

“This is My Language”
Agency, Identity and Community among Latino/a Artists in
Somerville



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“Art is the heart’s explosion on the world. Music. Dance. Poetry. Art on cars, on walls, on our skins. There is probably no more powerful force for change in this uncertain and crisis-ridden world than young people and their art. It is the consciousness of the world breaking away from the strange grip of an archaic social order”

-Luis J Rodriguez

“Life is transcended through not only my work but my being and just breathing, it’s like that’s art in itself. And I don’t label myself as an artist but more of a human that’s doing what they’re doing because they have to, because they live day by day and that’s the way they gotta communicate. This is my language, you know, I may know English I may know Spanish, I want to learn French, I want to learn Portuguese, but this is my language and I hope other people could read it as thus”

-Diego Guzmán

Preface:

The title page image is a photograph I had taken of one of Diego Guzmán's works that currently hangs at Rocket Science Screen Printing. This work, which featured in the Somerville Museum's *Immigrant City* exhibit in the fall of 2007, is part of Diego's *Homies* series; a collection of photographs featuring "Homies" figurine characters positioned upon a postcard backdrop. In this particular image, the juxtaposition of these pocket-sized, commodified, Latino stereotypes with scenes of old Somerville provides a subtle and humorous yet deeply poignant commentary. The image itself, in keeping with the artist, is quite humorous, and is intentionally so, but it is important to think about the underlying dialogue which surfaces through this sort of humorous irony. Diego states that his intension with this work is to "[highlight] the stereotype and [put] it back in your face...in the sense of 'lets think about this and lets come to terms with what we really do think about the Latino community in Somerville'".¹



¹ Interview with Diego Guzmán November 11, 2008.

² Homies figurines

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I. Introduction

Project Description

Drawing from past coursework, recent experience, and exposure to the Somerville community and its varying cultural forms, I have become increasingly aware of the precarious circumstances of immigration policy, discourse and conceptualization in the United States. The dominant discourse on immigration must be analyzed within a dichotomous, post-9/11, social and political context, one which classifies peoples and communities as ‘American’ or ‘Other’. Post 9/11 society witnessed the reclamation of an ‘Americanized’ US political identity, and the subsequent reification of ‘American values’ as ‘white values’. Through this discourse, the unique and individualized trajectories and experiences of Latino/as (including those born in the United States) and Latin American immigrants are often reduced to the stereotyped trajectory of the Mexican immigrant looking for a ‘better life’, who is here to ‘suck resources’ and ‘take jobs’, or to the criminalization of Latino youth as violent gang members. These falsified paradigms are further reified not only through forms of ‘informative’ media (i.e. newspapers, reports) but are reproduced through commodified cultural forms. And within this social and political context, one might ask, *Who is challenging this socially-constructed discourse? And how?*

When given the opportunity to develop an original research topic for Professor Pacini-Hernandez’s Fall 2008 Urban Borderlands Latino Oral History Project: ‘Latino cultural production in Somerville’, I was overwhelmed by the seemingly limitless areas of exploration. I allowed myself to be guided, however, by what some educators refer to as the ‘so what factor’;

while any original research on ‘Latino’ artists, musicians, dancers, etc. in Somerville could prove useful and meaningful, I couldn’t conduct such an investigation without first deconstructing the concepts of ‘Latino’ and ‘Latino art’, as they are understood both in Somerville and in a larger U.S. context. And as I began to look around Somerville, I found artists who were doing just that. I have thus conducted my research using Somerville as a point of departure for understanding the formulation and deconstruction of U.S. Latino sociocultural constructs, using artists as actors in this battle for voice and agency. My research is located within a temporally climactic Somerville context, with the imminence of the green line, the fear of gentrification, and, at the same time, a growing discourse and enthusiasm for ‘multiculturalism’.

Research Questions

Having chosen a project topic, it was then necessary to develop questions to organize and articulate my objectives and parameters. My primary research question has been ‘How are ‘Latino’ artists in Somerville using art to a) contest Latino/immigrant stereotypes and articulate individual identity and b) create community spaces, unity, awareness and engagement?’. Subsequent focus questions include “How do you identify yourself/ how do you view cultural identity/ what does ‘Latino’ mean to you?”; “What has been your experience with cultural assignments and categories/How have you illustrated or contested categories or stereotypes in your work?”; “What is your view of Somerville as an artist? As a resident?/What organizations do you work with/ what community projects are you involved with?/ How is your work received in Somerville?”; “What mediums/themes do you work in?/How does media/pop culture play into your narrative?”; and, ultimately, “Why do you create art? What personal and communal purposes does art play in your world view and future goals?”

Methodology

I gathered my information primarily from interviews with Somerville-based artists, whose rich narratives and insights read beautifully on paper. I had each narrator sign an IRB form and then tape recorded our conversation, later transcribing part or all of the interviews into word documents. The narrators' works, websites, and personal and organizational connections were also an integral part in formulating this report. Additionally, the politicized focus of this report made it imperative for me to develop a working sociopolitical context. In doing so, I drew upon government and census materials and scholarly publications.

Researcher's Note

Having established a complex research topic, predicated on academic, rather than personal, understandings, I soon discovered that placing a lofty agenda atop my research was limiting. I set out carrying a staggering amount of skepticism as well, fearful of misrepresenting my narrators, dubious of my own authority as an outside researcher. Like any thorough narrator, I believe it is important to integrate my own social location and worldview into the project. I am a white female, twenty-one years of age, and a junior at Tufts University. I grew up locally in a predominantly white, predominantly wealthy suburb. At Tufts, I initially took an interest in anthropology and Latin American studies, but, recognizing the way in which U.S. intervention in Latin America has been implicated in the difficult trajectories of Latino immigrants, I have refocused my area of interest to the United States. Additionally, my experiences living and working in Somerville (I interned with the Somerville Arts Council this past summer of 2008)

have whetted my fascination for this unique city, abundant with opportunities to interact, explore and organize. My involvement with this project has further served as an impetus for intellectual and personal growth.

Beyond my own development and growth, the primary purpose of this report is to provide an outlet for the insights and experiences of its narrators. I have attempted to provide a working framework for the issues, concepts, and spaces which they discuss. It is imperative to note, however, that all conclusions and interpretations are rooted in my own knowledge and understanding, and, therefore, are not necessarily reflective of the narrators' opinions, nor should they be taken verbatim.

Finally, I'd like to express my deepest gratitude toward my narrators and their subsequent organizations. I would like to thank Diego Guzman in particular for his encouragement and enthusiasm, and for allowing me to disclose a detailed account of his life. I extend this gratitude also to Professor Pacini-Hernandez for her guidance, patience and encouragement, the hard-working Tufts Anthropology office staff, my fellow classmates for their insights and helpfulness, and a special thank you to the Somerville community organizations who have generously devoted their time and resources to myself and my classmates, including the Welcome Project, Centro Presente and the Somerville Arts Council.

II National and Local Latino Context

Latinos in the United States: Government Definitions, Essentialisms and Stereotypes

The United States Census Bureau maintains that “Hispanics or Latinos are those people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the Census 2000 questionnaire - ‘Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano’, ‘Puerto Rican’, or ‘Cuban’ - as well as those who indicate that they are ‘other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino’”.³ According to the 2000 Census, Latinos constituted 12.5% of the United States population, a 57.9 percent increase from 1990. Within this category, 58.5% identified as being of Mexican origin, 9.6% Puerto Rican, 3.5% Cuban, with the remaining 28.4% constituting the ‘Other Hispanic’ category.⁴ For many Latino census participants, the distinction between race (white, black, etc.) and ethnicity (Hispanic) is unclear or irrelevant. In 1990, 40 % of those who identified ethnically as Hispanic chose ‘Other’ as their racial category.⁵ In *Measuring Latinos, Racial Versus Ethnic Classification and Self Understanding*, Hitlin, Brown and Elder contend that this compartmentalizing of identity “misrepresents the social psychological processes whereby individuals locate themselves along racial and ethnic lines” and that such standards “run the risk of imposing categories on individuals that make little sense to those being categorized”.⁶

Indeed, the category of ‘Latino/Hispanic’ does not adequately reflect the myriad countries of origin, phenotypes, languages, cultures, trajectories and habits of those who ‘check the box’. This unilateral category has served as point of contention for artists and academics alike. Gerard Torres states “I will take it as a given that the idea of ‘the Hispanic’ or ‘the Latino’

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, County Population Estimates by Demographic Characteristics - Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin; updated annually for states and counties.

<http://www.census.gov/popest/counties/asrh/>

⁴ US Census Bureau 2000

⁵ US Census Bureau 2000

⁶ Brown, J.Scott, Glen, Elder Jr. Hitlin, Steven, *Measuring Latinos: Racial Versus Ethnic Classification and Self-Understanding. Social Forces*, December 2007; Vol. 86, No. 2, pp. 587-611 588

is a problematic notion for those of us of one another Latin American heritage who find ourselves here in the United States” and further contends that “Since this process [of categorization] is essentially political, the elements of identity that matter are not those that are the essence of a specific culture, but those that can be converted to a more generalized representation of an ethnic type”.⁷

Such bureaucratic categorizing has translated into a derogatory and dangerous stereotyping of the U.S. Latino population. In *Greasers and Gringos*(2003) Steven W. Bender investigates the historical development and contemporary practice of Latino stereotyping. As an educator , he has noted the persistence of Latino/Hispanic stereotypes in the collective psyche of his students: “Perhaps the first trait they mention will address criminal tendencies...Following this prompt, the social construction of Latinas/os unfolds as the students suggest...that Latinas/os are also marked by their tendencies to be lazy...and to party” etc.⁸ Such associations are both formulated and reified by forms of popular media; “Popular songs, movies, television shows, news media, and advertising campaigns, when they portray Latinas/os, invariably draw on this store of stereotypical conceptions”.⁹ Additionally, homogenizing all peoples of Latin American descent in the United States in the context of a post 9/11 ‘War on Illegal Immigration’ has extremely detrimental repercussions for the population as a whole: legislation and operatives allowing for the deportation of legal citizens, occupational raids, profiling and harassment. As prominent artist and academic Guillermo Gomez Pena writes, “As the years have passed and the US has nurtured its citizens’ convalescence from post-9/11 shock, nativist newscasters,

⁷ Torres, Gerald, *The Legacy of Conquest and Discovery: Mediations on Ethnicity, Race and American Politics* from Bonilla, et al., *Borderless Borderlands: U.S. Latinos, Latin Americans and the Paradox of Interdependence*. Temple University Press:1998.

⁸ Bender, Steven W., *Greasers and Gringos: Latinos, the Law and the American Imagination*. New York University Press, 2003.

⁹ Bender, Steven W., *Greasers and Gringos: Latinos, the Law and the American Imagination*. New York University Press, 2003.

opportunistic politicians, right-wing think-tanks (FAIR), and citizen groups continue to portray Latino immigrants as the source of all our social and cultural ills and of our financial tribulations”.¹⁰

Given this national context, is it is useful, before locating these issues in a local, Somerville context, to make a few distinctions. It is absolutely imperative to resist any inclination to victimize; while there are indeed structures, attitudes and ideologies in place which benefit some groups and disadvantage others, *the purpose of this report is to underline the resilience, strength, agency and creativity of individuals whose lived experiences are located within this context.* In addition, the way in which these national structures are implicated locally is contingent on the distinctive characteristics of the local context. This case study is inextricable from its Somerville location.

An Overview of Somerville

Somerville is located at the fringe of the Greater Boston area, neighboring Cambridge, Arlington and Medford on one side and East Boston and Everett on the other ,with an estimated population of 77, 478.¹¹ Over the past couple decades, Somerville has undergone rapid demographic change and revitalization, shedding the nickname ‘Slumerville’ and replacing it with the likes of “The Model City” marked for its ‘vibrant arts scene’, community, engagement, and most notably, as a destination for immigrants past and present. Much of this positive change is due to a huge influx of immigrants from primarily Latin American countries over the past two and a half decades. There is an unmistakably proud rhetoric of multiculturalism in Somerville, further bolstered by community displays, events, and organizations. However, it is also important to note the statistics of resource allocation among Somerville’s various sectors. A 2008

¹⁰ Gomez Pena, Guillermo, *Border Hysteria and the War Against Difference*. The Drama Review, Spring 2008; Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 196-203

¹¹ www.somervillema.gov

community profile put forth by the Community Action Agency of Somerville makes visible the disparities behind a multicultural Somerville, noting that low-income residents are overwhelmingly from newly arrived immigrant populations. Additionally, housing disparities are rapidly increasing with the simultaneous influx of low-income immigrant populations, and recent ‘suburbanization’ along the Cambridge line where 2 or 3-family houses are being converted to accommodate higher-income individuals, couples and families.¹² These disparities translate into what is talked about as the “East/West Somerville divide”. There is an observation among many of those who live or work in Somerville—including my narrators—that the population is divided between the low-income, ethnically Latino/Brazilian East Somerville sector and the increasingly suburban, predominantly white West (Davis Square) sector. There is a common contention that both material resource allocation, such as transportation, as well as community events and arts initiatives, are disproportionately concentrated in the latter section. Organizations such as East Somerville Main Streets are taking an initiative to both increase economic activity in East Somerville, as well as increase the visibility of artists and art programs and events within the area.

Somerville Art Scene: Latinos+ Arts= Latino Art?

As mentioned briefly, there is a large emphasis on the presence of an artist community in Somerville. There are a very active Arts Council, and many additional artist initiatives, galleries, showcases, and collectives. In speaking with artists of all backgrounds, most notably my narrators, most seem to note a concentration of these artist resources in the Davis Square area. Additionally, as has been noted by a few of my narrators, there is somewhat of an ethnic and geographic divide in artist representation. What my narrators often have to grapple with is the categorization as an ‘immigrant artist’ or ‘Latino artist’, and the way in which one is expected to

¹² Community Action Agency of Somerville 2008 Community Profile, www.caasomerville.org

produce a certain kind of art based on that. There seems to be a fine line between celebrating art along specific nomenclatures in the spirit of multiculturalism and genuine interest, and the categorizing and subsequent misrepresenting or under representing of certain groups of people. Conversely, as an artist or a student, as demonstrated in the following narratives, one tends to occupy a liminal or transitory space in Somerville. Positioning oneself outside of the geographic politics of the city allows for a more individualized interpretation of experience through art, as witnessed in the following accounts of my narrators.

III Artist Narratives

Following a research prospectus that was pointedly political and, at least initially, premeditated, I sought out artists/narrators who demonstrated a high level of political awareness, a consciously and purposefully formulated identity, an interest in and history of community involvement, and a desire to affect change. Consequently, all of my narrators had been college educated and are currently well-established in Somerville, three of whom are studio artists and one of whom holds a position as the director of a program for youth arts and leadership at a local organization. Though each narrator offered a unique perspective, contingent on individual social location and lived experience, recurrent themes, ideas and opinions became increasingly more evident with each conversation. Most significantly, all narrators viewed art as a tool, medium or language for expressing, articulating, or reinterpreting their lived realities. Also relevant to each narrator, as noted above, is the question of what it means to be a “Latino/a artist”, both in Somerville and in a larger U.S. and transnational context.



Diego Guzmán- Diego was born in Santiago, Chile in November 1986 and came to Miami at eleven years of age. Having demonstrated an interest and ability in art at an early age, he was able to attend a Magnet High School. Following graduation he came to the Boston area to attend art school and is currently completing his final year at the Museum School of Fine Arts. He has been involved in numerous Somerville community art projects and lived in Somerville for a year while taking classes at Tufts. He currently works in Somerville at Rocket Science Screen Printing, but now lives in Allston.



Raul Gonzales- Raul was born in El Paso, Texas, to Mexican/Mexican American parents. He was raised in both Juarez, Mexico and El Paso. He eventually moved to San Francisco where he worked as an animator before moving to Somerville with his partner Elaine, who was attending Tufts/SMFA. He has shown his work in many public venues/cafes throughout Somerville as well as in galleries throughout Boston such as the New England Gallery of Latin American Art.

¹³ Photograph taken by the author, December 12, 2008

¹⁴ Photograph taken by the author, October 17, 2008.

Wilbur Renderos- Wil was born in El Salvador. In 1986, at age 13, he fled the Salvadoran Civil War and arrived in Boston. Upon his arrival Wil was granted TPS Status and was later allowed to apply for citizenship after the signing of NACARA(Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act) in 1996. Since the age of 14, Wil has been working with youth leadership programs. He attended Wesleyan University, concentrating in Latin American studies, and has since settled in Somerville where he has devoted his time to projects involving youth and arts. Wil currently holds a position as youth director at the Somerville based organization Centro Presente.



Elaine Bay- Elaine Bay was born in El Paso, Texas to an artist mother and an engineer father, both originally from Canada. Growing up in a predominantly Hispanic community, Elaine experienced and identified with the borderlands culture of El Paso and Juarez. After completing her BFA at the University of El Paso and spending a year in San Francisco, she came to Somerville in 2003 with Raul Gonzales to complete her MFA at the Museum School of Fine Arts, and has since remained. A member of Somerville’s artist collective, the Miracle5, Elaine operates under the persona PrincessDie and works exclusively with ‘found objects’, that is, she does not create anything new but rather manipulates and recreates that which she finds in her surroundings, including forms of media and electronic communication.

Diego Guzmán: “I’m American, you know, but I’m Latino too”¹⁶

Diego Guzmán is the narrator of both my first and last interviews, and the subject of my artist profile. I was extremely fortunate to have been referred to Diego, a former peer (and, I have since found, a compatible friend), during the primary stage of my research. The preliminary chats and recollections we shared eventually became the framework for my research topic. I

¹⁵©2005-2009 Princessdie

¹⁶ Interview with Diego Guzman, 10/13/2008. All subsequent quotations, until noted otherwise are from this source

conducted our first interview at my apartment, informally following a general list of questions. I was already well aware of the keenly perceptive and articulate nature of Diego's commentary, and was myself excited to provide a tangible and publicly accessible space for it. We had been in the same anthropology class focused on U.S. Latino identity, and though we share very different lived experiences, ideological and intellectual compatibility gave way to a simultaneously comfortable and productive working relationship.

Research predicated upon cultural, ethnic or racial difference has the potential to be disastrous unless the individual agency of its subjects is fully accounted for, engaged and articulated. Diego Guzmán, as an artist, as a student, as a Chilean immigrant, as a U.S. citizen, is perhaps the most consciously and thoughtfully self-aware person I have spoken with among those in my own age group. He speaks very naturally, casually and yet personally and passionately about many of the issues I have only been able to read about. When asked whether he identified himself as a 'Latino', he replied "definitely", though he does so critically, understanding 'Latino' to be much more than an ethnic signifier or a box to check. Diego's own 'Latino identity' is embedded within a complex and personalized trajectory of social and geographic migrations, experiences, relationships, accomplishments and hardships. He compares the 'Latino immigrant experience', in a rhetorical and socially constructed sense, against the reality of his own experience "There's this ideology behind the United States- the empire, the beautiful women, the great job opportunities, the easy money, the easy living. Once you get here you find out its completely different".

He proceeded to talk about concepts of the 'American dream' and the 'myth of meritocracy' as he had encountered them in his own life. He made a brilliant commentary on the tension between 'expectations' Latinos have, mediated through family ties, upbringing, and

institutions, and how such practices are both a reality and instigator for creating stereotypes of the ‘Latino immigrant’: “You have some correlations and parallels between what gender issues are or gender roles or family life and the glue that ties certain things together. And that’s where stereotypes arise and that’s where people get certain things confused and then there’s these boundaries that the own groups establish in order to figure out if they belong”. He seems to have been able to mediate, both personally and objectively, a balance between recognizing the complexity and fluidity of ‘Latino identity’, and understanding the outside implications placed upon those who claim it. Of the latter he states “you have Americans who don’t identify with these Latino groups see them in certain roles... you have your stereotypical Mexican lawnmower guy, you have your maid who might be from this country”.

For Diego, art has been his way of navigating a trajectory of physical migration, expectations, stereotypes, media and pop culture influences; a way of “[understanding himself] within the bigger world”. His artistic inclination, perception and talent have literally guided his stages of personal development. He attended a magnet arts high school in Miami, and is now currently finishing his final year at the Museum School of Fine Arts. He works in a variety of mediums, including collage, screen printing and performance work (See Appendix C Artist Profile for a detailed account of Diego’s life and art). Having lived in Somerville for a year while taking classes at Tufts, and working in Somerville at Rocket Science Screen Printing, Diego has been involved in a number of community art projects. He has worked with the Arts Council on a number of projects. He has been featured in the Somerville Museum’s *Immigrant City* exhibit, and often works with East Somerville Main Streets, participating in the recent “Color of the Americas” East Somerville Art Walk. He has currently been working with Raul Gonzales to create an East Somerville mural project.

I asked Diego for his thoughts on Somerville as a student, an artist, a Latino, a resident; he stated that “Somerville’s very transitional”. Of this, he states, “It’s divided because it really is” and elaborates, stating of the Latino/Brazilian Somerville community “people don’t want trouble, don’t want to be in the limelight...these people call Somerville their home because that’s where they could rest at night...it’s a different life and it’s a different frame of mind that yeah of course it’s hard for people to bridge because they haven’t lived it”. I asked him to place himself among this divide. He sees himself as “completely an outsider, trying to see things from the inside”¹⁷. As an artist, he feels it is extremely important to engage with the community, and sees his job as an artist “building a language where both of these completely different frameworks could come together and understand something even if it’s as simple as a photograph or sharing of a certain experience via an art piece”.¹⁸

In Somerville, as well as in the United States and the global world, Diego sees the solution of these sort of divisions as being a matter of putting oneself out there and engaging with the surrounding community; “I think we’re coming to a point where it’s like enough with the jokes, enough with the serious issues; at the same time it’s like we’re a part of the human race, there’s this whole idea of becoming a world citizen. It’s about time to transgress this and stop holding ourselves back by talking about these things, but talking about how we can bridge that gap together”. In a world so saturated with consumerism, pop culture, and the latest technology, it’s easy to get lost; barriers and prejudices arise because of a lack of communication and interpersonal understanding. Diego elaborates, “people need to communicate, and whether it may be through crazy wires or through a drawing or through a conversation or language and through feeling of understanding...the Latino community does that in various ways but

¹⁷ Interview with Diego Guzmán. November 11, 2008.

¹⁸ Interview with Diego Guzmán. November 11, 2008.

sometimes it gets lost within its own identity, trying to find themselves in this world of logos”. Circling back to Diego’s perceptive sense of humor, he concluded with one of my favorite remarks of the entire report, asserting that it is “important to come back to the community and realize that we can do this together to progress, this change, or, for example murals are a good way to do that or giving back to the community, establishing a sense of like ‘okay I got free time, I’d rather spend it with other people and teach something that they might not really know and get feedback in that sense or I could sit at home and watch Law and Order””.

My second interview with Diego was primarily a detailed and reflective autobiography, presented in the artist profile, but having further discussed ‘Latino identity’ with other narrators, I was eager to hear his final thoughts on the matter. After prepping him for the question, “So Diego... What does Latino mean to you?” He smiled smugly, stating, “Well it just means I was born in Chile...”, but then elaborated, “Because I grew up undergoing this process I have a different perspective. But so does Arnold Swartzeneger, so does Obama and so do you...So Latino to me, keeps me rooted in a sense because I know a different language, I could bridge the gap of understanding this American culture through other Latino eyes, maybe through conversation and through exposure and through dialogue there could be an understanding of a whole of what it is, maybe a connection, somebody could relate, and maybe not. I’m just putting myself out there and I know many other people are as well”.¹⁹

Wil Renderos: “Focus that energy into something different”²⁰

I was referred to Wil Renderos by a friend of mine and past Urban Borderlands student Diego Villalobos. Wil is originally from El Salvador, but fled to the United States at age 13 to

¹⁹ Interview with Diego Guzmán. November 11, 2008.

²⁰ Interview with Wilbur Renderos, October 31, 2008. All subsequent quotations taken from this source unless noted

escape the Civil War. When recounting his experience upon arrival, he noted the large role art played in helping him make sense of all the complexities and uncertainties of his experience. For him, and for many of the youth he has worked with, art was “A different way of seeing the world” in the context of a world and a society which assigned roles, identities and trajectories. And within the confines of the public school system, “It was probably the only space that I had to be creative within the school day”. Wil’s own experience led him to begin working in youth leadership, focusing on arts, noting the increasing disappearance of youth art programs in schools and cities. Specifically for Latino and immigrant youth, having that outlet for expression and creativity is extremely empowering against a backdrop of negative stereotypes and expectations.

Wil is currently the program organizer for the youth and arts program at Centro Presente. This specific program within the larger immigrant rights and assistance organization was founded twelve years ago. Of the program’s goal, he notes, “It’s about creating a safe space for them, but a space where they can come in and have fun and learn about art but also use that as a way to express either their political or social realities”. He went on to talk more generally about the difficulties faced by Latino and immigrant youth. He notes that Latino youths are often subjected to a one sided depiction of ‘criminal’, and consequentially “they buy into it, they internalize that, and they believe that really there are no options and this is what they can aspire to and this is what the world expects of them”. He spoke of a “sense of hopelessness” seen in immigrant/Latino youth and cited the 53% drop out rate for Latino youth. These statements resonate with critical race scholars’ concept of ‘internalized racism’ or ‘internalized stereotyping’. In “Social Identity, Stereotype Threat, and Self-Theories” Catherine Good, Carol S. Dweck and Joshua Aronson state that “In certain contexts...social identity may be

devalued...In response to this devaluation [those people] may find that their behavior or sense of self changes” and that “this sense can disrupt [a person’s] ability to perform up to [his/her] potential, a predicament known as ‘stereotype threat’”.²¹

Specifically in Somerville, such issues are played out in the lived experience of the youth Wil works with. He cited the Somerville Anti-Gang Ordinance, which allows the Somerville police to question/hassle any small public gathering of youth. This is where Centro Presente aims to create a safe space; “When every space that you are a part of attacks you and tells you that you can’t be anything in life it’s really hard, so for us, our job is to kind of be that space, we’re here to tell them you can do whatever you can”. I asked how the youth he worked with dealt with these issues in their art or which themes they chose to focus on. He said that in the beginning, males would depict images of gangster and gang culture remnant of LA, while, conversely, females would create images surrounding friendship. Of these contrasts, he drew a parallel where both genders were trying to find a family or belonging somewhere- “what they don’t have”; males would seek out gangs for a sense of belonging while many of the female youth he worked with were engaged in unhealthy romantic relationships. His role was to help them “focus that energy into something a little bit different” He talked about a Talents mural- a mural listing and depicting the various talents of Somerville youth- as a means of emphasizing and reinforcing positive images of immigrant/latino youth. He also talked about youth airbrushing shirts with their names on them names on them as a way of “creating identity”.

We discussed the way in which these youths’ artistic expressions have received within the city of Somerville. He mentioned how the program began by producing direct, controversial images (issues about immigration, police profiling etc) but contended that “people don’t like to

²¹“Social Identity, Stereotype Threat, and Self-Theories” from Fullgani, Andrew J. ed, Contesting Stereotypes and Creating Identities 2007.

be challenged by art”. The focus shifted to projects like the Talents mural; positive, non confrontational images, what Wil described as a “compromise” between Centro Presente and the Somerville community. The program, however, continues to face challenges and inhibitors; the Talents mural was not displayed due to (legitimate) permit issues. But it seems as though CP still has to ‘walk a line’ in terms of what messages are properly digestible to the rest of the community. He spoke about the way one becomes limited by the label of ‘Latino artist’ where it is expected that the artist will produce images related to Latin America/immigration, but that the outside audience does not always want to be confronted with images that are controversial, that you are “presenting a different reality, and that’s what causes problems”.

Wil also talked about the reality of being given representation and funding as an organization, and the way in which, unfortunately, that has an influence on the sort of artwork produced, “when you play it safe, when the messages are more indirect, that’s when you get the money, that’s when you get the funding and people want to work with you”. He recalled a recent experience where a “Hip Hop For Justice” in Somerville was cancelled at the last minute, with the citing of permit issues, but that after reorganizing and dealing with those details, it was also shut down in neighboring Cambridge. However, despite such obstacles, he emphasizes the importance of creating outlets and spaces for “young people with a positive conscience”, citing art as a means of expressing identity and dealing with personal and social issues. For he notes that, “A lot of people say that young people are the future, I think that they’re not the future I think they are the present, because everything that you see on TV is really directed towards them- the music, the clothes, everything is really marketed towards them”, and they have the power to contest what is presented to them.

Raul Gonzales: “defining the look of the community that you live within”²²

I had met Raul Gonzales once in passing during my summer internship with the Somerville Arts Council. While hanging posters in the Diesel Café, a popular coffee shop in the heart of Davis Square, with SAC’s executive director Greg Jenkins, we bumped into Raul. Greg introduced me to Raul, who then invited me to a show he was having at the New England Gallery of Latin American Art. I had prior engagements and was unable to go, but Raul’s warm and friendly character made the exchange memorable. Early on in my research, I went to Greg for his repertoire of artist contacts, and he put me in touch with Raul, who had remembered our exchange, and was very amicably willing to participate in my project. We conducted the interview in his South End studio, where I had the added pleasure and bonus of viewing his artwork (including works in progress), as we talked about it.

Raul was born in El Paso, Texas, to parents of Mexican descent; his mother is from Mexico City and his father from El Paso, with strong family ties in Juarez. He spoke of an upbringing with “the best of both worlds”, routinely visiting family in Juarez, Mexico and living in El Paso. Raul’s personal biography, it seems, is inextricable from his artistic narrative. He recalls, “I think I’ve always had an interest in art. For as long as I can remember I’ve been drawing. As young as I think I could hold a pencil mom would come home and see that I was drawing on paper bags, you know, copying things”. The way in which Raul speaks about and illustrates ‘Latino’ culture is through an individual, experiential lens; as an integral part of a fluid and dynamic personal narrative. He had beautiful things to say about his memories of Juarez and its vibrant imagery: “A lot of my influence, I think, especially now as an adult I look back on it, came from a lot of the visual stimuli that I would receive in Juarez, Mexico...the murals on local businesses, the knickknacks that my grandfather sold at his store, piñatas, leather bags, velvet

²² Interview with Raul Gonzales, October 17, 2008. All subsequent quotations unless noted are from this source.

Elvis paintings, and also comic books. All of that kind of allowed me [to] escape within my own world.”

I would hope that further analyzing Raul’s commentary within the specific framework of my research would not cause me to appear overly assuming; I have already learned just how easy it is to do so. While transitioning from his biographical narrative to his community involvement in Somerville, I called upon him to speak on behalf of Somerville’s ‘Latino art scene’. He responded, “As to your question of the Latino arts community, I’ve never really tried to just generalize myself in terms of just being the Latino artist. I am a Latino and a lot of my artwork speaks through my influence of growing up in a border town, but I’ve never really tried to label myself... I’m just an artist, basically” What I had done, I quickly realized, was exactly what I was trying to contest with my project- I categorized him, because he was Latino, and an artist, as a ‘Latino artist’. Having revisited his commentary, and having since engaged in the topic with other narrators, it is extremely important to elucidate what is meant by “contesting and asserting identity”. While the terms “contesting” and “asserting” evoke an image of active, perhaps even abrasive, resistance, “contesting and asserting identity” also means sharing one’s narrative, or reaching out to one’s community— any means of discursive or artistic self-definition.

Raul has found numerous opportunities to do these things— sharing narratives, engaging with a larger community—right within Somerville. He came to Somerville with his partner Elaine Bay (whose own narrative follows) in 2003, and found the area highly agreeable: “[In] Somerville [it] felt like there was a lot of a mixture, a healthier mixture of old time Somerville folk with the energy of the students. It created a very nice community and I felt very at home in that because [I was] able to tap into a lot of what was going on in the area”. He also commented on the strength, support and visibility of the Somerville Arts Council, the abundance of

alternative spaces, such as Diesel Café, in which to exhibit work, and the strong interest in arts and community among Somerville's residents. In his five years as a resident and active member of the artist community, Raul has participated in many community arts projects, collaborating with myriad Somerville community organizations. He first became involved teaching comic book workshops through the public library network, and has since worked with SAC on a number of community arts initiatives, designing for ArtBeat (Somerville's annual arts festival in July, which I had the pleasure to help organize last summer) and Somerville Access Community Television (SCAT), and participating in the Switchbox project, an initiative to bring art out of the studio and into the streets, by painting a switchbox on Highland Avenue, one of the major streets in Somerville. And, as noted above, Raul has been working with Diego Guzman to organize an East Somerville mural project. When asked about this he explained, "the idea is that the citizens themselves would be responsible for creating this revolving mural, spray paint stencil, whatever it is and in time we hope that it would inspire enough people to continue to add and take away from the mural so it becomes a very organic, ever-changing piece of artwork".

Raul, along with Elaine Bay, is a member of a Somerville-based artist's collective known as The Miracle5. On their website, www.themiracle5.com, the mission statement reads, "The purpose of theMiracle5 is to create miracles for the earth's well being - both imaginings and visions - beyond the power of conventional beliefs. If requested to do so by concerned parties, the miracle 5 will embark on magical missions that aid those of other dimensions. However theMiracle5's major responsibility is the harmony and happiness of earth. The miracle5 will also participate in helping the community and compassion awareness while involved in superfluous responsibilities all for the greater good". The collective was formed by chance, as all of its members are friends who, having worked together, realized that it was easier to produce shows

and exhibitions collectively than individually. Raul explains the Miracle5 as a collective narrative; each artist has developed a persona or a character; Raul's character is cerebot: "CEREBOT was created in the Factory Automata modeled after the interpretation of minorities by American Cartoonists in the 1930s and 40s. CEREBOTS are used the world over to do the man's dirty work. i.e. clean toilets, serve fast food, and clean houses". He explains, "we could take these personalities and kind of find a way to role play through them and also create a singular universe incorporating all of our ideas so each character is representative of all of our personalities and also our visual aesthetic. And by creating these characters we then felt free to dip into each others visual languages". Their works are linked through "folklore, ancient beliefs and rituals... also pop aesthetics such as comic book animation". The result of this collaboration has been the creation of "exhibitions that [weren't] just five people showing. It looked like it was one artist creating the work".

Of his own artistic style, Raul states, "I really love to just make images that I feel are visually captivating and I love combining very graphic elements with some painterly techniques or drawing technique but overall my work seems to be very epic oriented". Thematically, he often plays with elements of American history, including comic book and pop culture histories; "I'm really interested in my drawings in how we're able to dehumanize specific groups in order to feel much more comfortable in destroying them. I'm a big fan of American cartooning and I always find it interesting that whenever we are trying to make someone not completely human, like slaves, or Mexican Americans who clean homes or Chinese or any group of immigrants that come in and we're not really too wanting to accept them we dehumanize them by creating these stereotypical images of them through cartooning or...television or...radio". He showed me some current works in progress depicting racist Disneyesque portrayals of Native Americans. Raul has

also worked with the internet as a medium. One such project he showed me was a website he created, www.superherosproject.com, and a subsequent poster campaign in which he responded to something called the SuperHeroes Project (www.thesuperheroesproject.com) where one artist had selected eighteen Boston based artists to be representatives of the Boston arts community, portraying them as superheroes. Noting the racial and ethnic homogeneity of the selected artists, Raul found the project to be an “interesting social commentary of how easy it is in a city like Boston to dismiss a lot of the other people who are contributing to the arts scene”. He then created a satirical website and awareness campaign in the hopes that in the future individuals will “exercise more responsibility in defining a community of artists and maybe search deeper into trying to get people that actually represent the different facets that create and make a city strong”.



²³ Photograph taken of Raul Gonzales' work taken by author with permission Oct 17, 2008.



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I asked Raul who he imagined was his primary audience, to which he had an interesting and insightful answer, unique to a Somerville context, “the audience becomes people who might not necessarily search for artwork by going into a museum or in a gallery but it becomes part of their daily lives because they’re forced to, or in the habit of walking to work they get to experience it in that way. And I think that’s one of the great things about these public projects is that you in a way become a part of defining the look of the community that you live within”. Noting his overwhelmingly positive experience with Somerville, I asked about Somerville’s allocation of resources. He maintained that there are resources available to those who are willing to put in an effort. I concluded by asking him, referencing my position as a student and member of the Tufts community, whether he felt it was possible to create a more cohesive union in

²⁴ www.superherosproject.com flier by Raul Gonzales

Somerville, to which he had a simple, yet inspiring answer, “Find a way to contribute with what you naturally do best”.

Elaine Bay: “Awareness without Judgment”²⁵

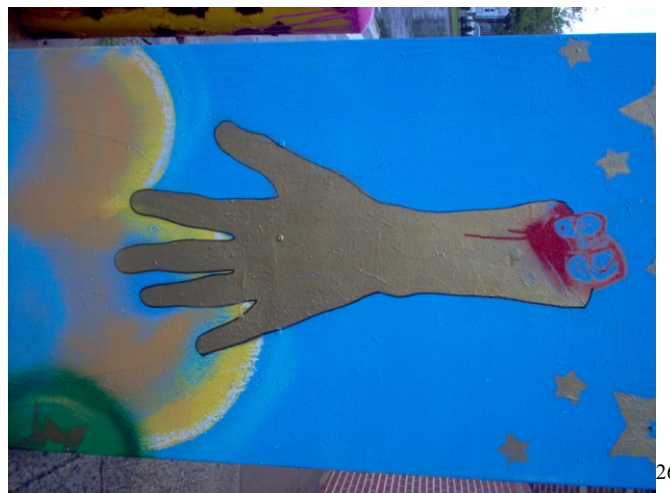
I came upon Elaine Bay during a follow-up with Raul. I was determined to find a female narrator, which had been proving difficult given the confines of my research topic. It would have been absurd to conduct a report so heavily focused on identity using solely male narrators, and I was fortunate that Elaine was so readily compliable during the last leg of my research. As an artist and narrator, Elaine occupies a unique and complex social location. She was born in El Paso, Texas, to Canadian parents, and lived all of her childhood and most of her young adult life fully immersed in Hispanic culture. She spoke of her experiences growing up speaking Spanish, attending Quinceañeras, spending time in Juarez. Also embedded in her personal and artistic narrative is the Canadian culture of her parents and relatives, as well as elements of Chinese culture she later gained exposure to. Elaine’s own multicultural experience translates into a dynamic and fluid understanding of cultural practice and identity. Unfortunately, as discussed above, cultural difference in the United States has been bureaucratized; individuals are made to self-identify racially and ethnically by objective, measurable criterion. For Elaine, her identifiably ‘white’ appearance has been limiting; she recalls being rejected from an exhibit in El Paso because her art wasn’t ‘Latino’ enough, and upon moving to Somerville, she noted how Latino populations she has worked with “don’t consider me Hispanic because of the color of my skin”. Of her own sense of identity, and her experience ‘checking the box’, Elaine states “I don’t look Hispanic but that’s all I know... it’s a weird thing to play with, that I’ve experienced”.

²⁵ Interview with Elaine Bay November 22, 2008. All subsequent quotations unless noted are from this source.

Elaine, in accordance with the other narrators, views cultural, ethnic and racial categorizations as arbitrary social dividers; "People are still fighting about cultures, beliefs, nationality, religions, money, etc. when we should be worrying about trying to save our planet and uniting together as one world (with equality). Our beliefs create boundaries and separation, us verses them. How do you make peace in the world when there's that wall?" It is interesting to inquire, conversely, about the way in which *not* having white skin becomes a barrier to being 'American'. By dint of having white skin, society tells Elaine that she is 'American' (though born of Canadian parents), and that she is not like the people she grew up with, sharing language and culture, because their ancestral histories and phenotypes make them 'Latino'. Keeping the current discussion in mind, I asked Elaine to locate herself in Somerville, her place of work and residence for the past five years: What brought her here? What sort of work has she done in the community? What is her perception of Somerville and its 'vibrant art scene' ?

Elaine, with Raul, moved to Somerville in 2003. They had left El Paso in 2002, spending a year in San Francisco while Raul worked as a cartoonist, then two years in Boston as Elaine attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. They moved to Somerville in her third year of her master's program because of its proximity to Tufts and its relative affordability. Finding the Somerville community an opportune space in which to become established as an artist and community activist, Elaine chose to remain after finishing her masters program. Regarding her role as a local community artist, Elaine too has worked with the Somerville Arts Council, working on neighborhood projects and set designs for Somerville Community Access Television. One such work is a painted switchbox on Broadway, one of Somerville's major thoroughfares, which features an image of a severed hand along with the text "the severed human hand liberates us from our bodies to end our illusions of the world". The hand is a symbol of Hindu

mythology. Residents, however, have complained about the image, calling it ‘morbid’. Elaine believes that this sort of reaction exemplifies the persistence of cultural boundaries: “a lot of people if they don’t know about something they’ll become fearful of it and they won’t look at it at all”. As a resident, she, like the other narrators, notes the Somerville East/West divide between the “Latin area” and ‘students’, and the way in which resources, transportation, access to groceries, etc., are unequally divided and allocated. When I asked her to locate herself, she said it was difficult because “You want to locate yourself by Davis Square because it’s so accessible to transportation, but then it’s so expensive to live there”.



Elaine also notes an inequitable distribution of public art displays among the varying Somerville neighborhoods; “There is a strong division. I feel like in places like Davis Square there’s more art involved and more effort to make things beautiful, and less in the poorer communities, they kind of just leave that area alone” Regarding access to resources and representation of artists and their works and businesses in Somerville, Elaine contends there is a dearth of representation among minority artists and, noting the persistence of artists’ fees, that wealth inevitably plays a factor in who is represented in the Somerville art scene. She laments, “I

²⁶ Photograph of Elaine’s painted switchbox taken by author

don't feel that intermix of the cultures, it just seems more segregated to me, especially coming from El Paso... I don't want to call them 'white people' ...but I've never seen so many white people in my life!" (laughs). Not unlike the previous narrators, Elaine ultimately favors an atmosphere less individually and communally preoccupied with categories and divisions, "I think there's a problem there with people making the division, 'Oh I'm Hispanic' or 'Oh I'm European' ...It doesn't really matter, we're all the same, and we shouldn't be separated by class or demographics".

Beyond the 'innocuous' community art projects and designs she works on, and in addition to offering private instruction in screen-printing, Elaine produces art 'off the radar', occupying both a locally and globally accessible space. Under different personas— most principally "PRINCESSdie" her Miracle5 character," Elaine infiltrates the public realm- locally, through posters, exhibits and other publicly accessible displays, and globally, through the internet- offering images which warp and manipulate things that are 'found' (magazines, calendars, internet websites, popular iconic images, etc) to challenge normative values. Playing on public fears and prejudices, Elaine incorporates irony and absurdity into her works in order to challenge premeditated perceptions and create awareness. She believes that "an artist's responsibility is to reflect the world that's around him" and contends that "I don't create anything new because you can't really create anything new you can just redo it and put it into a different meaning". Utilizing this sort of approach as well as incorporating myriad cultures, symbols and wisdoms, Elaine aims to deconstruct stereotypes and social borders, to address these problems so that they can then be "taken care of and gotten rid of".

One such project we talked about is the "Revolt2Die" website, a satirical replication and reaction to a self-help/spiritual awakening program and website pioneered by Oprah. She was

disturbed by the exclusively Caucasian representation on the site, facetiously stating, “I need to do something so it’s more diverse here”. A great deal of Elaine’s work either uses the internet as a medium or is broadcasted or showcased on the internet. She explained how the internet, as an anonymous and limitless space, provides an opportunity to transgress, contest or perform social and cultural categories. She talks about working with different profiles, as a means to “create whole new people” and “whole new artwork”, stating, “I can be somebody else and I don’t have any problems because it’s not out of character or out of context”. Additionally, as somebody who works both locally and globally (often transgressing these categories by advertising global campaigns in local venues), she has found that with the myriad outlets to communicate and interface available on the internet, reactions to her work, through exchange and dialogue, are an integral part of the work.



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I asked Elaine who her intended audience was, and, ultimately, what values, beliefs or goals motivated her to do this kind of work. The extremely favorable sort of mantra I found in her response was “awareness without judgment”. The images in Elaine’s work are often highly controversial or difficult to digest, frequently garnering backlash. She talked a lot about people’s

²⁷ ©2005-2008 Elaine Bay

premeditated fears, which are so deeply embedded that they cast unconscious prejudice, “a lot of people if they don’t know about something they’ll become fearful of it and they won’t look at it at all... you come in with your glasses on and you’re not going to see it for anything else”. She ultimately contends that “when people are critical or negative it’s a reflection of a fear from within themselves”. Her mission, then, with such jarring images, is to force people to come to terms with these alienating fears, to create an awareness, and ultimately, to create a dialogue to mediate the social borders that plague Somerville, the United States, the world. Elaine concludes that she “can’t wait for the future where nobody knows where they’re from”.

III Commonalities, Conclusions and Reflections

My narrators were abundantly clear that though their ‘Latino’ identity and experiences were integral parts of their personal identities, they were *parts* of their identities, and consequentially *parts* of their artistic narratives. In re-examining all of their narratives, I have come to conclude that the most political acts are personal. More than contesting as one segregated group or as one self-interested individual, they advocate for a more interconnected and interpersonal society. They do this through the messages in their art, as well as by engaging in the community around them: sharing a narrative, creating an image to illustrate the absurdity of something, posting something controversial to get a conversation going, teaching somebody else how to express himself or herself. In Somerville, for them, this has often meant to stop talking about cultural difference as a barrier, or to stop celebrating Latino or immigrant artists exclusively as such and relegating them to specific events or cultural spaces. I had the opportunity to chat with Christopher Poteet, of Rocket Science and East Somerville Main Streets the other day while I was taking pictures of Diego at work. In talking about his work with ESMS, and the debates, tensions and enthusiasms surrounding cultural difference and art, he had a wonderfully concise piece of advice; “Create an arts scene which is reflective of Somerville’s population”.

What I have gained from all of this is, beyond the wonderful opportunity to talk with and learn from these insightful, personable and interesting people is that, as a researcher, it is important to recognize the assumptions and biases that come from working within a certain framework, and that as a Somerville resident, a member of the U.S. population, and a human the

absolute best way to learn about anything is to talk to somebody about it. I'd like to conclude with one of my favorite of Diego's remarks:

“I mean, I'm American, you know, but I'm a Latino too. People, you know, are like ‘well where are you from? Where were you raised?’ Well in this day and age I was born here and f***ing A, let's get to work, hand me this, let's do that. I'm not going to get a Big Mac with you but it's like you need to find meeting points with the other, there needs to be a conversation, take your iphone out of your pocket and take off the plugs, meet the person next to you and figure out where they're from because we're gonna lose touch of that in this technological internet age”

Appendix A: A List of Somerville Organizations/Places

- **Somerville Arts Council**

50 Evergreen Avenue

Somerville, MA 02145

Tel 617.625.6600 ext. 2985

www.somervilleartscouncil.org

Gregory Jenkins, Executive Director

gjenkins@somervillema.gov

- **Welcome Project**

530 Mystic Ave # 111

Somerville, MA 02145

Tel (617) 623-6633

www.welcomeproject.org

Warren Goldstein-Gelb, Executive Director

- **Centro Presente**

17 Inner Belt Road

Somerville, MA 02143

Tel: 617-629-4731, Fax: 617-629-2436

email: centro@cpresente.org

Wilber Renderos: Youth Leadership Program Coordinator

Tel: (617) 629-4731 Ext.230 Wrenderos@cpresente.org

- **Rocket Science Screenprinting**

227 Cedar St

Somerville, MA 02145

Tel: (617) 625-1957

www.rocketsciencscreenprinting.com

- **East Somerville Main Streets**

114 Broadway – Suite 112

Somerville, MA 02145

tel. 617-623-3869

info@eastsovervillemainstreets.org

www.eastsovervillemainstreets.org

- **Community Action Agency of Somerville**

66-70 Union Square, Suite 104

Somerville, MA 02143

Tel: 617-623-7370

www.caasomerville.org

Ms. Melissa McWhinney, Director of Advocacy - mmcwhinney@caasomerville.org

- **Somerville Museum**

1 Westwood Rd

Somerville, MA 02143

Tel (617) 666-9810

www.somervillemuseum.org

Evelyn Battinelli, Executive Director

- **Boston Museum School of Fine Arts**

230 Fenway

Boston, MA 02115

Tel (617) 267-6100

www.smfa.edu

Museum School Dean: Deborah Dluhy

- **Somerville Community Access Television**

90 Union Square

Somerville, MA 02143

Tel 617-628-8826

info@access-scat.org

www.access-scat.org

Wendy Blom, Executive Director director@access-scat.org

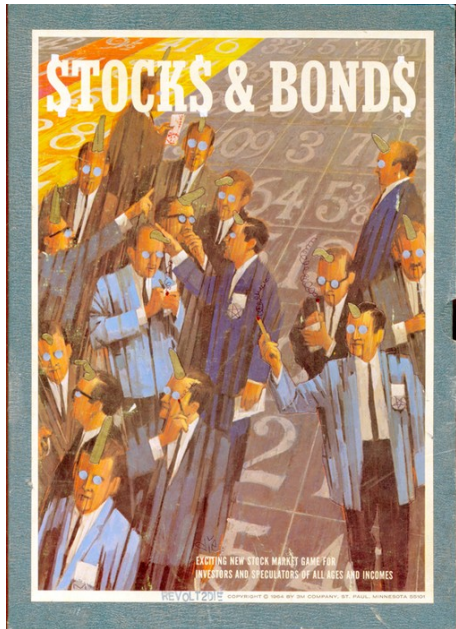
Appendix B: Additional Images

Diego Guzmán



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Elaine Bay- PRINCESSdie



²⁹ ©2005-2009 PRINCESSdie

Raul Gonzales



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The Miracle 5



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³⁰ copyright © RAUL GONZALEZ 2008 www.iheartcerebot.com

³¹ ©2005-2009 theMiracle5™ www.themiracle5.com

APPENDIX C: Diego Guzmán Artist Profile

I first encountered Diego Guzman when we were classmates in Professor Jennifer Burtner's anthropology class, 'Growing Up Latino' in the fall of 2007. A student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Diego was taking academic classes at Tufts University through its partnership with the SMFA. As classmates we were friendly, as comes naturally with Diego's inviting character and openness, and both of us shared an opportunity to talk and work with Tufts' artist in residence Miguel Luciano (though, for obvious reasons, Diego was much more involved than I with Miguel's visit and presentations). I hadn't had any continued contact with Diego after the semester ended. However, when I spoke with Somerville Arts Council director Greg Jenkins about Latino visual artists in Somerville, he immediately offered contact information for Diego, who, previously unknown to me, had worked with Greg on myriad SAC projects. I did so, and Diego complied enthusiastically, inviting me to chat with him at either of his two places of work, Rocket Science Screenprinting and the SMFA, and subsequently granting me two interviews and numerous opportunities to view his artwork. I have chosen to profile Diego not only for the depth, intentionality, skill and intelligence of his artwork, but also because he is an extremely self-aware artist and intellectual willing to share his lived experience (and additionally, listen to yours) through any accessible medium.

Diego was born in Santiago, Chile in November of 1986. At the age of three his parents left for the United States while he remained in Chile, temporarily, under the care of his grandparents. His first context for understanding himself and his place in the world was that of the "formal aesthetic of Chilean regime". He recalls a childhood of strict adherence to traditions and etiquette, receiving his primary education at a 'uniform and tie' English-language

elementary school. From age seven to eight, he spent a year in Miami, attending public school, before returning to Chile with his father a year later following his parents' divorce. Diego speaks most admirably and venerably of his mother, whom he honors as a "warrior" who "did all she could to try to bring me a 'better life'", working selflessly and inexhaustibly to garner the income necessary for Diego's stay in the United States. At the age of ten, Diego immigrated to the United States permanently. With a smug, yet slightly tired humor, he shared with me the details of his "extended stay at Disney world". He noted the way in which, upon arrival, an ability to verbally communicate was the primary criterion for developing social networks. In the Spanish-speaking Miami community where he lived, common language superseded country of origin and other quantifiable differences; he recalls, of his first social encounters, "we didn't really vibe or click but that didn't matter, it's the whole sense of 'there's somebody who knows my language'"³². Having established basic social ties through shared language, Diego was then able to "climb the ladder on an individual base of experience", forming relationships and social spheres which had been founded upon a deeper and more dynamic set of commonalities.

Woven into Diego's biography are the various stages of his artistic development. By the third grade, he had taken an active interest in drawing, cartoons and comic books, noting, as an only child, "I was alone a lot so I had to use my own imagination. Whether I was Asian, Hispanic, African American... I'd probably still be making art". And, for Diego, having come from a position of relative disadvantage, cultivating his talents and intellect was a necessary means of gaining opportunity. Having spent a year in Miami previously, having followed a regimen, as prescribed by his mother, of reading in English an hour a day, and, additionally, having been in the habit of watching English-language films, he was able to master his command of English very quickly. Consequently, he was indoctrinated into his school's gifted

³² Interview with Diego Guzmán November 11, 2008. All subsequent quotations taken from this source.

program, demonstrating a particular interest and excellence in the subject of art. Art was most importantly a means through which to explore his bilingualism and biculturalism: “It was my language...English and Spanish were there but this was my own way of bridging that gap between the two”. Throughout Middle school and high school, art continued to play a primary role in Diego’s life; he described it as a means of “[understanding] myself and my place within the bigger world”. At a difficult and awkward time for most youth, Diego experienced the added complication of being “the Hispanic guy in class”. He had a cousin who lived in a ‘nicer’ part of town, allowing him to attend that district’s middle school, where he developed an acute awareness of the “class gradient” present in his surroundings.

Diego applied and was accepted to a magnet art high school on the opposite side of town, two and a half hours from his home. The difficult commute, (which, recalling my own high school experience, seems an impossible feat for any adolescent high-schooler) did not deter Diego, whose experiences had taught him early on that “life doesn’t come easy”. He credits persistent self-direction and self-motivation for his successes and achievements. In high school, he began to focus and specify his aesthetic preferences. He has always felt an attraction to “outsider art”, which he defines unromantically as “people who just need to do things because they do it”. This translates, within his own body of work, as an interest in urban aesthetic and working with found objects. He states, “I don’t know if it’s a sickness or a hobby; I pick stuff off the ground, I’m attracted to certain colors, certain aesthetic values of paper, dirty, grittiness, things sort of discarded because I’ve always felt discarded in this society”. In this way, art, for Diego, was not a casual or leisure activity, but a means of situating himself; a way of developing and communicating his identity within multiple geographic and cultural contexts.

Diego's upbringing serves as a point of departure for a complex process of identity formation and reformation. He views Miami, as the location of his childhood and teenage years, as a "portal and bridge point to get to other cultures and transgress the Latino vibe". Following high school, Diego moved to the Boston area to attend the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. In the summer of 2007, he began working for Christopher Poteet at Rocket Science Screen Printing, where he still currently works. Between enrolling in Tufts courses for the fall semester and working at Rocket Science, Diego found it most convenient to take up residency in Somerville, where he became an active member of the community, engaging in a number of public art projects and exhibits, collaborating with the Somerville Arts Council and East Somerville Main Streets among other organizations. What is extraordinary in Diego's personal account is the way in which material reality has not seemed to hamper him from doing these types of projects. Diego works full time; in fact, every time I met with him he was at work or coming from work. In addition, he is a full-time student at the SMFA. He does not speak glamorously of his impossible schedule, but just maintains that you have to survive materially, but you also have to do what you love.

Diego is currently finishing his final year at the SMFA and continues to produce an extremely impressive body of artwork, working with a wide range of mediums including collage, silkscreen and graffiti aesthetic, and performance. Recurrent themes and mechanisms in his artwork include the constructions of characters and personas, satirical juxtapositions of images, icons, drawings and text, humor, irony, Americana, mass media and absurdity. His extensive summary reads, "hyperpop saturated iconographic hyperAmericana images in which people can get the satirical and ironic feel of their life in this mass produced, capitalized society". He collaborates with an SMFA colleague and friend ,George Rosa. Sharing common interests,

visions and backgrounds in design, they produce work together, mainly zines and collages, under the aesthetic of “Hobbyhorse”, which has as its logo the head of an avant-garde poet . These visual pieces feature strategically chosen and evocative layers of dated and historical images, superimposed text, iconographic and character images (such as those of Walt Disney), as well as modern photographic elements and visual pieces of pop culture. Such works are intended to take digestible, relatable and recognizable pieces of culture and put a satirical and humorous spin on them, to “comment on what’s going on now”. It is difficult to discuss one isolated work of collage as each is a complex layering of images, materials and text, but features include ‘Americana’ or wartime images, newspapers and official documents, classic cartoons and comic heroes, and exclamatory statements. Diego also does performance work, “I do actions and I feel like actions are also a great way to express ones own frustrations and put oneself into the work”. He describes them as performative actions to demonstrate ideas about identity and of masculinity; “Me as Hispanic American, doing these actions it shows lots of labor and work through exhaustion of the physical activity”.



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Diego summarizes his work; “it’s basically we act as a filter for what’s going on within mass media or American culture as perceived through me, cause, I’m exploring American culture every day”. For him, art is a means of reinterpreting what is unilaterally imposed through institutions and images of mass media and popular culture. He places himself in a very interesting position, that of being an outsider- Chilean, an immigrant, and also very much a part of the melting pot of America, a U.S. citizen. With art he is hoping to, “leave remnants of myself”, to engage people in dialogue, ultimately, to allow others to break down barriers, to reexamine what’s underneath the images, stereotypes, and consumerisms of American capitalist society. “Touches back on the idea of Americana absurdity and of humorous undertone of what life may be, to try to tell people not to take themselves seriously, not to base judgment, because after all we’re all the same and hopefully through artwork we could reach that level of understanding of stupidity, honestly, and how life could be taken so easily and lightheartedly if

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people just smile more and talk to each other more and make a conversation whether about my artwork or about a crack in the sidewalk... it all comes full circle I hope". I asked Diego about plans following his graduation from the SMFA this spring. He had ideas about moving out to San Francisco, notions of starting up a screen printing shop, but ultimately, was content to continue both working to survive, and doing and sharing the things he loves.