I Am the Luchadora: Countering Exotification through Printed Installation

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Countering Exotification through Printed Installation

My final installation for the group exhibition, *The Stories We Tell Ourselves*, featuring my work alongside Isa Díaz-Barriga and Jasper Clarkberg, is an expanded portrait. This installation is a self-portrait in the sense that it highlights personal narratives and my own understanding of my cultural identity as a mixed Mexican-American. The artistic practice that I have developed here at Oberlin College is one that is rooted in my own personal identities. Using personal narratives in my work is critical to my objective, which is to defy the stereotypical image of Mexican-American experience by proclaiming my own experience, which does not fit this restrictive image and thus undermines this assumed experience. I consider how my experience of cultural identity, family history, and assimilation has complicated my interaction with Mexican culture within the United States. My work questions how cultural identity is reduced to stereotypes, employing the reproducibility of print to mimic the proliferation of simplified and exotified portrayals of Mexican-Americans in popular culture. A common thread throughout my work is the contradiction of societal expectations by creating work that distorts stereotypical imagery; by embedding my own lived experience into these recreated consumer objects, I attempt to counteract and resist misrepresentations of my identities. In order to contextualize this body of work I need to address my own understanding of my identity, where I draw artistic influence, why print is an apt method, and then how these all manifested and evolved into a self-portrait in the form of an immersive printed installation.

My approach to this body of work has evolved dramatically over the year. Initially, this project was grounded in rage, as it was a response to a series of exotifying comments made to me when people learned that I identify as Mexican-American. At some point I became fed up with these minor comments and questions that people simply didn’t think through; such as: “No,
where are you really from?”, “Oh have you every heard of Frida Kahlo?”, “I can hear the stones grinding the masa while looking at your work”, etc. These comments were reflective of Mexican-American stereotypes and of the exotic fantasy of Mexico in the American imaginary. One of the many issues with these stereotypes is that they assume that all Mexican and Mexican-Americans have one experience, despite there being a huge variety of experience within the Mexican-American community let alone the broader Latinx community.

I began this project, using the form of the luchador mask, as it is a common Mexican cultural symbol also found within American popular culture. Lucha libre is a style of Mexican wrestling that is a mixture of performance and sport; it is known for its simplified good vs. evil narrative that is played out in the ring. Luchador masks are an apt vehicle for exploring the topic of stereotyping because within the first few moments of a luchador entering the ring, the audience knows everything about them: if they are good guys or bad guys, how they wrestle, if they are associated with other luchadors (lucha families pass down masks), and possibly nationality (symbols and flags are sometimes incorporated into the masks themselves). Like with this almost-immediate identification of a luchador, stereotypes trigger assumptions about someone’s experience based upon pre-existing notions of a specific identity, founded or otherwise. Not only does the luchador mask mimic the instantaneous recognition and assumptions generated by stereotyping, the luchador mask is an easily recognizable Mexican cultural symbol that is prevalent in American pop culture; one finds it in the form of kitsch items, tourist items, cartoons, and even restaurants to give a sense of authenticity. This style of mask is prevalent in the US yet distinctly Mexican, thus it is the natural vehicle for discussing Mexican-American stereotyping. My intent, however, was not to simply recreate these masks; instead I wanted to use them as a way to make my own commentary on stereotyping and assumptions of a universal experience. I approach this commentary by printing my own repeat patterns as a way of making these masks less of sportswear and more of a decorative art object. By making this cultural item more in line with its tourist function in place of its original sports function, the form of the mask can be used to critique the exotification of Mexican culture as a way to make it a commodity in the United States. This commodification has consequences in the stereotyping of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

I find that it is necessary to explain my relationship to the sport of lucha libre as an introduction to my own understanding of my cultural identity. Though this background is not
required for understanding this installation piece, this written expression of my personal history is an important supplement to my resistance of the stereotypical depiction of the Mexican-American experience. *Lucha libre* has always fascinated me; I have read books on the sport, watched classic El Santo and Blue Demon films, but I have never seen this sport/performance in person. I remember growing up watching American cartoons that featured *luchadores*, such as *El Tigre* and *Mucha Lucha* that were on Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network. When I was thirteen I went to Cabo San Lucas (a resort and tourist-centric region of Mexico) where I bought a *luchador* mask, contributing to this tourist exotifying culture. As someone who is ethnically mixed, being half white and half Mexican-American, I have felt as though I am in a liminal space where I cannot fully identify with either. The Mexican-American side of the family is on the West Coast, whereas the white American side is in the Midwest, but I grew up on the East Coast in a suburb of Washington, D.C. I am not close with the Mexican-American side of the family because of distance, and there is not a large Mexican community in the suburbs of DC.

The Latinx community in my home is predominantly first-generation and from Central American countries (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala), and, my experience being mixed was very different and this community was not mine to share. Growing up I always felt as though my mother, who is Mexican-American, and I were on our own, and that I was severed from a community of people with a shared experience. Because of this sense of ethnic isolation, my only understanding of cultural history is from American depictions of Mexico in popular culture. This skewed understanding of cultural identity, riddled with stereotypes and exotic fantasies, has increased my sense of distance from an identity that feels mythic and fantastical because of the images propagated in the American imaginary. These stereotypical images of a singular exotic experience has been a source of shame as I feel that my experience is in some way inauthentic and that I cannot claim a place in the Latinx community. It has taken me a long time to realize that there is a variety of experience and that my liminal position is valid. This journey of acceptance of my identity has made me sensitive to comments based in stereotypes, which make me feel like some exotic object to be consumed or as inauthentic and an imposter (that some how I am not Mexican enough).

My ill fit in Latinx circles stems from family histories of assimilation. My grandfather grew up in Los Angeles during the Zoot Suit Riots, when American sailors on shore leave went through Mexican neighborhoods of LA attacking young Mexican residents for a number of days.
My grandfather and his brothers were kept in their family home throughout the duration of these riots; I think that this experience is what encouraged my grandfather and grandmother to raise their children, my mother and uncle, to be as assimilated as possible. Grandpa Landa, who served in the Marines during WWII, did not raise his children in a Spanish-speaking household. My mother eventually learned Spanish in school, but she learned it with a Castilian accent, so my mother and I are Mexican-Americans who sound like Spaniards. For Grandpa Landa, assimilation was a necessary form of survival, something that I am in a privileged position to not need (inherently because of him). Both of my grandfathers served in the military, and loved the US in a way that I never will because I never have to. Specifically, I do not have to prove my patriotism as a way to survive in white America because I pass as white. I can critique the US without fear.

This body of work is not only about voicing my personal histories as a way to undermine stereotypes, but it has allowed me to work through my cultural identity and the ways in which I too have played into the commodification and consumption of an exotic vision of Mexico.

My earlier work, though aesthetically very different from this current body of work, is in some way still tied to this new body of work. From sophomore year through junior year, my work revolved around the depictions of women in classical Western Art and later iconography of the Virgin Mary, as a way to explore the societal expectations of women. I explored the ways in which classical portrayals of women in art are sexual objects that are little more than decorations. Through my investigation of Marian iconography, I looked at how the ideal woman is so celestial that she is body-less, comprised only of a face, hands, and endless layers of clothing. Like my current body of work, I replicated this limiting and objectifying imagery and then altered the imagery as a way to subvert these notions that women are art objects for visual consumption or are ethereal pure creatures that no real woman can mimic. Both of these depictions of women are one-dimensional in nature. This feminist approach to understanding the portrayal of women in art has informed my current body of work in that this work also critiques the ways in which societal expectations and assumptions restrict and burden my own relation to my Mexican-American identity. The notion of decoration and one-dimensionality found in the confining depictions of women in Western Art again makes an appearance in my *luchador*
installation in that, like the erroneous depiction of women, the exotic portrayal of Mexico in commercial American media reduces people to exotic others, and makes them appear as not fully dimensional people with their own unique experiences.

Both my previous work revolving around a feminist critique of the portrayal of women and my current disruption of Mexican-American stereotyping comes back to the confusion of high and low art that can be found in printmaking. I have drawn inspiration from the work of Andy Warhol and the Guerrilla Girls with their use of reproducible media that is reminiscent of commercial popular culture. This use of the everyday or overlooked commercial imagery has been prevalent throughout my artistic practice. I find that this method of complicating commonplace cultural imagery while simultaneously critiquing high art is can be the most effective form of artistic resistance or commentary; printmaking belongs to a history in which “the ‘high’ culture of art history and classic literature and the ‘low’ culture of advertising, television, and movies were claimed and recycled by artists who cited the original source and filled it with unexpected or contradictory content” (Tallman 204). More recently I have been influence by the performance artist and writer, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who has written about Latinx oppression and the need for intercultural dialogue. He has described sardonically the presentation of Latinx identity in popular culture: “We are suddenly, fashionable and grantable, and our ethnicity is being commodified…We are undetermined ‘objects of desire’ within a meta-landscape of Mac Fajitas, La Bamba crazes, MTV border rock, Pepsi ads in Spanish and Chicano art without thorns” (Gómez-Peña 24). Through American commercial culture, Mexico is portrayed as an exotic fantasy where culture and people are simplified to easily consumable tourist items: “These mythical views only help to perpetuate the colonizing notions toward the South as a wild and exotic preindustrial universe ever awaiting to be discovered, enjoyed, and purchased by the entrepreneurial eye of the North” (Gómez-Peña 25). With this body of work I have attempted to combine my attraction to print resistance with the critical cultural lens of Gómez-Peña, that by drawing on commonplace commercial imagery I can use print and high art as a way to discuss the problematic fantasies that popular culture can perpetuate.

My method for producing this exploration of stereotyping and my personal experience with identity is printmaking. The wallpaper and luchador masks used in the installations are
printed objects. Print is the necessary medium for this research; in order to recall understandings of stereotypes used throughout popular culture, print media is used to evoke these understandings while simultaneously providing the opportunity to critique these notions. Printmaking has a long history of social critique; this is almost expected of print. The ability of print to be disseminated to a large audience has historically allowed for printmaking to take this social critique role. However, mass culture is also derived and rooted in printmaking, as print was originally used for commercial purposes to advertise and as less expensive art objects because of its ability to offer art to a mass audience: “the position of the print, perched on the border between the rarified and the commonplace” thus puts print in a liminal fluctuating place between high art and mundane commercial imagery (Tallman 212). The multiples of the edition make each print feel less precious because it is not one–of–a–kind. Lack of preciousness makes the print more inviting to be handled. Furthermore, the familiarity of popular culture imagery and aesthetic invites a diversity of viewers, as there is a way into the piece that only requires a familiarity with mass culture. This history of print as commercial mode and social critique informs the installation, as well as the printed objects I have produced. I intend for these printed objects to evoke popular culture while simultaneously critiquing the stereotypes that it proliferates, for example: I have recreated exotifying advertisements of Corona beer but I then superimpose my own text “Do you know what’s being celebrated, because I don’t” as a way to illuminate the exotic fantasy being promoted. The prints that I produce are a way of resisting these common stereotypes, by tapping into popular culture imagery while presenting them in a critical and altered manner. I am drawn to print media because of the approachable feeling of the works and the accessible nature of the print shop.

Ultimately my reasoning behind using printmaking is to subvert the common stereotypes and exotic portrayals of Mexico in commercial forms. According to José Roca in *The Graphic Unconscious*, we live in “‘a society of reproduction,’ where culture is experience mainly, at times even solely, through its virtual or actual surrogates,” thus using reproducible media in the form of printmaking that references commercial imagery is the most logical way to counter and subvert this way that stereotypes are disseminated through commercial avenues (Roca 25).
After completing my first installation at the half-time show, where there were a variety of printed *luchador* masks on a hat rack next to a mirror that had the superimposed text, “Try it, see how you like it”, was primarily in response to exotifying remarks I had personally encountered. For the final group show, however, my installation has not only physically expanded to incorporate printed wallpaper, in addition to the masks, but also has become more of a sincere investigation of my own identity in relation to assimilation, authenticity, and stereotyping. This installation is constructed from a variety of wallpaper patterns: American camouflage, Corona beer ads, old family photos, the map of the DC metro system, and text relating to my mixed identity. The camouflage and masks all relate to my inability to feel at home in either identity, suggesting that I am somehow trying to disguise myself to fit into an identity category, but they also reference my family history of assimilation and shared military service. The Corona ads and stereotypical exotic imagery of Mexico are used as a way to critique how this is more often than not the only understanding of Mexico in mainstream pop culture, and how this imaginary is not my experience. This installation is a large self-portrait, in that the printed components assert the personal histories and opinions that have shaped my sense of self (all without displaying a true self-portrait. My experience is exhibited as a way to counteract and resist the singular exotic stereotype of life as Mexican-American.

Throughout the year I have used pattern in my work as a way to entice viewers to look more closely at the printed works. Ideally, these patterns are colorful and inviting from a distance, but upon closer inspection the work reveals itself to be a stinging critique. I want the decorative quality of the patterning to lull viewers into a sense of welcome, but after looking closer at the patterns themselves in conjunction with the titles or the superimposed text to then reject and resist stereotypes and the easy visual consumption of exotic fantasies of Mexico. In thinking about mass culture and print media, I have integrated ready-made cloth and pre-existing images of advertisements with the wallpaper and cloth I have printed. This mixture of ready-made and personally invented pattern is an attempt to illuminate how common this stereotyping is within the United States. My own invented pattern subverts the found commercial images, while the found pattern exhibits how prevalent this issue of stereotyping is (not simply an issue on the fringes that does not affect everyday life).

My first installation with the masks, which I perfumed and which were displayed on a hat rack, invited direct viewer interaction where the viewers could put on the masks. I had printed
stereotypical imagery on the outside of the masks: such as tequila shots, “Happy Cinco de Mayo,” portraits of Frida Kahlo, and tortillas; while the inside of the masks had phrases: “I don’t even know what’s being celebrated,” “Yes, I do know who Frida Kahlo is,” and “No, I have never made masa by hand,” “I only buy pre-packaged tortillas.” These phrases spoke to my own experience of feeling exotified and being stereotyped. The intention behind the phrases inside the masks was that people would be drawn to these colorful and decorative objects, but while attempting to put the mask on the phrases inside would be revealed. Unfortunately, this installation did not inspire the type of reflection that I was aiming for. Rarely did people put on the masks, and those who did were unaware of the text inside. Furthermore, the perfume within the masks was intended to be an overwhelming aspect of attempting to put on the masks, but instead the scent was pleasant as it wore off throughout the evening. Many of the aspects that were meant to make the viewer uncomfortable with the consumption of Mexican culture were either ignored or made pleasant. My aim in the creation of the masks was to put the viewer in my position of feeling distressed by these assumptions.

There is a shift from the first to second presentations of the masks where they were initially more sculptural but in the second iteration they were part of a larger installation, involving not only masks, but also wallpaper and prints. As with the personal context that I have given in this thesis, the wallpaper of the installation functions as a visual context that informs and reveals the lens in which the luchador masks are to be viewed. Following this previously unsuccessful installation of the masks, I had to re-evaluate how to display the masks in a way that would reveal my personal experience with the objective of countering the recreation of stereotypical and exotifying imagery. Though I want my work to be inviting and accessible to a range of viewers, I did not want this work to be totally comfortable as a way to assert my discomfort as the assumptions and exotifying remarks I have experienced. However, I wanted to maintain the interactive quality of this installation as a way to keep the pieces approachable. To this end, within the installation itself there was a bowl of tortilla chips and salsa on a wallpapered podium placed next to a stack of free artist statements. This unspoken invitation to consume this innocuous cultural food is presented along with the recreation of commodified images of Mexico for American consumption in the form of Corona ads and “Happy Cinco de Mayo” wallpaper, and this “invitation” is meant to make the viewer culpable in the consumption of these mundane commercial images.
Additionally, this second installation is more immersive in nature than the first exhibition of *luchador* masks. The first display confined the masks to all being hung on one hat rack placed adjacent to a mirror. The second installation was a combination of collaged wallpaper covering a third of the wall space in Fisher Gallery with the *luchador* masks hung on hooks in these walls interspersed with framed prints featuring family photos with added text and masks, prints of *luchador* masks being torn off or forced on, and prints that prominently displayed the hidden text within the first iteration of *luchador* masks as a way to more prominently display my own experiences. The wallpaper was not confined to the walls but it also expanded to the floor and covered a freestanding podium. This expansion of the wallpaper enables viewers to enter into the installation to closer inspect the hung masks and prints. The actual arrangement of the wallpaper installation is vaguely reminiscent of geographies, as they are not positioned from floor to ceiling like usual, but this variety of wallpapers all inspired from my own experiences are interspersed, torn, and layered to either conceal or reveal layers beneath. This more amorphous installment of the wallpaper both references landscapes and distorted domestic space, and the amorphous quality makes the installation less of a recreation of a real place than an abstract internal space.

In addition to incorporating wallpaper into the installation, I also included baseball jerseys, which reflect masculinity and the all-American sport, contrasted with the repeating image of my Mexican-American grandfather playing baseball when he was at U.S. Marine Camp Pendleton. The importance of including not only masks that I have produced but also my own clothing is based in Georg Simmel’s theory on adornment:

> Every property is an extension of personality; property is that which obeys our wills, that in which our egos express, and externally realize, themselves. This expression occurs, earliest and more completely, in regard to our body, which thus is our first and most unconditional possession. In the adorned body, we possess more; if we have the adorned body at our disposal, we are masters over more and nobler things, so to speak. (Simmel 210).

These personal found objects are not only used to make the installation feel more domestic, but it was a way to ensure that the installation was presented as a self-portrait. These objects are visibly worn and are all related to place (the LA Dodgers, the Washington Nationals, my high school letterman jacket, etc.) further expresses family histories and personal narratives that influence my understanding of identity. These are not random items, but are presented instead as
personal property. These jerseys and hats from my youth both normalized and contextualized the masks that are themselves related to my experiences.

In an effort to counter the masculinized nature of the luchador mask and baseball jersey I have incorporated feminized decorations. Particularly for the luchador masks, I mixed found patterned cloth (usually floral or other delicate patterns) with the masculine form of the luchador mask. This mixture of feminine and masculine design was taken further in the final installation with the combination of wallpaper used to create a vague feeling of a domestic space while patterns on the wallpaper are not a traditional innocuous pattern but is instead a mixture of camouflage, text, Corona advertisements, coconuts—a racial slur I experienced--and photos of a figure having a luchador mask being torn off. In using the combination of the usually distinct sport and decoration, I attempt to complicate the assumed masculinity of sport and reflect my own expression of gender that is not confined to a binary.

This large wallpaper installation is not the final iteration of this exploration of identity, but is instead the beginning of this type of experimentation of recreating domestic space and calling out stereotyping. I will continue working within the discourse of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the Guerrilla Girls by further resisting cultural consumption and stereotyping through subversive reproducible media. Yet moving forward one of the main issues that I want to consider is to find a way for my social critiques to find a wider audience that is outside of the art field. In my practice I struggle with making my work as approachable to a variety of audiences while also making it a strong societal commentary. I want my work to reach as many people as possible and to not be so obvious that potential viewers close themselves off to the message of the work. My current approach to producing work that invites a variety of viewers, not necessarily versed in art history or contemporary art, is by making colorful printed patterns and reproducing pop culture images as a way to make seemingly benign and inviting decorations but then turning that initial reading on its head. However, I do recognize that by displaying my installation in Fisher Gallery, this body of work can only be so accessible. That by exhibiting this work in a gallery space, it is inherently inaccessible to certain demographics. Though I was unable to solve this problem of the accessibility of this work, this is a topic that I am invested in continuing to consider and explore in my future practice.
Works Cited


