Yo, Mi Persona y México

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Yo, Mi Persona y México

Jaime Trinidad

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Yo, Mi Persona y México

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Master of Fine Arts

For as long as I can remember, I have struggled with understanding who I am. What makes me is something I try to make sense of through art. When I started working on this my graduation show, the idea behind it was to make a portrait of the Mexico I know, but when the pandemic hit, I found myself locked down at home, completely alone in a new country for the first time. This led me to question my existence and the belief systems I espoused and prompted me to try to understand myself better in the context of a foreign culture. As a result, the concept behind the show evolved from being about the Mexico I know to exploring who I am and how my upbringing has shaped my art and trying to make sense of my existence.

Keywords: art, self-portrait, Mexico, 3D scanning, 3D printing, black, gold leaf, chrome, sculpture, Aztec, pre-Columbian, lucha libre, contemporary art
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A mi madre y a mi padre.
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Introduction

Two years ago, I began to question what it means to be me. When I began working on this my final show, I was making sculptures that were a portrait of Mexico. It all started when I mixed Michelangelo’s *David* with an Olmec head and saw that something really beautiful came out of this *mestizaje.*¹ Over time I began to realize that the sculptures were, in a way, self-portraits. All of the pieces and materials were somehow connected to my childhood. Religious and cultural iconography, artistic influences from Europe and Mexico, and the everyday experiences of walking through the local markets, spending time with family, and watching the dazzling performance of lucha libre merged to become a truer reflection of who I am.

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¹ Miscegenation.
Influences

Lucha Libre

One of my earliest memories is the day I went with my mom to the store to buy a new T-shirt. I was really excited because I was going to pick my own shirt! To a five-year-old, that just sounded amazing. It was a gorgeous sunny day in beautiful Veracruz, Mexico. I still vividly remember getting on the bus, holding my mom’s hand, looking up at her and waiting in excitement to get to La Tienda del ISSSTE, a government-owned store. The store was not that good or popular; I actually never liked the way it smelled or the dull government colors in which it was painted—silvers, whites, and browns. But my mom loved the place. She had worked for the ISSSTE hospital before my sister and I were born, so the place was somewhat special to her.

The store was located in front of a massive water fountain that did not work. We walked into the store, and before we could go to the second floor to look through the clothing, my mom did what I would call a “ritual,” which involved saying hi to all of the workers she knew from the ISSSTE hospital. For a five-year-old, this felt like it took an eternity. Finally, after the “chitchatting” was done, we headed toward the second floor where I could finally see what I came for: clothes.

My mom started to look through the T-shirts, and I remember her picking one with a skull on it, which I liked, but it was too big for me, so she picked another shirt with a mask printed on it. The mask was half yellow and half black. It almost looked like a checkerboard because the designs on the mask were the opposite color of the background. I had to have it! And thankfully, this one fit me. I asked my mom if she knew who the mask represented, and reading the tag, she said, “Pierroth Jr.”² Who was this, or what was this? I was five, so I did not give it a

² A famous Mexican wrestler from the 1990s.
second thought, and after picking my shirt, I remember running and hiding and touching all the tees under the circular displays. This was my favorite thing to do as a child. To this day, whenever I go into a clothing store and see rows of T-shirts hanging from their racks, I feel closer to home.

My mother purchased this shirt in 1993, which was before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). My influences prior to that year were largely Japanese anime and Mexican wrestling. In the 1990s, it was cheaper to bring imports from Asia to Mexico than it was to bring them from the USA. All the cartoons I watched were Japanese dubbed to Spanish. I was not even aware of many American superheroes. My childhood was heavily influenced by Japanese culture, but at the time I did not know this.

It was almost a tradition back home that on Saturday mornings, kids would turn on the TV and watch Caritele on the TV Azteca 7 channel; Caritele was a block of Japanese animations that were really popular in the early ’90s. On one particular Saturday, after my favorite cartoons were over, I changed the channel and stumbled upon something I had never seen before: lucha libre. The colorful outfits, the commentators, the ring, the lights, the fans, and the masks gave me the feeling that the wrestlers were real superheroes made of flesh and bone. From that Saturday on, I was glued to the TV whenever lucha libre was on.

A week later, I made another discovery while watching wrestling again. The image on the T-shirt from my childhood with the black-and-yellow mask was actually Pierroth Jr., a masked luchador. I could not believe it! The T-shirt was already one of my favorites, but after finding out who was on it, it became my favorite. I wore it until it was almost too thin to be washed or worn.

Pierroth Jr. became my favorite wrestler. He was a rudo, or as known in the States, a “heel”—one of the bad guys. The way Pierroth Jr. fought and taunted not only his opponents but
also the fans made him one of Mexico’s most hated and most popular wrestlers of the ’90s. El Vampiro Canadiense was another wrestler that made an impression on me. He was probably one of the first males I saw on TV with long hair; I had always thought that boys were only allowed to have short hair. And not only did he have long hair, but he was one of the first people I saw with tattoos. His look (and Dennis Rodman’s look, for that matter) and that of other wrestlers have really influenced my personal look. I would not have tattoos and long hair if it was not for lucha libre. It was through this new world of wrestling I had just discovered that I was introduced to different cultural identifiers.

Mexico is a really conservative country; most people consider themselves Catholics, and the “macho” culture is very present. Lucha libre created its own ecosystem wherein there are tecnico, “good guys”; rudo, “bad guys”; and exotico, gay, trans, and/or cross-dressing wrestlers who are not only accepted but even hailed as heroes in the Mexican wrestling world. It was in lucha libre that I first saw someone from the LGBTQ+ community. Lucha libre is so diverse and inclusive; everyone is welcomed within its world. It embraces every culture and background. All of these things contribute to take the theatricality of this traditional Mexican sport to another level.

**Catholicism**

In Mexico, I was surrounded by Catholicism and its culture. When I was a child, it was common to see altars dedicated to a certain saint or the Virgin of Guadalupe in front of houses or next to roads with people paying respect to them. Many of Mexico’s holidays are based on Catholicism. For example, in April, we get a whole week off for Semana Santa—Holy Week. The week is supposed to help us prepare for Easter, but everyone uses the time to go on vacation,
specifically to the beach. This is how most religious holidays are treated in Mexico—they’re the perfect excuse to have fun and enjoy some time with family—and there are so many religious holidays.

When I came to the States for the first time and saw that the holidays were not the same as back home, I began to think about how much Catholicism had influenced my upbringing. During my undergraduate education in Idaho, I was making art that was heavily influenced by Japanese culture and street art. Toward the end of my last semester, I was having really bad artist’s block when I started thinking about my childhood in Mexico, and my neighbor’s Virgin of Guadalupe altar came to mind. It hit me—I come from a really beautiful culture, enriched not only by Catholicism but also by its pre-Colombian roots. I decided then to start using Catholic and pre-Colombian motifs in my art, realizing that I did not need to take ideas from other cultures and that I should do my best to elevate and understand my own culture.

Another reason why I use saints and Catholic symbolism in my work is that I feel that the Spaniards imposed their religion on the Mexican natives. Catholicism was used to colonize Mexico. To be clear, I am not angry with Spaniards or Catholics, as I believe the colonization was necessary for Mexico to be born. Mexico did not truly exist before the Spaniards arrived—many different tribes were living on the land, and most had to pay tribute to the Aztecs. Once the Spaniards landed, many native tribes allied with them to defeat the Aztec empire, thus giving birth to modern Mexico. I see my home country as the result of two completely different worlds coming together and fighting a common “enemy.” I do not see myself as someone who was colonized but rather as the product of that war. It is crazy that something as ugly as colonization can create something as beautiful as Mexico. Mexico is a complicated place, and I hope that my work can capture even a little bit of its beauty.
Street Art

There is something interesting that happens in Mexico, and it may even be unique to its culture. Whenever there is a concert, whether it is a small local cumbia (Folkloric rhythm dance is popular in Mexico.) or traditional band or a band known worldwide, artists are hired to paint on walls to advertise the show.

In this modern day, with all of the technology available, it is hard to make sense of why a country like Mexico would use street art to promote concerts instead of using billboards that can be mass-produced faster and can reach more people. Yet, Mexicans choose to paint on walls instead. What might be even more interesting is the fact that during elections, politicians also use street art to promote their campaigns.

Using street art to advertise concerts and politicians in Mexico reaches the common Mexican, the one that uses public transportation or walks to their destination. Street art is at their eye level; it is not high in the air like a billboard that can only be seen from a car on the freeway. Money is always a consideration too. Billboards have monthly fees, and walls are free to use. In Mexico, a country still considered part of the third world by many, the lack of public-space laws and cheap labor are likely why this kind of advertising is so popular.

Street art became a powerful tool in the form of murals made by José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and others, who were paid by the Mexican government to paint large artworks showing the history of Mexico and what it means to be Mexican. Diego Rivera is perhaps the most popular of these artists. He is believed to have popularized using frescos in Mexico to make murals, and he was also the most political of the muralists, as he portrayed the government as the reason for the indifference and turbulence in Mexico at the
time.\textsuperscript{3} These artists were revolutionaries and freedom fighters. Although the government paid them, the muralists included motifs and imagery that showed their discontent with the government.\textsuperscript{4} These large murals were really effective, as the majority of the people in Mexico at that time were uneducated and did not know how to read. The murals made it easy for them to learn about their history and to try to understand their identity as Mexicans. To this day, these murals still stand and have inspired many Mexicans.

The muralists have been a great inspiration to my practice. I want my art to tell stories in a powerful way, and I also want Mexicans to be proud of my work. I want to do a good job of representing my country. I will examine the connections between the muralist tradition, street art, and my work in later sections.

\textit{Lowbrow-Highbrow}

During my undergraduate education, when I started to hang out more often in the printmaking studio, I noticed that the printmaking students and most of the fine art students looked down on the illustration students. At the same time, the illustration students made fun of other art students. The main argument was the idea of highbrow versus lowbrow, that fine art was better than illustration. Fine art was considered “real art,” while illustration was made just to please the eye—there was no “soul” in it. I found myself caught between both worlds, and this tension made an impression in my mind, as I considered myself a printmaker, but as an illustration student, I sometimes just wanted to make something beautiful just for the sake of

making something beautiful. Most of my fine art peers would have seen this kind of art as “soulless.”

Sometime later, during my second year of grad school, there was an illustration show in the art building. My classmates and I were walking back to our classroom and through the show when one of them said, “I wish they had their own building so I would not have to walk through their work.” These words took me right back to my undergrad experience and the highbrow versus lowbrow/fine art versus illustration debate.

This question of the lowbrow-highbrow aesthetic has really shaped my work. I try to help erase that line by incorporating street art and other pre-Columbian motifs into my work and bringing them into the gallery, where they are part of the highbrow world.
Process

The first step in creating the majority of my work is to search the internet for 3D scans of old sculptures from western art history. I browse through different databases where museums upload 3D scans of their art pieces. It is awesome to see how 3D scanning technology is being embraced by important museums. This technology has even been used to re-create some monuments in Syria and Iraq that were destroyed by the Islamic state.\(^5\)

I usually try to look for religious imagery, as I am really attracted to its aesthetics and also to the fact that some people might hold the images sacred. Finding 3D scans of pre-Columbian pieces can be difficult. Only a few museums in Latin America have uploaded 3D scans of their collections. I must mention that because a lot of pre-Columbian art made its way to European museums, it is easily found in their digital archives.

I also make my own 3D scans using my smartphone. I like to use scans of my face for my art. I am the only Jaime in this universe. I am the only one with access to this entity and likeness known as Jaime. Why not take advantage of it and try to create from it? This is the way I think now as I try to make sense of what it means to be me. As I mentioned before, as a Mexican, I see myself as the mixture of two great worlds. This is what I try to represent in my work, so I feel that using my own likeness fits well with that concept.

After choosing 3D files to use, I upload them into a program called Meshmixer, which is similar to Photoshop but in 3D. In Meshmixer, I explore different compositions until I find one with which I am happy. I try to find similarities in the sculptures from which I work, for example, mixing images of Aztec gods with sculptures of Catholic saints. Like the birth of

Mexico, I try to create something beautiful from two completely different things. I like to think of my process as gluing together a delicate piece of broken china.

Once I am happy with my digital sculpture, I put the new 3D file into a program known as a “slicer,” which prepares the file to be sent to one of my 3D printers. Before discovering 3D printing, I used to carve woodblocks, which is a really old form of producing art prints. 3D printers are the complete opposite of woodblocks, and that is one of my favorite things about them. Almost everything about woodcuts has been discovered, but 3D printers are really uncharted territory. Whenever one of my 3D printers breaks down or I need to do an upgrade, I enjoy the process of fixing and getting the printers working again. The printers remind me of the etching presses in the printing lab where I used to hang out during my undergrad. The 3D printing process takes days—the sculpture is printed, or “created,” by the machine from the bottom up, one layer at a time. The time it takes to create the 3D files, fine-tune the printers, and print the piece reminds me of when I would spend days slowly and steadily carving my woodblocks.

After the sculptures are printed, I sand, prime, and use my airbrush to paint them. I paint my sculptures black as a reaction to the perception that all of the old leaders and saints were Caucasian because the marble sculptures are white. What they do not know is that many of these western sculptures were originally painted, sometimes with bright colors, but the paint has worn off over many years. This phenomenon has helped whitewash the world’s history. When people see a black sculpture, they do not know how to react because they’re not used to it. BLK 3.0, the paint I use, is considered one of the world’s blackest blacks; it absorbs 99% of the light. From

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afar, the sculptures have a silhouette-like appearance and appear extremely flat. This forces the viewer to come up close to really appreciate and explore all the details.

Next, I add gold leaf and/or chrome paint. The conquistadors stole massive amounts of gold from Mexico. Gold was not as valuable in pre-Columbian America as it was in the rest of the world. Natives would trade gold for mirrors because they had never seen mirrors before and found them valuable. In a way, the chrome I use is a representation of those mirrors. I also like using juxtaposition and asymmetry in my work. The mirror-like look of the chrome paint and the contrast it makes with the blackest black creates a really captivating and interesting aesthetic.
Exhibition

Layout

In my exhibition, I arranged the sculptures in a loosely organized manner on top of pedestals of various sizes draped with a traditional Mexican fabric called cambaya. This fabric was bought in Mexico and brought to the States for this show. The idea behind this design was to invoke the loosely organized arrangement of vendors in traditional Mexican markets and is a contrast to the traditional sculpture gardens in museums, where sculptures are neatly placed at the same distance from each other, almost in a grid-like manner. The brightly colored cambaya draped over the pedestals would be considered lowbrow by most Mexicans.

On the front wall is a big projector playing video of some of my favorite lucha libre matches—bringing into the show the sounds and heroes of my childhood. Under the projected video, on the floor, are small handmade candles and soaps and small sculptures made out of sugar, creating a little altar to lucha libre. I positioned the main piece of the show, titled Calcutla, in the center of the gallery. It was the only piece that was put in a specific place. Calcutla is a life-size bust with a custom-made professional lucha libre mask. In a corner of the gallery is a small projector showing portraits of me wearing the Calcutla mask.

Calcutla

Calcutla came to be one day when I was watching lucha libre and wondered how differently I would behave if I were wearing a mask. In a way, I was asking myself if I was really being true to my character and wondering what would happen if I covered my face with the iconography that I identify as personal. Wearing the mask makes me feel like I am Calcutla, this character that I have created and that represents me and my upbringing. My plan is to fully
embrace this “persona” by wearing the mask when talking about my art or when going to show openings. I really want people to “not know” my real face and to only see it represented in my art. This also connects to my love for street art and graffiti and the fact that many of my favorite artists’ identities are unknown. The mask also helps me talk about my art; I am more confident as Calcutla than I am as Jaime.

I based the design of the mask on Tlaloc, the Aztec god of rain, specifically the eyes, the teeth and fangs, and the split tongue. The design for the mouth area is borrowed from samurai masks, and the all-seeing eye with the square and compass represents my love for symbols and hidden meanings. The roaring lion is my family’s crest. The little “clouds” are symbols the Aztecs used; my mom always taught me that the clouds represented that the Aztecs were alive. Three of the little clouds allude to my last name, Trinidad. The colors are taken from the Mexican flag. The mask is mounted on a life-size 3D printed bust of myself, which is placed in the middle of the gallery and set up at my eye level, bringing my personal presence into the show. Four additional Calcutla masks in the gallery have identical iconography, but colors and fabrics based on my favorite wrestlers.
Conclusion/Potential

The more I think about my exhibition, the more I realize it is truly a self-portrait. At the beginning of the process, I set out to try to discover and understand my cultural identity, which later turned into a quest to find my personal identity. I was really trying to re-create a little piece of home, a place where I could feel safe miles and miles away from it, by using lucha libre fights, the sounds from my childhood, and the traditional Mexican textiles that are a callback to that first Pierroth Jr. T-shirt and my trips to the store with my mom when I would hide under the racks as a kid. The BLK 3.0 harkens back to my love for street art and my idea of disrupting the gallery, to bring some of that black grime found in the streets. For the most part, I keep my sculptures smaller in size because it forces the viewer to get close to really understand them. The small size is also a reference to the toys of my childhood, particularly Sofubi, (Soft vinyl toy) my favorite type of Japanese toy.

My next step is to go home to Mexico to 3D scan my parents, grandparents, and siblings. I want to explore their likenesses and their connections to me. I am interested in how this technology can be used to preserve, understand, and duplicate human likenesses. My work has not been exhibited in Mexico, and I am curious to see how it will be accepted and understood by my own country. I wanted to wear my Calcutla mask for my exhibition opening to see how people interacted with me, however I could not have an opening because of the pandemic. Once we are able to meet again and freely host events, I hope to explore what wearing the mask in public really means. I will keep exploring how my presence affects and is affected by my surroundings.

Lucha libre has embraced, and accepted, different cultures, bringing together the lowbrow and highbrow, the Japanese and the Mexican, the Catholic and the pre-Columbian gods,
and many more. And to me I feel that mixture is reflected in my persona as the result of two different worlds coming together and clashing creating something new. I feel my life closely resembles Mexican wrestling. Through my art I hope to represent, understand and find out who I really am.
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