cortadito, bien bonito, o los árboles bien entresacados, la palma bien limpia — es un arte.

Alejandro "Pollo" Orozco Perez,
as interviewed by Julissa James
for LA Times Image article, "What
would the visual identity of L.A.
be without landscape artists?"



SIM
FRESH M

Flores



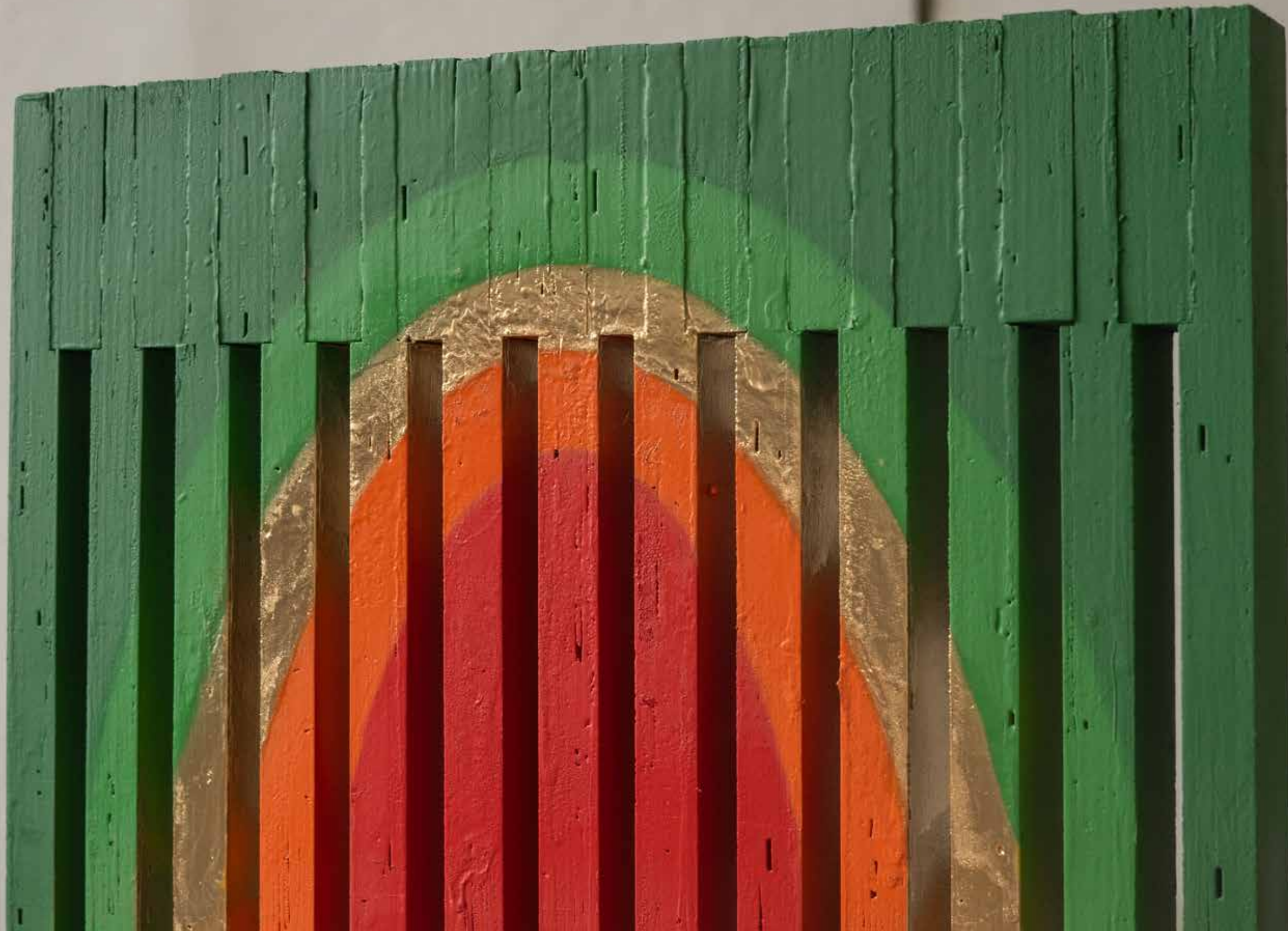


SIN
H ME









By flowers I don't mean a Coco-type of romanticized celebration of death and loved ones that have passed. What I mean by flowers is the mourning and trauma that is seeped into the Mexican-American experience and normalized. My parents left Mexico as teenagers, leaving behind their homes in exchange for the pursuit of a distant, but better future. Within that immigrant experience, a lot is lost with little time to process what that means. There are traumas that come with crossing the border, and then there are the traumas of trying to get by while being dehumanized. For my generation, mourning comes through seeing the aftermath of our parent's challenges. There is the realization of the opportunities afforded us because of our parent's sacrifices, and the acknowledgment that they lost the opportunity to have the young and dumb average American adolescent experience. There is the acknowledgment that the traumas my parents experience directly affect how much time I have left with them. As I get older, I have realized

Aquí estoy establecido
En los Estados Unidos

Diez años pasaron ya
En que cruce de mojado

Papeles no he arreglado
Sigo siendo un ilegal

Tengo mi esposa y mis hijos
Que me las traje muy chicos

Y se han olvidado ya
De mi México querido

that my parents have now spent the greater part of their lives in the United States, and I mourn that feeling of becoming foreign to one's homeland.

Outside the familial space, I mourn other Mexican-American people that have dealt with the unfortunately familiar experiences with xenophobia,

Inum quame eum iunto blabori
busaperereri abores simus, ullecto
maximus, odist, commolo ressequi
remprior ra corem volupta tintiur as
velis a ipsum quiatibeat.
Offic te quae penderibus se
doluptur, soluptur, omnis dolor sitior
renatur? Aquatia quias acidebit,
occae consequ nobissi tatiuntus
doleceario. Nam dolentit etumquo
ditatur reroivid erunt.
Occum aliam, sae mi, similis dolorum



violence, and dehumanization. I can't think of the El Paso Wal-Mart shootings without crying because I see my family in the people that died, and

Del que yo nunca me olvido
Y no puedo regresar

De que me sirve el dinero
Si estoy como prisionero

Dentro de esta gran nación
Cuando me acuerdo hasta lloro

because I've received similar threats just for being. Burdens I have carried for little more than not looking like I belonged in a space. And it's sadly a common experience as a Mexican-American. Whether it is Californian city council officials making racist comments about indigenous Oaxacan immigrants, immigrant farm workers dying from terrible working conditions, or having Trump fanatics throw jagged slurs, mourning and trauma are sadly accepted symptoms of existing.

I prefer the title flowers to trauma or mourning, because ultimately the cultural practice of making the best of a situation is a form of gardening. That despite the day to day struggling, and the heavier acute stressors, we as Mexican-Americans are constantly moving forward and making the best out of a situation in hopes of a better future. The sacrifices we make are tending and tilling for a better circumstance. The trauma and mourning of the past and present are intended to be a foundation for a better future that's all roses.

Aunque la jaula sea de oro
No deja de ser prisión

"Escúchame hijo
Te gustaría que regresáramos a vivir

México?"
"Whatcha talkin' about dad?"

I don't wanna go back to Mexico, no
way dad"



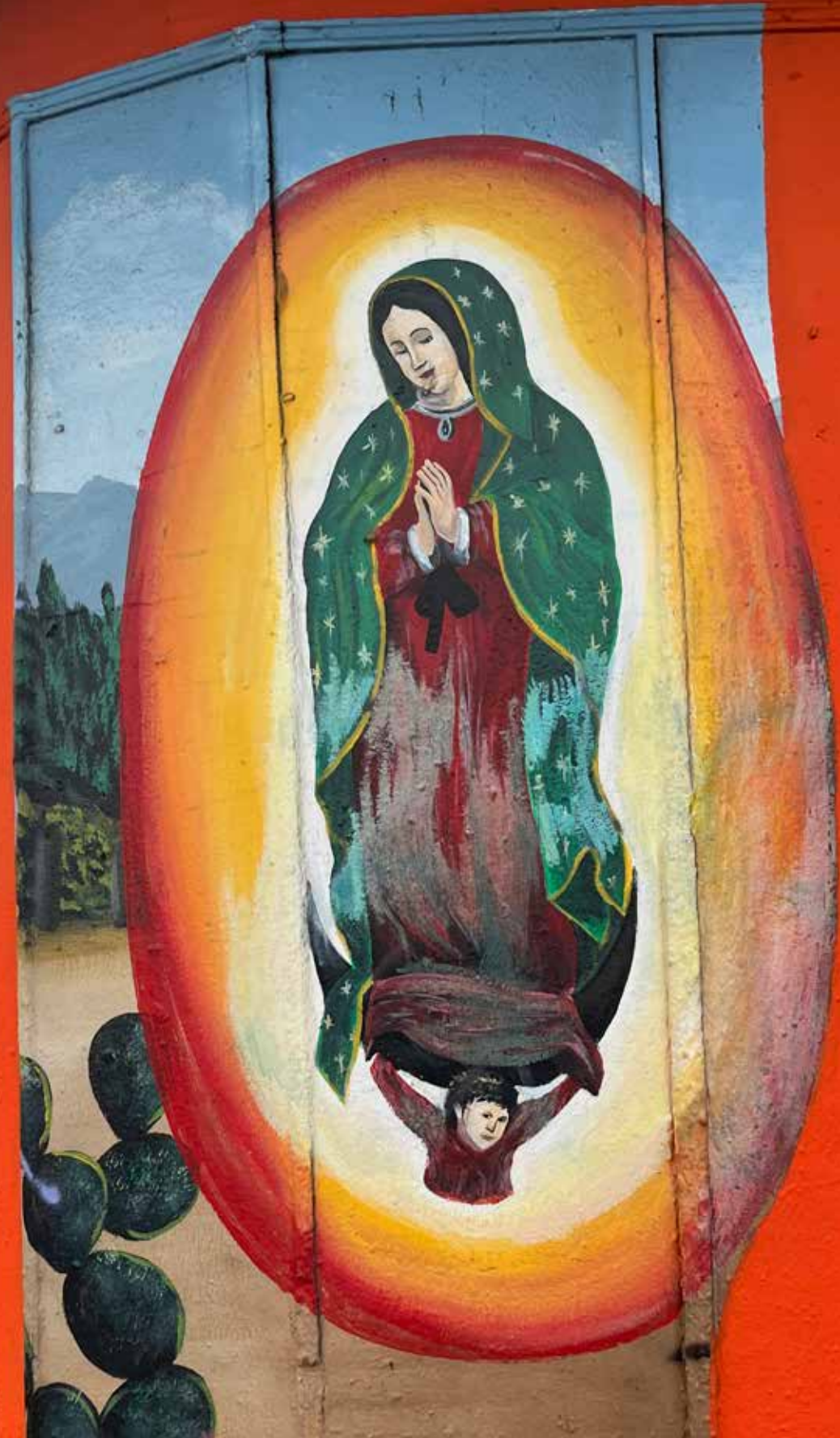
Mis hijos no hablan conmigo
Otro idioma han aprendido, y olvidado el español
Piensan como Americanos, niegan que son Mexicanos
Aunque tengan mi color
De mi trabajo a mi casa
No sé lo que me pasa
Que aunque soy hombre de hogar
Casi no salgo a la calle
Pues tengo miedo que me hallen
Y me pueden deportar
De que me sirve el dinero
Si estoy como prisionero

This final chair takes its form reference again from Donald Judd's 84 chair, but equally from George Nelson's Platform Bench and Frank Lloyd Wright's Side Chair. It is constructed from strips of birch plywood that are coated in white primer. The strips or slats carry a resemblance of the visual language imposed by the Trump administration in their demonization of immigrants at the US-Mexico border. Prior to glue up and construction, the strips are arranged and spray painted in a mural-like style. This glue up process is reminiscent of weaving in that interlocking pieces of wood nestle within each other to provide strength and size. The spray paint ornamentation is in reference to memorial murals that honor loved ones that have passed. The colors and abstracted form borrow from the Mexican icon La Virgen de Guadalupe, who is heavily present in the visual language of mourning and an icon adopted from Catholicism. The colors are also found in flowers, votive candles, cards, and altars.

Dentro de esta gran nación
Cuando me acuerdo hasta lloro

Aunque la jaula sea de oro
No deja de ser prisión

La Jaula de Oro
Escrito por Los Tigres del Norte

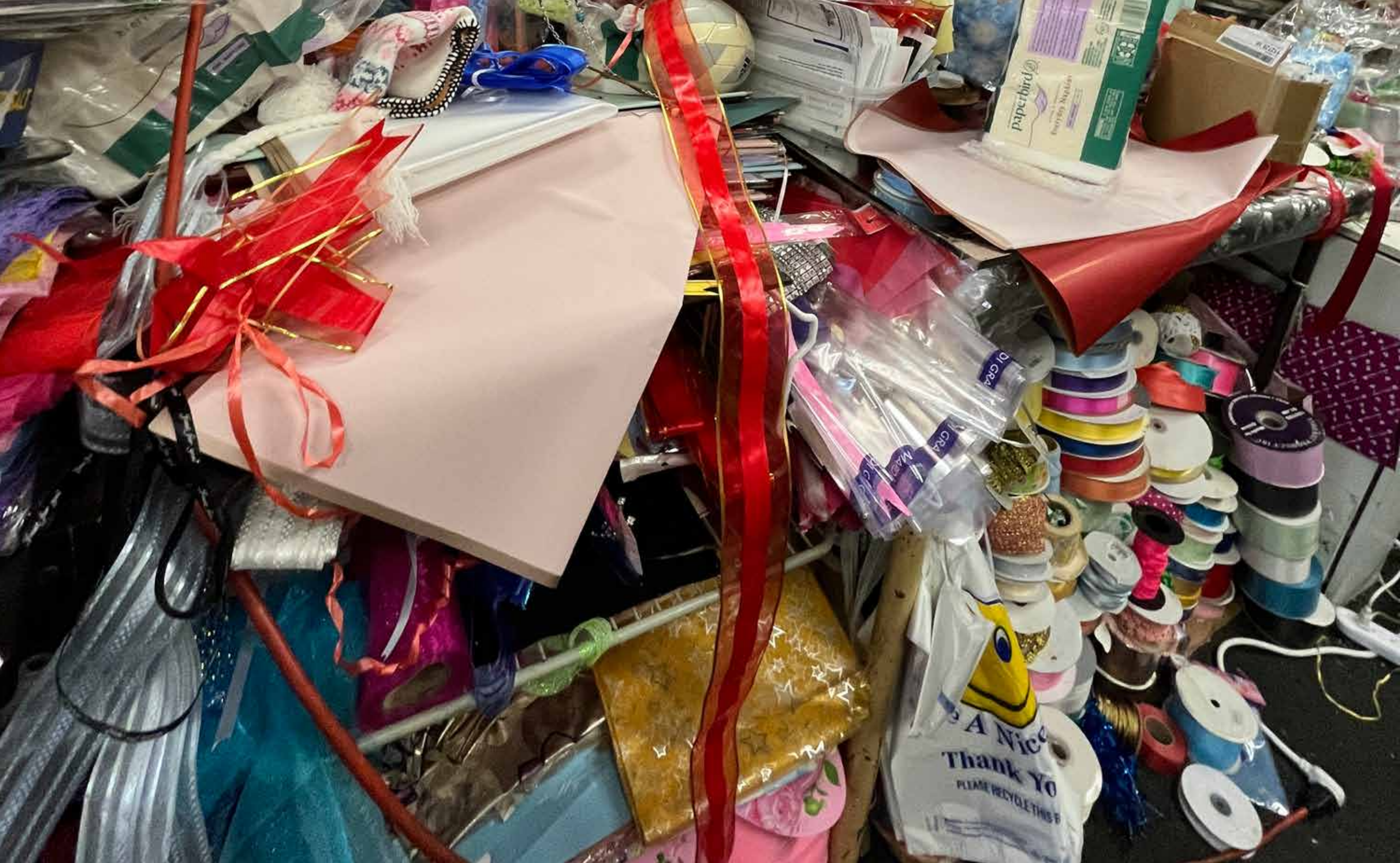




Siempre le vamos

My life

CRYSTAL



paperbird
Everyday Miracles

A Nice
Thank You
PLEASE RECYCLE THIS



SAN JUDAS

QUE LAFRANCESCO



INRI

B501



Conclusion

In exploring the tensions in Mexican-American visual language, I have uncovered a great pluriversality within it. To paraphrase Lewis Richardson Fry's findings around turbulence and fractals, little worlds have lesser worlds and so on to viscosity. The closer you look into the vast richness of cultural design language, the more overlapping details reveal themselves. Detail that brings a wealth of information through ornamentation when considering regional cultures, community historicity, and cultural change occurring in a home country. I have spoken with people that have immigrated to the United States from a place of privilege. I have spoken with people that have immigrated to the United States from a place of need. In seeing these different positionalities, I see both the core familiarities and unique distinctions that color those spaces. The Mexican-American experience, as well as its connected material culture and visual language, is so broad that this truly only captures three vignettes.



Industrial Tenderness voices Mexican-American ornamentation through the lens of my experience as a Mexican-American person and designer. It is impossible for me to completely separate the influences I have encountered through living and working, resulting in designs that distinctly reflect my specific experiences. In a traditional Western perspective this would be a drawback and flaw in this work, but the intimately connected nature of this work where the academic, artistic, and design work bleed together with no harsh boundary is only affirming of how Mexican-American cultural design functions. It is inherently mixed, interconnected, woven.

This cultural design language framework as exercised by other Mexican-American designers would result in vastly different outputs. This framework as exercised by myself in a different regional context, outside of Rhode Island, would result in vastly different outputs. My proposed model for cultural legibility is a zoomed out model, which can benefit from zooming in and seeing all the different

manifestations of cultural legibility. At its foundation, this project illustrates the cultural power of ornamentation as a pluriversal practice, but also presents a small step in a rich world of pluriversal aesthetics.

What I have found is an imprecise and familiar core that colors the meaning-making within Mexican-American visual language. Noting that we are a hybrid and diasporic people, I am content with these undefined results. If anything, it highlights the strengths of the visual gradient I feel and see within Mexican-American spaces. These strengths being the distinct arrangement of things as they are, and the rich ornamentation that transforms objects and spaces into a culturally legible newness. These results are not a discouraging amorphousness, but a validating mestizaje.



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