

**Recollections of Endearment**

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## **Introduction**

At the end of every relationship, event, and experience, an individual is left with only the memory of the experience or moment. Crucial aspects of family and cultural traditions are passed down from generation to generation to actively keep these memories alive. When one is no longer connected to his or her family, country or culture, the presence of these memories becomes essential. . In the end, the only things an individual can walk away with are these memories. Our memories shape current behavior and the way we choose to perpetuate customs and traditions to others.

Memory is a subjective experience that can be as real as a tangible object. Therefore, I am seeking to create a space of remembrance in my artwork that is beyond a traditional shrine, memorial, or altar. I am interested in exploring this space of memory through the process of painting and installation. My memory of growing up with the Mexican culture is the lens I use to approach my body of work. I am seeking to create an experiential space through the artwork that has the potential to visually transcend language, culture, and religion. The cultural and religious elements from private and public memorials, shrines, and altars are incorporated into the work. I fuse my interests in the visual exploration with the subjective space of memory and culture and with influences from contemporary art. Also, I have used the persuasion of contemporary artists such as Jacqueline Humphries, Charline Von Heyl, Beatriz Milhazes, and Pepon Osorio as an underlying inspiration for much of my work.

## Defining Memory

The body of work that I have created through the exploration in my studio practice has been centered on my own definition and the literal definition of memory. Memory is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as “a person or thing remembered.”<sup>1</sup> Using the personal memories from my Mexican culture to influence the structures of design in my paintings is one aspect of the exploration. I am also interested in incorporating elements from personal and public memorials where memory is activated through the visceral experience. The definition of memorial in the *Oxford Dictionary* is “an object or structure established in memory of a person or event.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, I am colloquing and incorporating memory, culture, craft, and contemporary art to create an installation.

Many memories of family, tradition, and culture are centered on the border town of El Paso, Texas. My family’s move from Southern California to the border town, when I was 15 years old, dramatically influenced the person that I am today. The memories of my experiences in a border town have ignited a passion in me to bring the elements of culture and human injustices in Mexico into my paintings. The farther I move from the Sun City, El Paso the deeper my love grows for its culture and people. Throughout this entire process, I spent some time revisiting childhood memories. As I sought out the recollections of memorials and other cultural elements that were introduced to me at a young age, one stood out as the structure to reference in my work.

Furthermore, my investigation of memory is explored through the process of painting and collecting of glass jars that have been filled with human hair. I am exploring the hair on two levels through its presence in the installation. One is the

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<sup>1</sup> Ask Oxford

<sup>2</sup> Ask Oxford



physical, tactile presence of the hair, along with its associations; and the second is the metaphorical presence that becomes a stand-in for the individual who is remembered. My Mexican grandmother collected a lock of her grandchildren's hair in glass baby food jars as a way to remember us, her living grandchildren, in a nontraditional, nonreligious way. A wooden cabinet in the dining room, which stored many glass jars containing locks of hair from my abuelita's (grandmother's) grandchildren, is a dominant part of my past. There were no religious icons, candles, or photographs, just the objects that represented the beloved. I want to explore visually this way of honoring an individual in the installation.



Fig.1.

## **Memory used as the seed for art**

This memory inspired my choice of the structure of collecting that is a metaphor for the living. Using this structure not only incorporates a personal memory but also has allowed enough space for various interpretations. Within the experience of the installation, viewers bring their own associations with collecting and their connotations of human hair. The uncovered domestic glass jars are the vessels for the hair, a stand-in for the individual and thus an implied reference to the living.

This framework of collecting has many elements that parallel the process of painting and the idea of memory that I am investigating. The method through which I collected the hair is just as relevant as the hair itself. Collecting the hair through the intimate relationship of hairdressing is the methodology used. The skills from my previous career as a hairdresser, and an understanding of the power in the dynamics of the way these relationships are built, are yet another seed from my memory that influences the work. The one-on-one, hands-on relationship opens a space of trust, caring, and loyalty through intimate conversation.

There are superficial elements in hairdressing that are purely decorative, as in the paintings, which incorporate a highly chromatic color palette and ornate elements of decoration and pattern through repetition. The ritual element of having the same person's touch and caress reiterates the importance of the individual who is remembered. The repetitive shapes, gestures and patterns in the paintings also echo the memory and the importance of the individual.

## **Femicide Facts**

Although not all the hair in my installation was collected from females the associations with women and their hair are tightly woven together, so viewers may assume that the hair in the installation is from females. The Mexican women specifically who are considered second-class citizens in the Mexican culture, are the very individuals I am remembering through the piece, *Recollections of Endearment* [fig1].

During the years I lived in El Paso, the Juarez femicides were often at the forefront of local and international news. “Femicide” is defined by the National Organization for Women as “the mass murder of women simply because they are women. This term was coined in response to the murders of nearly 400 young women on the U.S.-Mexico border in the city of Juarez, just across the border from El Paso, Texas.”<sup>3</sup> The hundreds of victims, who were murdered beginning in 1993, were pretty young women who were abducted during the day, in very congested areas of downtown Juarez, while walking to or from work, school, or home. The young victims were abducted; tortured, raped, mutilated and violently murdered. Some of the bodies were disposed of and found in the desert. CNN Online clearly states the shocking numbers, “while over the past decade, 450 women were killed and 3,000 went missing.”<sup>4</sup> The femicides have been seen by many as a transition to the current drug war.

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<sup>3</sup> Femicides of Juarez

<sup>4</sup> Human Trafficking

## **Growing up on the Border**

In addition, the period in which the femicides received international attention has a distinctive place in my memory when I think of my high school years in El Paso.

Attending a private Catholic school called Father Yermo for a year and a half opened my eyes to the privileges of being on the American side of the border. The Mexican middle class families, from Juarez who wanted their daughters to have better lives by receiving an American education, mostly funded the all-girl school. Father Yermo is located 5 minutes from the International Bridge of the Americas, which made it accessible for these girls to commute from Juarez to come to a school in the United States.

As a teenager, I daydreamed and stared out the classroom window that faced Juarez. From this viewpoint, it is apparent that the only obstacles that separated the two countries visually, other than the bridges, are the Rio Grande River and a chain-link fence. This heavily patrolled border separates the two countries and cultures visually. The border becomes part of the landscape and the experience of living in El Paso.

I spent many weekends drinking with my classmates in Juarez at discotheques (which are known now as money-laundering businesses for the drug cartels) that catered to El Paso high school students, since the Mexican legal drinking age is 18. We would be so naïve as to walk through the back roads of Juarez streets, unaware of the dangers in various neighborhoods. After a night of the infamous “drink and drown” parties at the discotheques, we walked unharmed back to El Paso across the international bridge and back to our safe American lives.

However, the local media on both sides of the border were flooded with reports on the evening television news of the missing girls and graphic images of their bodies,

which were found in ditches, on the side of the road near busy intersections, and far from the city. With the threat of a serial killer, the media and the El Paso government warned girls to be careful and not to walk alone in Juarez. Unfortunately, the attitude of my American classmates and me was, “we don’t work in the *maquiladoras*,<sup>5</sup> (Mexican factories that exploit Mexico’s cheap labor force that produces exports to America). We’re not walking in the same neighborhoods as the victims so it won’t happen to us.”

There was a clear class distinction: the victims were poor young girls who worked 12-hour shifts for a meager couple of dollars a day and we were not. Most of the girls lived in *colonias* (shanty towns on the outskirts of the city) and the little money they did make from working in the *maquilas* was used to help support their families.<sup>6</sup> Their families had no political power or financial means to demand investigations. The families that did hire private investigators were disappointed by the termination of the cases because of death threats on the private investigators, who had no help from the police department. What if my father and his family hadn’t come to the States when he was twelve? Would I have grown up in Juarez? Did any of the girls at my school know any of the victims or were they related to any of them? These are the questions that I still ponder.

Visual public reminders have been placed at the sites where the bodies of these young women were discovered, so that the public or government will not forget them. These young women were treated as disposable objects because they and their families had no voice financially, socially, or politically, simply because they were women.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> Juarez

<sup>6</sup> Washington

<sup>7</sup> Washington

Juarez government victimized the families further by trying to convince the families that the girls were caught up in drugs and prostitution or sold into human trafficking \_\_or arrogantly implied that they crossed the border to run away with a boy and did not tell their families. At the time, the Juarez drug lords had no political opposition and paid off government officials for cover-ups.

The victims were not only the innocent young girls; anyone who tried to shed some light and truth during the investigations could become a victim. The cases that were honestly investigated were terminated by killings and kidnappings of lawyers, police chiefs, newspaper reporters, and activists who later had their bodies dumped in various parts of the city. Police evidence was destroyed, dismissed, or denied. There were many arrests of obvious scapegoats, but no assailants were ever convicted of these crimes.

Juarez is now one of the most violent places in the world because of the murders committed during the current drug war. It is estimated by the *El Paso Times* that in Juarez, Mexico, “at least 555 people have been murdered in 2010.” In 2009, 2,643 murders were reported, thus earning the city its reputation for being the most deadliest city in the world.<sup>8</sup> There is no official government registry of the victims’ names, no investigations\_\_ all that the families are left with are the memories of their daughters, sisters, and mothers. Their names and their memories are permanent. Their names in my work become a reminder to me of their absence.

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<sup>8</sup> Gomez

## **Memorials in Public and Private spaces**

Initially contemplating how to artistically and conceptually deal with this large political issue visually began to feel like our country's current deficit: enormous. However, the use of names in Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial it reinforced my desire to use the names of the femicide victims in the paintings. Maya Lin's design is elegant and simple, yet somber in tone. Maya Lin made a clear conceptual decision not to use figures or statues, and no representation flags, just the 58,000 names of the dead and missing etched into the granite. The fact that there is no official registry of the Juarez femicide victims' names ignites in me the desire to use their names as a way of keeping their memories alive. Their names and people's memories of them cannot be erased. Erica Doss, chair and professor, Department of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame, argues that memorials have become "visceral modes of experience are regarded as primary vehicles of knowledge acquisition."<sup>9</sup> The Vietnam memorial is a public acknowledgement of the conflict and a place for healing through contemplation at the site. This visceral experience is what I want to communicate and transfer to the viewer through the use of celebratory colors that are used in the building up of the names.

Another challenge was to find a way to distill all the horrible images, statistics, and political lies in order to understand the underlying issues. Most important, I was concerned with the essence of my emotional connection and my investment in this human injustice. What resonated with me about the spontaneous memorials to the victims is that once the bodies were found, the family immediately erected memorials to the victims at those exact locations. At the sites, a life-size pink cross with the victim's name

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<sup>9</sup> you tube

handwritten is the visual marker, and the sites are also decorated with flowers, teddy bears, and religious icons. This reiteration of the power of names has become clear through the way this culture has used the names in the memorials. The only tangible thing I felt clear about, after many years of keeping up with the events, was the victims' names. My intuitive response was to write their names. Initially, the process of repeatedly writing their names became a ritual therapeutic act. In the meditative act of writing, I pondered how I would visually translate their memory.



Fig.2.

Defining the terms of the visual investigation through painting was essential to creation of the process. It was essential that the color palette be specific in referencing



Mexico. The second requirement in creating the painting was to use only their names repeatedly to create the work. The building up of the names conceptually provokes the viewers to think about these names and my reason for writing their names compulsively over and over.

The layering of each name slowly creates the space depth in the paintings. I am also using the layering as the visual parallel for the cover-ups associated with Mexican human injustices. The highly chromatic color palette used in each name painting allows their names to scream out for attention, highlighting the names of the politically forgotten. Even though the girls were killed in such a brutal manner, I wanted their names to be separate from those events. The girls were more than victims; they lead happy, peaceful lives, and their memory deserves celebration.

## **Mexico's perspective of Memorials**

The use of celebratory colors in the palette of the paintings symbolically removes the victims from the dreadful nature of their deaths. The innocent Juarez femicide victims deserve honor and remembrance, something that has rarely been done by the Mexican government. I did not to use images of graphic violence: the Mexican television and newspapers released enough of these images. These beautiful young Mexican girls had rich lives before their deaths; I wanted to separate them from their horrific deaths. I wanted the colors found in the culture to represent their names, as if the country is honoring their names, even if the government will not recognize their deaths.

Taking into consideration the way the Mexican culture views and celebrates death, I also wanted to create a space that has a celebratory perspective. The challenge of creating a memorial using celebratory colors pushed my thinking beyond the traditional ideas of the way a memorial looks. I began to question why a memorial has to be somber.

If I want the colors to reference Mexico, then the colors cannot be somber, even in a memorial. The fusing of culture in memorials, shrines, and altars is found in most places in Mexico\_\_ in homes, yards, parks, cemeteries, restaurants and religious icons. Even the drug cartel has an altar/shrine to its patron saint for protection. In the cemeteries, marble mausoleums are built as memorials to the biggest names in the drug business. I am comparing the American approach to public memorials, religious altars, and cultural shrines to the Mexican culture and traditions in regard to life, memorials, death, and celebration.

One thing that is clear to me about Mexican culture is that life is to be celebrated, even after death. Dia de los Muertos, Day of the Dead, is celebrated on All Souls Day as a way to remember loved ones who have passed on and to help them on the journey to the afterlife. The altar that I made for Dia de los Muertos reminded me of the importance of visual symbols used to memorialize individuals. The making of this altar also helped me define the terms of the installation: no religious icons, candles, or photographs \_\_just the objects that represented the beloved. This decision helped me establish the perspective I was to take in regard to the celebratory aspect to the work.



Fig.3.

## **Talavera Tiles**

As I revisited my personal memories, I was searching for a color palette that had to be specific to Mexico without being a cliché or iconic, such as the national flag. I began to look at the colors and patterns that are used in traditional Folklórico dance costumes. The colors used in these performance costumes are highly contrasting, and the patterns are extremely ornate, with silver metal accents and gold-and-silver-colored thread. Wanting to choose a specific color palette that referenced Mexico, I looked more deeply at handmade crafts that are tied to the Mexican culture, and the Mexican pottery became a signifier for Mexico. It caught my attention because of its extremely bright, transparent oranges, neon yellows, vibrant reds and cool bright greens. Like the fabrics, the pottery is eye-catching because of the use of these vibrant contrasting colors. The handmade and hand-painted pottery that is sold in the mercados (markets) is used in homes, churches, and businesses throughout the country. This specificity was essential to the exploration of memory and the way I chose the color palette for the paintings.

I also wanted to use elements of pattern and decoration that are found in handcrafted Mexican pottery and also in American contemporary art. Looking for a specific type of pottery whose elements of design, pattern, and ornamentation I could use as the structure in my paintings, I chose the Talavera tiles. They are small decorative tiles that originated in Puebla, Mexico. The distinctive Pthalo blue that outlines most of the designs and the vibrant-colored flowers are striking because of the contrast against the white background of the tiles.



Fig.4

### **Color, pattern, and the process of painting**

Even though not all pottery and tiles come exclusively from the town of Puebla, the Talavera tiles have influenced the iconic style of pottery that is sold throughout Mexico. These captivating decorative tiles are found on the interior and exterior of churches, homes, and other buildings. The colors in the pottery are high-contrast and extremely vibrant, like those used in the performance costumes. Within the designs of the handmade tiles are clear structures with a mandala shape that puts the focus of the design in the center. Shifting the scale of the 3-x-5-inch Talavera tiles to 5-x-5 feet in the paintings I have created separates the designs from a purely decorative function to a design structure. The compositions in the designs of the handmade tiles gave me enough structure to creatively respond yet still keep aspects of design that point to the source.

Shifting the scale allowed me to create a multitude of layers of space, pattern, and color through the painting process. The ornamentations of lace and pattern in the pottery refer to domesticity and the presence of the female hand that is used to pass on craft traditions. These traditions are passed on the same way a memory is kept alive. In these tile paintings, there is a struggle for space within the patterns, marks, and colors. The repetition of circular shapes and gestures is echoed throughout the installation space, including the outer rims of the jars, the wooden circular bases that the jars are resting upon, and the shapes in each of the paintings. The paintings are built up with many layers of various gestures, patterns and circular shapes that reveal the expression of the maker's hand.

The paintings are created through the building up of many layers of transparency. In keeping with the idea of transparency apparent in the paintings, I have left evidence of

my process of decision-making. This additive process of painting reveals areas, such as borders and edges that remain unpainted. In other areas, the under-painting reveals gestural moves that are as dominant as the areas of opacity.



Fig.5

## **Influences from Contemporary Art**

As the paintings evolve, a visual language is introduced by the color palette, gestures, and marks. The specific color palette then becomes a modifier of the cultural reference for the paintings. Each layer that is left apparent is a metaphor for the layers of political corruption. The paint is covering up, being masked off, and implying borders highlights elements that I am exploring with paint. Since there is no political transparency, it is imperative to leave most of the layers transparent.

Contemporary female artists who are using this collage approach have influenced the choice of scale in my installation and provide a model to create layers of complexity in the paintings. The works of contemporary artists such as Jacqueline Humphries, Charline Von Heyl, and Beatriz Milhazes have greatly influenced this body of work. These successful female artists have made a place in the art world that has previously been dominated by men. Each artist is working out differently on canvas the elements of painting that I am investigating and incorporating into my painting process. They all use paint on large-scale canvases. The process-based work of each artist mentioned is extremely color-driven and are collaged through paint and the use of hard edges, patterns, and organic shapes. Also, these artists allow intuitive choices to be made during the art-making process, which is an important element in studio practice as well. These three painters also evoke a unique presence through their paintings, yet they are not didactic, which is the exact feeling I am seeking to evoke in my work. In, *Talavera Rising*, I referenced the work of Humphries and Von Heyl to indicate how I would resolve the painting.



Jacqueline Humphries creates many complicated layers of space by masking off with tape, wiping off and adding paint with grand gestural movements that sweep across the canvas. In her last show at Greene Naftali Gallery, the subtlety of the silver color palette invites the viewer to look more deeply into the work to investigate how the space is created. In several of the large-scale reflective paintings, there is an off-centered bull's-eye area created by marks and contrasting colors. As in the 2008 work of oil and enamel on linen, titled *Dirty Mind*, Humphries references abstract expressionism and hard-edge abstraction through the large canvas and gestural moves. The use of tape becomes a tool to create a compositional space and organization with many layers of complexity. The use of reflective paint becomes part of the experience. The experience is different for viewers depending upon their physical proximity to the paintings. As viewers move and negotiate the space around the paintings, aspects expand and are transformed because of the way light bounces from the canvas. These are the experiential elements I am seeking to transfer in my work.

Charline Von Heyl is an abstract artist whose work emulates experiential elements in its presence and uses tape to create layers of space and patterns.



Fig.6.

She uses a highly chromatic color palette in a very unique way because the images are not flat, even though most areas are opaque. A long vibrant drip seems to have as much

intention as a taped-off edge. In her recent show at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, she demonstrates an organized collision of patterns, gestures, and painting marks that create the compositions. An extreme amount of attention to detail is given to each painting, and each mark seems to have clear intention. Three or more planes of space are fighting for the foreground; the pattern and organic shapes as in *Dunce*, for example are collaged to create this space. What is most intriguing about Von Heyl's work is that at first glance, one would assume that the paintings are made quickly because of the gestures and large shapes, but a closer investigation reveals the intricacy in the making



Fig.7.

The Brazilian artist, Beatriz Milhazes, provokes a visceral experience in her work through the intricacy of the layering of paint that creates patterns and shapes. She is a source of reference because of the way she resolves layers of pattern and color. The lace patterns and organic shapes of color in her paintings are overlaid and built upon each other to create the compositions. She incorporates areas of opacity, transparency, and a hard edge line in a totally different manner from that of Von Heyl or Humphries. What I am most interested in about Milhazes is that she has found a way to bring in the influence of Brazil through the color palette. There is also a strong feminine quality to the work because of the patterning and collage elements. Since there is no presence of the hand through the brushwork, the paintings have a graphic quality. The work is interesting

because it cannot be reduced to merely graphic illustrations due to the slick quality of the paint application, but a clear sense of space and time remain in the paintings. Varying the areas of transparency and opacity. Milhazes uses a multitude of layering with patterns and shapes that isolate icons and shapes that are in and out of the foreground by varying areas of transparency and opacity. Milhazes's window installation in the Pinacoteca Museum in Sao Paulo, Brazil, transports the viewer viscerally through the transparent vinyl on the windows that echoes elements of sacred places. Her work became most influential in resolving my tile painting, *Untitled*. I was seeking to create an image by the intersecting of two tile patterns that are merged and progresses into a new pattern, yet still reference the cultural source.



Fig.8.

The artist Pepon Osorio clearly integrates culture and art in his powerful visceral installations. His work includes repeated motifs and highly decorated areas of ornamentation that reference the Latin culture. His unique installation work is captivating on many levels because of the conceptual and formal elements. He successfully

transforms the gallery space into a place with an intense visual experience. The viewer leaves informed, challenged, and visually stimulated by the engulfing of the gallery space. In *Badge of Honor*, the excessive and ornate elements from the mirrored floor to the plastic gold fists in the child's room, reference the Latin culture's flare for ornamentality. Osorio considers all areas of the gallery space\_\_the floor, the ceiling, and every aspect of the space\_\_so that it is completely transformed. Osorio also integrates cultural and personal histories and narratives into the installations allowing the viewer to enter into the dialogue created within the work. The intimacy established because of the experience is the way I want my work to be activated in the gallery space.



Fig.9.

## **Conclusion**

The influences of these contemporary artists have informed my choices for this body of work that was produced for my thesis exhibition. The fusion of my personal history, memory, and collecting are elements that produced the work. I was also interested in exploring the sacred space of a memorial that is presented to the public. Private memorials that are presented in a public draw attention to the person or persons being honored. As in Osorio's work, I am seeking to use my artistic voice to provoke social awareness through art. An experiential installation that weaves elements of culture together visually is the space in which I am exploring my ideas. I am seeking to find a space for my work in contemporary art that is influenced by culture and by public and private memorials, personal religious altars and shrines that still speak about painting. Culture, religion, and the arts are at the core of every successful society. The erasure of one of these elements leaves hope for the future bleak. It is through the passing on of traditions through these acts of remembrance that relationships and bonds are created and strengthened- and thus the permanent memory of the individual.

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