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Corrido de Gabrielito

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Corrido de Gabrielito

by

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Report

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my incredible mother, Ruth Aracely Torres, whose love, sacrifice, and hard work allowed my brother Eric and I the freedom to pursue our ambitions. I also want to dedicate this to the rest of my family, friends, and loved ones who continue to show me love, support, and encouragement for the work that I'm making; including my father, Jesus Treviño who took my sister Diandra and I to visit the ranches and shared its stories as we grew up.

Para mis abuelitos con todo cariño, su nieto Jesus

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Abstract

Corrido de Gabrielito

Jesus Gabriel Treviño, M.F.A

The University of Texas at Austin, 2022

Supervisors: Dan Sutherland and John Yancey

This report narrates an incident involving barbed wire at a family ranch that became central to the work I've been making during my time in the graduate program at the University of Texas at Austin. I'll be recounting my experience revising the site and reflecting on the underlining poetics of the story which led to the development of a corrido, a few paintings, and an installation; all of which serve to be commemorative monuments to my family and home along both sides of the Rio Grande.

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Chapter 1: The Run-in with Barbed Wire

When I was about 5 years old, I almost lost an eye. My dad had taken me to visit one of his old friends, nicknamed El Güero Gamboa, who was having a gathering with other cousins on the property of Cotonó where he worked as a ranch hand. This was Rancho La Carrera where my grandpa Don Chuy was born and laid to rest. The cemetery was walking distance from the house where the family stayed, which was across the road from the ruins of the old school. My great grandpa was a well-respected teacher in Matamoros who would teach all the children in the ranchos. As my dad and other men caught up and chatted, I was left to play with cousins my age. I struggled to communicate with them but that didn't stop us from playing and exploring a world that was unfamiliar to me. At some point, we decided to play races, and I could not see well at that time. I went years squinting my eyes to a hazy world because I was too embarrassed to wear my glasses. With my dad to my left, my grandpa's cemetery behind me, my great grandpa's school to my right, and my eyes fixed to the floor, I raced against my cousin towards a tree. Unable to see, I ran full speed, clotheslining myself with barbed wire. One of the barbs pierced me on my brow less than half an inch away from my right eye. I remember being knocked to the ground in slow motion then turning to catch a glimpse of blurry men dropping beers and running towards me as everything went dark. Despite needing stitches, I woke up later that day at my aunt's house with my head wrapped in gauze, a rancho medical treatment courtesy of my father. This very formative moment in my life was the last time I visited the ranches, and I carried it with me when I decided to revisit during the Winter of 2021.

During my time at the University of Texas, I developed a way to fuel a body of work quickly. It began by going to my maternal grandpa's home in the colonia of Cameron

Park to explore and collect material for me to use to construct intuitive art objects in my studio that contained transparent images I made from family photographs and found artifacts. Wanting to build on this generative way of working led me to plan a visit to the string of ranches along the river in Matamoros, Tamaulipas where my paternal family have been since it was known as Nuevo Santander and a part of New Spain. I wanted to figure out how to connect paintings to the physicality of a place and started to think about my work like land, with a capacity to hold traces of the past. In an Art21 video titled “Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes”, Jason Moran, a jazz composer/pianist she collaborated with, spoke about America by saying, “It doesn’t know how to deal with its emotions. It doesn’t know how to deal with its history. It doesn’t want to dig in the ground to know what artifacts are under it.” Fraught with complicated histories, the remnants of movement, struggle, dispute, and violence linger beneath the surface, and I intended to collect material from these ranches with a desire to scratch away at the surface to reveal some of the emotional residue held within the land. I will be recounting that journey while highlighting specific works I’ve made, and then I will conclude by unpacking the incident with barbed wire to understand how it relates to my art practice.

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Chapter 2: Cartographer del Rancho

On January 7th, 2021, we traveled towards Playa Bagdad in Matamoros, Tamaulipas and entered through a road called El Refugio that goes on all the way to the Gulf of Mexico and connects all the ranchitos along the river. It was a really rocky unpaved dirt road, but I was surprised by the new power lines and housing development that had occurred over the years. After a few minutes of violently vibrating in our seats from driving down the road, we were surprised to find El Güero Gamboa eating outside with his family.

It was fitting that the last person I saw at the ranches when I was younger was the first person to greet me upon my return. He came up to the truck window and I put my phone in the door pocket to record the interaction. My dad loosely explained my “school project” to him and asked if he remembered the incident with the barbed wire. We all laughed about it and he told us that Cotoño still lives and owns the land where it happened. However, he wasn’t around as often, and a lot of other people weren’t either. We parted ways and drove towards Rancho La Carrera, passing a small, newly erected chapel with some ranch security in a pickup truck letting us pass through.

Before reaching our intended destination, we made a stop at my dad’s property, which neighbored the location of the “ancestral home” that sat overlooking a body of water that was now all dried up and used to grow crops. We were there to pick up an electric bill from a distant uncle who is renting the house from him. While there, he told us about a different property he was doing labor for and how it was allotted to the owner’s child. I snapped a quick photo of him hunched over, using a stick to illustrate how irregular it was divided on the dirt. That image became the painting “Cartography del Rancho (Campesino)”.



Figure 1: Cartography del Rancho (Campesino)

The title refers to map making, exploring, and charting land but adding “del Rancho” to the end makes the title a little tongue and cheek. It refers to a sort of “rasquache”, make-do-with-what-you-have mentality that connotes class, hybridization, and innovation. The imagery was very iconic, familiar, and human with the down to earth gesture acting as an extension of communication and storytelling. I immediately related the source photo to an image I’d seen in a book at the Blanton; a painting/mural of a man laboriously working the land with a short handle hoe called “Campesino” by California artist Daniel DeSiga. I liked the idea of making my own version of this work, but also the sentiment in the imagery of laboriously communicating histories by pushing mud around with a stick, and how that felt emblematic of what I wanted to do as a painter. Being fond

of the result and having a desire to make something “monumental”, I decided to make a larger scale version with some minor changes. Unfortunately, at some point during the process, my phone’s memory card got corrupted and all my photos from my trip, including that reference photo, were lost. This newer iteration then took on more meaning as I then decided to finish the painting by transplanting my own hands, shoes, and a hat I bought at a thrift store. In this work I embody those that have come before, assuming the role of cartographer and storyteller like my uncle in the original painting, my dad during this trip and artists like Daniel DeSiga from older generations.



Figure 2: Cartographer del Rancho

Chapter 3: La Carrera Fading in the Sun

As we continued on the path, we passed many lots and houses that more often than not seemed abandoned before we made another stop at a house owned by Beto and Lupita Cisneros. Despite not knowing who they were, they immediately recognized me and knew more about my family than I did. They've both grown up and lived there for their entire lives and know more history of the ranches than I could ever hope to, so when we finally reached our destination, I wanted to learn about as much as I could. As we walked the land, a boy named Jose came out of the ranch house and followed us. He was the son of a ranch hand and we later found out his grandpa helped my dad bury his father in the cemetery a few paces away.

I asked my father to reintroduce me to the space and share some of those stories, so he was naming where things were in the past and sharing what he knew about what took place there. At some point I snapped a quick photo, which became the painting titled "Recounting Histories del Rancho Fading in the Sun". The two figures stand at a distance from each other, with one in profile up front and the second younger figure at a distance staring at the other. Their shadows are deep purple and stretch across the ground mixing in with shadows of trees in the same hue contrasting with an orange yellow ground in the lower half of the painting. Approaching the top, the figures and scattered cacti defuse and become overwhelmed by a muted yellow ambience with cracks on the surface that drain some of the paint from the surface. The candid moment in the image appealed to me with the clear hierarchy between generations, as well as the sentiment in the older figure passing down knowledge and sharing stories about the land. This moment and gesture are complicated by the painting cracking, dematerializing, almost fading away.

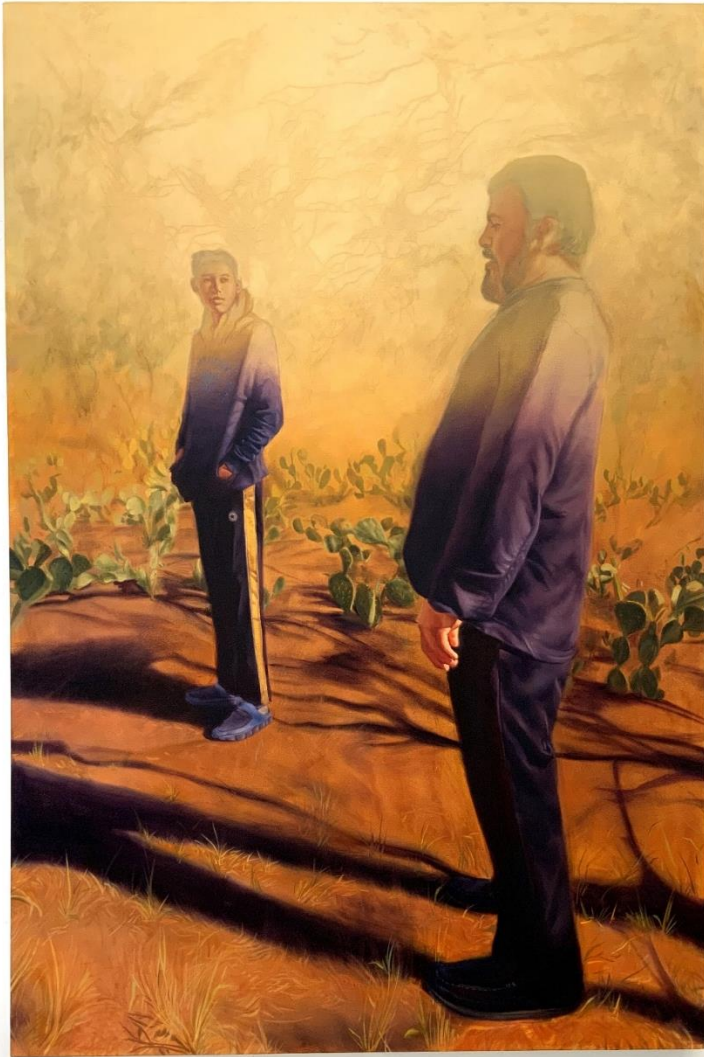


Figure 3: Recounting Histories del Rancho Fading in the Sun

Part of the painting process I developed while leading up to this work involved removing paint with a textured rag. I'd lay liberal marks down, wipe away, then push back and forth until it was in an agreeable spot. I wanted it to feel like the landscape was active, agitated or slipping away as if being forgotten or discarded. The cracking on the painting was an unintentional result of possibly wiping with too much pressure on a surface of an unstable ground. The already primed canvas was left over from previous semesters, and I

reclaimed it adding my own layers of acrylic gesso on top. My guess is that the initial priming layer was oil based which didn't bode well with my acrylic addition on top. Despite the archival mystery of how it will hold up, it was one of the first times I was forced to embrace an element outside of my control in the work, which ended up being an exciting happy accident.



Figure 4: Detail of Recounting Histories Fading in the Sun

Chapter 4: Whispers from the Cistern

Next to the ranch house was a piece of land where I found a cistern during our walk. It was almost inaccessible due to the thick brush and cacti guarding the structure. A cistern's usual function is to catch and store rainwater but as I learned about this particular one being where my grandpa and all the cousins would meet to hang out and play as they were growing up, I began to wonder what else that construction could have captured. Looking down the hole, I found it filled with dirt and dead things, but I imagined echoes of life from the past.

I wanted to recreate the structure from memory as a sort of monument to the location and my grandpa. The first iteration would act as a display for objects that I found that resembled its current contents including bones, shells, and rusty barbed wire. The structure was fragile and threatened to collapse as it was made from branches that I collected near the UT art building and held together by an entire roll of fiber string that resembled the spider webs that cut through the space of the hollow shaft. The cistern has an odd structure in that it looks like a cake with two tiers. At the rim, the base of the two cylindrical shapes, and on the floor of the installation, I placed large photos I took with my camera phone of the hole that were printed on newsprint and made transparent with baby oil. The objects then rested on the floor level of the structure on top of the image and underneath the webs of string holding the thing together. The whole thing resembled a telescope, which was intended to almost act like a microscope in order to analyze the artifacts.



Figure 5: The Cistern

Not completely happy with the result, I decided to try to make it again. With a lot of help from the woodshop assistant Andy Forbes, fellow grad student Austin Swearingin, and Professor Eric McMaster, this version was made from large sheets of plywood with the circular shapes cut by a CNC router that were then held up by boxes that allow it to handle weight. I wanted it to be portable with the ability to disassemble and assemble easily so I used a ton of pocket screws. The interior framing is covered with malleable 1/8 inch

MDF and the interior is lined with a charcoal drawing that uses archival family photographs as source material. For this attempt, I wanted an actual structure in the space to interact with and be social around like it was for my grandpa. It could act like a bench to look at paintings but then upon hearing low volume sounds of conversation, ranch ambience, drops of water, and most importantly a recording of a song I made coming from inside, it would hopefully prompt the visitors to investigate and discover what else is being held within.



Figure 6: Whispers from the Cistern.

Chapter 5: Corrido de Gabrielito

The song playing in the cistern is a corrido, a type of Mexican folk song that I wrote about my experience. The word “corrido” comes from “correr”, which means to run in Spanish. The Smithsonian online shop selling a Mexican corrido cd quotes someone named Henry Cowell by saying that word indicates a “running narrative” in the song without breaks or choruses. Evolved from Spanish romances, corridos were traditionally written about tragic events from wars and violent occurrences that were documented and passed around orally via song. In his book, “With a Pistol in His Hands”, folklorist and border studies academic Americo Paredes talks about corridos mythologizing the subjects in their songs which evolve past the initial intention of telling the news to become exaggerated folkloric tales and act like a monument to an event or figure in history. Utilizing ideas about border ballads outlined by Paredes, the idea of corridos being a “running narrative, as well as loosely following the parameters of the songwriting structure, I documented my story about running into barbed wire.

The song includes an introduction of the scenario that hints at some bloodshed, the telling of the incident plainly and with attention to name dropping family members and locations to set up the scene, and lastly, a farewell that in this case shares a moral or lesson. Most of the song is written in Spanish with help from my father and my artist friend Jesse Burciaga, but then it shifts to English once “Gabrielito” hits the barbed wire in the story. I took the song to my other friend Cande Aguilar, a fellow Brownsville painter, who also happens to be a renowned award winning Conjunto/ Tejano musician, to improvise accordion as I tried to sing the mostly Spanish lyrics as best as I could. The attempts were recorded with the intention of playing it from truck speakers to the land as a monument to

that event, and at the end of our visit, before we drove back to Brownsville, we did just that. The lyrics are as followed:

Esta es un corrido
de Gabrielito del Valle
Chocó en un alambre de púas
Y llegó a conocer a su sangre

En la finca de cotono
Del Rancho La Carrera
Fueron a ver un amigo
Lo llamaban El Güero Gamboa

En ese rancho
Estaba la escuela
Todos los tíos contaban
De donde El Profe enseñaba

Los niños se divirtieron
Jugando las carreras
Donde nació Don Chuy
Su abuelo que no conocía

Debajo de su árbol
Genealogico

No mira hacia arriba
Y ya merito queda tuerto

El Alambre de puas
A Gabrielito domo
Corriendo se golpeó la cabeza
Cerca del ojo se gancho

Passed out he didn't feel pain
They put bandages on his face
A scar that will never erase
Runs deeper than he can outpace

Before I go, I should say
If you run blindly, you'll pay
Had to learn that the hard way
Almost 20 years too late

Chapter 6: Farewell

Every time I reflect on that experience, the myth of it grows. It took place when I was pretty young, and I've come to find the story I retell is distorted and riddled with holes. So "Corrido de Gabrielito" has become an allegorical tale about a refusal to see and pay attention, running blindly without acknowledging the history and people that make up who I am, and ultimately paying a price for it. Revisiting the family ranches and my past through

this song has shifted my practice into an excuse to reconnect with my family. The work I've been making, including the ones I've highlighted in this report, address the loss I've experienced when thinking about an unnatural boundary that has kept me away, as well as the displacement and erasure of histories which continue to affect my relationship to family and my sense of identity. I feel privileged to have this opportunity to share my story and recreate the space of my creation myth through this report and thesis exhibition as a treatment to those old wounds.

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