

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Raíces (Roots), an exhibition by Ruby Barrientos. The show is at the Western Nevada College's Bristlecone Gallery from January 22 – April 12, 2024. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artist, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Mark Salinas, who provided the following essay.

‘Altared’ Perspectives



Verdadero, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36", 2018.

"For me, art is not just about personal expression, it is a form of activism."

"Para mí, el arte no es sólo expresión personal, es una forma de activismo."

– Ruby Barrientos

On January 16, 1992, after more than three years of negotiations, the Government of El Salvador, and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) signed the Chapultepec Peace Accords. This treaty, convened in Chapultepec, Mexico under the mediation of the United Nations (UN) and with special cooperation of Colombia, Mexico, Spain, and Venezuela, ended a civil war in El Salvador that had started in 1979.

This 12-year war pitted two main actors against each other, the FMLN - a leftist group supported by Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union - and the El Salvadoran government, which was backed economically, militarily, and politically by the United States.

Clashes between the left-wing rebels and the right-wing military resulted in catastrophe; 75,000 Salvadoran lives were lost, and one-fifth of the country's population was displaced.

During the Chapultepec Peace Accords negotiations, the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador was established with the "task of investigating serious acts of violence that have occurred since 1980 and whose impact on society urgently demands that the public should know the truth."

In 1993, the Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador found that the war resulted in numerous human rights violations - mass murders, kidnappings, and the disappearance of nearly 1,000 children. The report determined that 85% of these violations were perpetrated by the Salvadoran government.



Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 9' x 4', 2023.

The effects of the Civil War in El Salvador can still be seen today in the U.S., and here in Nevada.

According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the U.S. provides Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to approximately 610,000 foreign nationals with about 30% of those being from El Salvador. The TPS program is provided to eligible foreign-born individuals whose home countries are considered unsafe. Migrants have the right to live and work in the U.S. for a temporary, but extendable, period of time.

In recent years, the number of Salvadorans in Nevada granted TPS has fluctuated between 3,000-6,000. In addition to this population, there are U.S.-born children in Nevada who have Salvadoran parents who hold TPS status.

In 2023, the 31st anniversary of the Chapultepec Peace Accords, Nevada Assemblywoman Selena Torres (Las Vegas, District 3) inspired a resolution submitted to Congress seeking the U.S. to formally acknowledge the extent of their role in perpetuating the violence in El Salvador. In addition, the resolution urged the U.S. Administration to work through nongovernmental entities in El Salvador to increase investments in education, violence and gang prevention and rehabilitation, human rights protection, and strengthening civil society and the judicial system.

The resolution has since stalled in Congress.

"I was born and raised in Reno, Nevada. My parents immigrated to the United States from El Salvador in 1979 to escape the Salvadoran Civil War and to give me and my sisters a better life. I am grateful to them for having the courage to come to the United States and leaving their life behind to make a better one for us."

—Ruby Barrientos

The studio practice of Reno artist Ruby Barrientos (they/them) can be described as an ongoing examination of layering political history, Mayan culture, and family identification into both traditional and contemporary contexts. Although the self-taught artist was born eight years after their family fled El Salvador, there is an embedded nature in the work to honor an identity that claims the past while attempting not to recapture it entirely as to completely relive it. This is not a portfolio of works solely dedicated to family, cultural, or country history but rather the re-envisioning and a re-composition of Mayan glyphic cartouche-making to create altar-like moments of reflection for change towards equity and acceptance in today's world.

For U.S.-born children of foreign immigrants, especially for those who seek to embrace their own cultural heritage of a non-dominant community, the challenge of a social dualism can arise in attempting to find individual acceptance in both worlds. A sense of displacement or 'othering' can surface while existing in between cultures.

Nevada Assemblywoman Selena Torres, whose own father fled El Salvador, teaches at Mater Academy in Las Vegas and shares that as a Latina-presenting educator, she best prepares her youth for the future when learning from the past. She notes that there is a dualism in fostering safe spaces for kids to envision their future selves while also holding them at a higher degree of expectation along the pathway of preparation for adulthood. With Nevada's population of Latinx communities now at 30%, – and with the majority of those being under 40 years of age – new conversations of future identity around the desire, or displeasure, of assimilation are growing rapidly.

**“Being unchallenged does not prepare them to be successful as an adult.
Ay, pobrecitos is not a philosophy I have adopted for my students or myself.”
Nevada Assemblywoman Selena Torres (District 3)**

Within the artist's portfolio, amid this context of diaspora and social dualism, an experimental toggling between two stylistically different modes of fabrication is openly embraced. In CCAI's exhibition at Western Nevada College, the artist's debut in Carson City, grippingly aggressive hand-made works are juxtaposed

alongside the cautious calculation of CNC (computer numerical controlled) router-made works. Both human-made and machine-made art are created in tandem to reach and rally like-minded devotees around the spark of resistance, or the bonfire of reverence.

It is within this aesthetic coding that the smaller collages, comprised of hand-torn and defaced imagery, reference underground whispers in the font of persona non grata, while the larger LED-based artworks shout loudly as 24/7 storefront statements of a belief system.



Resurgiendo de las Cenizas CENIZAS, mixed media, 12"x12", 2022.



Ancestro, mixed media, 3' x 4', 2021.

Embedded within each work in this exhibition is a conspicuous, if not consuming, application of stacking chiseled mark-making as one would handle brick and mortar in building a monument. Most of these monuments are masks, Mayan-inspired and referencing their ancient rituals and motifs of abstracted human and animal features adorned with tall, feathered, and jeweled headdresses. Indigenous devotees created deity alters embellished with burning incense and offerings of food, drink, prayer, and ceremony.

“Ancestor worship was an important part of Mayan religious practice and was often linked to the construction of elaborate tombs and burial sites. They believed that their ancestors continued to exist in the afterlife and that they could intercede on behalf of their living descendants.”

–Ruby Barrientos



Maya Censer Stand, ca. 690-720, ceramic, 44 × 22 × 12”.

From The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Lives of the Gods: Divinity in Maya Art
(November 21, 2022 - April 2, 2023)

Amid the two ciphered modes of fabrication, one notices the artist addressing the symbolism of altar worship in three overlapping practices: Reverence, Disassembly, and Construction. This cyclical sequence of holding an unquestioned belief system, slowly questioning it into dismantlement, and then attempting to forge a hope of new perspective echoes the creative process of many practicing artists in their studio.

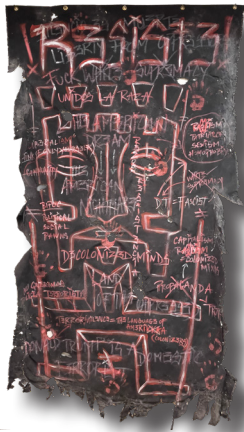
Reverence to altars can be seen in the depiction of verdant landscapes, expansive heavens, and bountiful foods – all composed in still-life compositions of inner thought. Sharing characteristics of religious prayer stations of gratitude, other works of this nature are panel or tablet-like, symmetrical, and ornate in hand detailing that frames the deity, or event, in a moment of calm. These works convey peaceful and unchanging environments.



Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 9' x 4', 2023.



El Dios de Revolucion, acrylic on canvas (6 pieces), wooden crosses (6 pieces), 3' x 7', 2020.



Untitled, mixed media on canvas, 3' x 5', 2020.



Aposematism found in nature.



Intrépido, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 30", 2017.

Disassembly of altars can be seen in the aggressive handling and subtractive presentation of dark and somber materials. Other works of this inquisitive nature are about injustices, struggle, resistance, or revolution and include such text in composition or title. These works feature the bold aposematism of yellow, red, and black – nature's vibrant and explosive warning colors to predators of something dangerous, toxic, or distasteful. These works are emotionally charged, and their imperfections are meant to convey physical confrontational encounters with systemic oppression.

Construction of altars can be seen in the method of mechanically-fabricated artworks which are later placed in a public commercial setting. These works rely upon computer-aided design to size up, to size down, or to mass produce. They often feature a softer color palette completely unseen in other works. Reliant upon synthetic plastics, rubbers, or inkjets, whether an electrical wall-mounted display or a pocket-sized laser-cut keychain, these works typically do not include artist-written text or a square tablet-like composition.

In this practice of altar Construction, the artist's studio work migrates towards foreign places outside traditional gallery and museum destinations. In these examples, a larger partner organization (or system) provides the foundation (or monument) for creative collaboration. Here the system relies upon the artist for the messaging on their platform. These interdisciplinary results create a diverse portfolio of community outreach, exchange, and collaboration.

Barrientos' past public commissions include vinyl wraps for vacant windows at the Whitney Peak Hotel; graphic illustrations for Edible Reno-Tahoe magazine and UNR textbooks; urban billboards for both the Holland Project and Save Art Space; and gift shop merchandise for Meow Wolf in Las Vegas. It is within these partnership collaborations, all reaching some level of material transfiguration, that the artist grows an audience of new collaborators and disciples. It is within these collaborations that the artist's call to action for social justice is best positioned for awareness and amplification.

And yet not all forms of altar Construction are seen in a gallery space, or necessarily result in a physical artist's work at all. In September 2022, the artist co-curated a group show of emerging Salvadoran-American artists at El Rincon, a Salvadoran restaurant in Sparks, Nevada. In a ready-made environment of food, drink, and music, the addition of these artworks altered the restaurant booths into separate altar-like spaces activated by captured audiences. Through this

thoughtful and strategic community engagement, topics of cultural awareness, social cohesion, and personal identity huddled new audiences to spark self-reflection about their own call to action.

“What we can do is stand in opposition to the inequalities created by systemic oppression and come together to resist, for we, the people, hold the power when we love, unite, and rise up to fight for what is right.”

–Ruby Barrientos

Mark Salinas
Berkeley, CA
January, 2024



Ruby Barrientos
photo credit: David Calvert



Ancestro, mixed
media, 3' x 4', 2021.



Key chain available on
artist's website:
www.nuwavemayan.com

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