

Natalie Melara

The Beauty of the In-Between

Natalie Melara is an emerging multi-media artist whose work explores her relationship to her “composite identity” as a Salvadoran Canadian. Natalie was born in Calgary, Alberta to two Salvadoran parents who immigrated in the mid-1980s during El Salvador’s civil war (1). They recognized the opportunities Natalie would have as a Canadian. At five years old, Natalie and her mother moved back to El Salvador for around eighteen months to live with her extended family and be immersed in their culture.

When she returned to Canada, she struggled to find a robust Latin American community and lacked the resources to fully explore her cultural identity. Natalie felt judged because she looked and acted differently from other Canadians. Making traditional Salvadoran dishes like tamales, pupusas and nuégados helped her feel closer to her parents and her heritage. As a teen, Natalie discovered Mexican American Chicano culture (2) through the internet. There were similarities between, as she says, her “hybrid identity” and that of Chicanos and Chicanas. She didn’t feel ownership of either side of her identity— not quite Latina enough and not quite Canadian enough.

Natalie was drawn to art making. However, in her family, art was always a hobby and not a career choice. Natalie graduated from high school in 2004 and pursued more practical careers to express her creativity. She obtained a diploma in Fashion Design from Olds College in 2007 and then an Architectural Diploma from the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) in 2015. When her son was born in 2015, she realized this work was not as fulfilling for her as being an artist.



In 2018, Natalie enrolled in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at the Alberta University of the Arts (AUArts). At thirty-two years old, she was surrounded by other mature students with similar life stories. Natalie received help caring for her son during this time. Although she occasionally feels guilty about not being a stay-at-home mother, like her mom, she is at peace with her decision. Learning is never lost, and Natalie used her skills in architectural and fashion design in her art. They equipped her with meticulous attention to detail. Her academic experiences ultimately confirmed that she was an artist.

At AUArts, Natalie met alumna Rocio Graham and they bonded over their shared experiences as Latina artists. Rocio’s tenacity and excitement in her artistic practice inspired Natalie to explore what it meant to be a Salvadoran Canadian. Through works such as *The Treachery* (2021) and *MALLEABILITY* (2022), Natalie explores, as she puts it, her “tentative relationship” with her heritage, understanding that something entirely new emerges in the patchwork imagery of her two distinct cultural backgrounds.



The Patterns of Digital Threads of Identity (2021) is a collection of digital patterns resembling Central American weavings and textiles. To create this collection, Natalie scanned physical paintings and collages, printed the photos, and repeated this process. She found that the artwork had lost resolution after each scan. Similarly, she observed that each generation born outside of El Salvador, like herself and her son, received a “lower resolution” of Salvadoran culture, with something new forming in its place.

“Little by little, day by day, allows me to keep growing and to stay committed to being a lifelong artist.”

These days, Natalie is active in many areas of Calgary’s art community. She is a retouch artist and photographer for Mathieson &

Hewitt photographers since 2017. She learned Photoshop and photography from her mentor Harry Mah, the owner of Mathieson & Hewitt, which she uses in her art. She is also part of the Clematis Collective with three other female artists, where she hopes to take a research approach to her art practice. The collective explores the ways women artists are made to be and feel invisible. Death, religion, automatic painting, and spiritually guided art all have the theme of ‘liminality’ that Natalie would like to explore in the future as she evolves her idea of “in-between” spaces. Similarly, she adapted her lifestyle as an artist to be around her son, with activities such as doodling on an iPad at home or experimenting with photography and Photoshop. This embodies the “in-between” of being an artist and a mother.

Based on an interview with Anya Labelle in 2024.

References

1. “Salvadorian Civil War.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 25, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvadoran_Civil_War
Additional Note: The Salvadorian Civil War saw 65,161 civilians killed and 500,000 refugees move to other countries. More than 25% of the population of El Salvador was displaced as refugees before the end of the war.
2. “Chicano.” Wikipedia. Accessed June 25, 2024. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicano>
Excerpt from the website: “Chicano (masculine form) or Chicana (feminine form) is an ethnic identity for Mexican Americans who have a non-Anglo self-image, embracing their Mexican Native ancestry. [...] The word Chicano may derive from the loss of the initial syllable of Mexicano (Mexican). [...] Chicano and Chicana identity reflects elements of ethnic, political, cultural, and Indigenous hybridity.”