

# **Stony Brook University**



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**In Search of the Extra Life**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Jose Antonio Ojeda**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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for the Degree of

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in

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Abstract of the Thesis

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In this thesis I examine the progression of my artistic practice to be one that is both culturally and community oriented. By being introspective about my own roots and heritage, I become informed to draw connections between the symbols and icons of ancient and modern civilizations. Small metal cutouts and large-scale installation become my primary methods of creating. In my projects I seek to understand the meaning and limits of memory, and the power of building community. The end result is the search for eternal life; The desire to prolong the existence and beauty of humanity far into the future.

## **Dedication Page**

Dedicated to my friends, family, and to living forever.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

During my time at Stony Brook University, my artistic practice has developed into a means of asking and answering questions about the human journey. Using myself as a subject, and as a sample representing various groups of people, I became introspective to the various elements that comprised my existence.

As a child growing up, I quickly became captivated with the story of a workingman of humble beginnings who became suddenly displaced into a strange new land. The land was a curious mixture of the primordial and the modern times, where dinosaur-like monsters and medieval castles covered the landscape. The man often found himself facing beasts superior in size, all the while on a journey of the heart. The only way for him to compete in this world and continue moving forward was to physically break through the walls of the society in search of aid and enlightenment. Behind the brick and mortar he finds golden treasures, potent medicinal plants, and portals that allow him to more easily navigate through these foreign lands.

Similar classical stories have been written and passed down through the centuries. The way that this narrative manifested itself early in my life was through *The Super Mario Bros.* video game for the Nintendo Entertainment System. The console game was released in 1985, coincidentally the same year I was born. To date, the game has sold more than 40 million copies worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Over 25 years of sequels, spin-offs, television shows, and countless other forms of brand marketing have cemented the series as a staple of popular culture. Aside from providing years of playable entertainment, I have come to realize that the Super Mario Bros. gaming empire continues to be a central influence to my artistic practice as it was pervasive during the development of my elemental thought process.

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<sup>1</sup> "Super Mario Sales Data: Historical Unit Numbers for Mario Bros on NES, SNES, N64...". GameCubicle.com. Retrieved 27 August 2008.

My artwork deals greatly with the excavation of identity – striving to resurrect an ancient history and heritage within a modern context. Within this broader theme, my focus has been on metal work directly inspired by Pre-Hispanic metallurgy. Combining these with the pop cultural icons of my youth, I attempt to bend perceptions of time and begin to make syncretic connections. Identity has strong ties to community. I am interested in the power of community and how different communities can share and learn from the cultural and historical roots of their collective identities. Furthermore, I am investigating the power of the Internet, social media, and technology as a method of expanding the reach of community and extending the limits of the flesh.

I will use the framework of the *Super Mario Bros.* series to introduce the evolution of my practice and philosophy. Such a reference could be argued to be trivial and frivolous, but in the context of our modern and increasingly digital culture, its relevance and weight should not be taken lightly. The generation of children who grew up with such video games are now adults and active members in our society, all influenced with the legends, lessons, and visual vocabulary inherent in such games. Even the 8-bit musical jingle that starts off the game is an instantly recognizable staple that brings us back to that moment of interaction with this foreign, and now historical, world. Just as an obsidian arrowhead is reminiscent of an ancient culture, an 8-bit pixelated star with eyes harkens memory to ‘The Mushroom Kingdom.’



## II. SYMBOLS

Icons, symbols, simple graphical representations, are the way through which we communicate as humans. What more is the alphabet of any language than a series of symbols that represents a phonetic sound or concept? As early as the first known written language - the hatched cuneiform markings of the ancient Sumerians - humanity has been recording and communicating their ideas through symbols. Symbols are important because they are unique to their serving community. They become inherent cultural identifiers. Have you ever walked into a neighborhood where all of a sudden the signs and markings were in a different language? You understood that there was a cultural or ethnic shift in the community space. The spread of the English language worldwide is an interesting indicator that we are progressing towards a global community. Language is only one of many mechanisms that become identity markers for a community or civilization.

My parents were both born in Ecuador and later immigrated to the United States. I grew up speaking both English and Spanish, and was instilled with the cultural practices of both the United States of America and Latin America. In high school and college especially, I began to learn more about my Latin American cultural roots. Going back to the concept of symbols as cultural identifiers, I started to investigate the ancient symbols of Latin America – as a means of figuring out my own identity, especially in environments where I was different or ‘other’. My university was comprised of students who were predominantly white Anglo-Saxon and of a higher socio-economic status than I came from. It was 49 percent white, 14 percent Asian, 8 percent black, 8 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Native American. Much different from my hometown of the Bronx, New York, where the Hispanic population was over 51 percent. Going

to school and experiencing that paradigm shift in the ethnic makeup of the population of my peers and surroundings forced me to be more introspective about my own cultural identifiers.

Latin America has an immense number of symbolic cultural identifiers, but the focus of my attention has turned to those ancient, Pre-Hispanic, or indigenous in nature. However, my earliest encounter with Latin American symbols was one more colonial and national in nature, the coat of arms of Ecuador, called “El Escudo de Armas de Ecuador”, which is depicted on the national flag. My grandfather was a farmer and businessman, but an artist by hobby. In his house there was a framed drawing of the Ecuadorian escudo that he had made in the early 80’s. It was because of this drawing that I first realized that being an artist would be acceptable in my family, and in my culture. Growing up a first generation American sometimes carried the burden of “socially acceptable” paths to success – i.e. becoming a lawyer, doctor, or another well paying and better “classed” profession (in the eyes of immigrant families). But if my grandfather was an artist, even as a hobby, that was precedent enough for me to pursue my passions.

*El Escudo de Armas de Ecuador*, like many coat of arms, is a national symbol and cultural identifier composed of a conglomeration of other symbols and historical references. This was my introduction to seeing different symbols combined into a larger graphical composition. The center is an oval, framing an Ecuadorian landscape with Mount Chimborazo in the background, and a river flowing downward into the foreground. Above the mountain is a golden sun that is framed by various astrological symbols that symbolize the duration of the March Revolution of 1845. This is also one of my first encounters with sun imagery, which will be explored later in this thesis. Framing the oval are four Yellow, Blue and Red flags of Ecuador, and atop sits a condor with wings stretched out. Every icon and detail of el Escudo has specific meaning and symbolism connected to the idea of Ecuadorian history and patriotism. In my early

attempts to learn about my roots, and be more like my grandfather, I repeatedly copied El Escudo until it became a memorized image.

The shift of attention and interest to more pre-colonial Latin American symbolism was largely influenced by the work of ‘Big Three’ Mexican muralists in the early 1900’s, especially Jose Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera. Orozco was very influenced by Symbolism, and was perhaps the most complex of the three. His fresco, *The Epic of American Civilization* became the gateway to the development of the themes of my practice. The mural is composed of twenty-four individual scenes/panels depicting a narrative of Latin American history, beginning with the migration of the Aztecs into central Mexico, to the arrival and influence of the Spanish, to the development of modern industrial society. There is a clear, linear progression to the piece. It is arranged in such a way that there is foreshadowing of future events and lasting remnants and reminders of the past. This condensing of time fascinated me, the idea of being able to jump back and forth between eras so quickly; to more easily recognize the influence that the past has on the present.

Rivera was also inspirational because of his personal journey and development as an artist. Rivera was born in Mexico where he began his artistic studies at the age of 10. Starting at the age of 21 he traveled through Spain, France, learning about the new school of art, witnessing the emergence of cubism and Post-Impressionism. In Italy, he studied Renaissance frescoes. He later returned to Mexico in the 1920s to become involved in the government sponsored Mexican mural program planned by Vasconcelos, Minister of Education. While I have not traveled to Europe for study, for an urban youth in New York City, going away to college in New Hampshire is a considerable journey. Rivera traveled to Europe to hone his craft and bring it back to his native land. Having traveled to college and then graduate school, I feel the

responsibility of bringing my new found knowledge and talents back to my local community in the Bronx and New York City. The muralists, through the employment of fresco, were able to bring a level of craft and sophistication to the public realm that otherwise was not accessible.

### III. AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

To understand one's roots is to understand one's future. I am constantly reminded and influenced by the Hermetic concept of "As above, so below." "In accordance with the various levels of reality: physical, emotional, and mental, this relates that which happens on any level happens on every other."<sup>2</sup> What happens on the macro level is reflected at the micro scale. What happens in the past is referenced in the future, as seen in *The Epic of American Civilization*. Thus, to understand my own identity and future, I had to first map out my past. This concept is central to my thesis of "resurrecting an ancient history in a modern context." We cannot move forward without first understanding where we came from. Imagine the "root" structure below a tree, and think of how much it resembles the branching structure above. The Yggdrasil Tree is an example of such a tree, commonly found within Norse cosmology. The branches are often shown extending into the heavens while the roots anchor the tree to earth. "As in the heavens, so on earth. This dualistic philosophy is applied throughout religion, alchemy, and mysticism."<sup>3</sup> In order to understand the future of our selves, our community, and humanity, we have to take a careful look at our "roots."

I also apply this concept in relation to the varying scale of my artwork. On the one hand, I have been creating larger scale installations comprised of sculptures or murals that are larger than 10 feet in height and width. At the same time, I have been working on very small, palm-of-your-hand sized pieces out of metal. The practice of one method often informs the other. The vocabulary of cutting and carving is the method that ties both extremes of scale together. The practice of cutting metal on the small scale very much only involves the hands and wrists, while

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<sup>2</sup> Garstin, E.J. Langford (2004). *Theurgy or The Hermetic Practice*. Berwick: Ibis Press.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Irvin & Andrew Rutajit, *Astrotheology & Shamanism: Christianity's Pagan Roots* (Kentucky, Gnostic Media, 2009), 3.

working at a larger scale involves the entirety of the body for range of motion. The awareness of both methods while working back and forth between them makes them both stronger.

#### IV. PAN-AMERICANISM

My direct heritage is that of Ecuador – the history of that specific country, the Andes Mountains, and the contained indigenous civilizations. However, the focus of my art has taken a more Pan-American lens. I do not only focus on the symbolism and iconography of Ecuador, but rather of Latin America as a whole. It stems once again from my search for a cultural identifier in college and beyond. I am Ecuadorian, but even more so, I am Latino. Latinidad is a very American phenomenon, evolving from the term ‘Hispanic’ that was used beginning in the 1970’s. Hispanic was a term coined by the US government that was used for census purposes. “A Latino or Latina is a person considered part of an ethnic background that is traditionally Spanish-speaking, especially a citizen of, or an immigrant from, a Spanish-speaking country.”<sup>4</sup> Cultural anthropologist Arlene Davila describes this notion of Latinidad as the “out-of-many, one-people’ process through which “Latinos” or “Hispanics” are conceived and represented as sharing one common identity.<sup>5</sup> As one who searches to find and build communities, I found myself gravitating to a more “Latino” community in college, and thus was able to associate with a more Pan-American historical foundation. As a Latin American and Caribbean Studies major I became familiar with the history, traditions, and artwork of the entire Latin American region. I held it with such high regard and reverence as if it were my own. “Latinidad ranges from the very local scale of the individual and his or her immediate zone of inhabitation—a block, a neighborhood, a street—to nations and world regions that are hemispheric in scale.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, for years to come, the

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<sup>4</sup> United States Census Bureau (March 2001). "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin". United States Census Bureau.

<sup>5</sup> MORRISON, AMANDA MARIA. "Chicanas and “Chick Lit”": Contested Latinidad in the Novels of Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez." *Journal of Popular Culture* 43.2 (2010): 309-329.

<sup>6</sup> Price, Patricia L. "Cohering Culture on Calle Ocho: The Pause and Flow of Latinidad." *Globalizations* 4.1 (2007): 81-99.

symbols of the pre-Hispanic societies would follow me through various locations and communities, informing my work, and helping to define my identity.



## V. PUBLIC & COMMUNITY ART

“Community arts” was a term coined in the 1960’s to describe art practices in which a professional artist collaborates with a local group of people who have varied to little artistic experience or engagement. I first became involved with community-arts in 2005 through my mentor, Ernesto Cuevas Jr. At the time, he was leading a series of workshops in colleges, community centers, and after school programs that each resulted in the creation of a mural. The workshops engaged the participants in a discussion about various issues that were facing their community. After the discussion, with the help of facilitators, the community participants would draw out sketches and symbols that reflected what they wanted expressed in the mural. Using all of their ideas and imagery, a final design was composed and then executed by all members of the community over a series of days. I had the privilege of working with Cuevas on a number of projects, inspired to continue working with the community in artistic ventures.

This method of activism and community engagement though the arts has its roots to artists such as Suzanne Lacy, who established New Genre Public Art, “a socially engaged, interactive cultural practice that deploys a range of traditional and nontraditional media in public spaces for public audiences, intersecting activism, education, and theory.”<sup>7</sup> This movement began with Lacy’s work *Three Weeks in May*, which aimed to draw attention to the anti-rape movement in the United States in the early 70’s, ending the silence about rape in American culture. In developing her work, Lacy led a series of women’s group sessions that consisted of rituals and storytelling that allowed students and artists to share their experiences with each other

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<sup>7</sup> Fryd, Vivien Green. "Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks in May: Feminist Activist Performance Art as 'Expanded Public Pedagogy'". NWSA Journal, Spring2007, Vol. 19 Issue 1, p23.

and the audience.<sup>8</sup> Cuevas employed a similar strategy with the developmental workshops that occurred before mural projects. Lacy learned that art could become politically meaningful by engaging directly in life and addressing significant issues. For Lacy, the issue she wanted to address in the public sphere was the lack of attention paid to rape and sexual violence. In the development of Cuevas' murals, each community had their own issue that they wanted to shed a spotlight on – whether it was gang activity, drug use in their community, lack of education, issues of diversity, or student rights. The German poet and playwright, Bertold Brecht developed “epic theatre” to encourage audiences to think rather than just be involved in the story, forcing them to reflect critically.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Lacy, and future generations of socially conscious artists like Cuevas, very much recognized the importance of public participation and engagement with the work.

Community and Public art also helps to address the issue of the accessibility of art. “Even in large urban centers where cultural resources are usually plentiful, for many students (especially at the entry level), art museums are the quintessential, unapproachable, ivory towers, and it takes sustained consideration and multiple museum visits to convince them otherwise.”<sup>10</sup> Alternative methods and spaces have evolved to improve and increase the access of art to the public, including the creation of artist run gallery, utilizing local storefronts in conjunction with the community, and commandeering unused spaces. The recent advent of the Internet as a new space of social engagement creates a new realm of possibilities for public art. The Internet is

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<sup>8</sup> Fryd, Vivien Green. "Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks in May: Feminist Activist Performance Art as 'Expanded Public Pedagogy'". NWSA Journal, Spring2007, Vol. 19 Issue 1, p24.

<sup>9</sup> Fryd, Vivien Green. "Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks in May: Feminist Activist Performance Art as 'Expanded Public Pedagogy'". NWSA Journal, Spring2007, Vol. 19 Issue 1, p26.

<sup>10</sup> Cher Krause Knight, “Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism”. Blackwell Publishing, UK. 2008. p 49.

thought to be a “public” space to begin with, but this reality is becoming less and less obvious as more regulation, privacy restrictions, and policing come into play.

## **VI. METALLURGY**

Gold was considered one of the sacred metals to the ancient indigenous peoples of Latin America. In our modern society, Gold and other precious metals are symbols of wealth, economic status and opulence. In ancient times, Gold had more religious and ceremonial purposes. I became attracted to the metal work of the indigenous peoples of Colombia and the Andes for this very reason. Their gold work told the story of their belief system and of their values.

I initially began making metal cutouts in 2004. I had just joined a Fraternity at my undergraduate institution, and part of the culture was to wear pendants of the letters or symbols associated with one's respective Fraternity/Sorority. I utilized the jewelry studio that was on campus and began making fraternity related paraphernalia for myself out of metal, mainly brass. I was attracted to brass because it was closest in value to gold, especially when polished. I then continued to make more related metal cutouts for my friends and other members of Greek-lettered organizations. At the time I was unaware, but these were the beginnings of my having a specific role in a certain community as "creator," and "facilitator" of identity and passage.

I never fully considered these pieces to be "jewelry" – that is to say, as simply adornment. Just as I did, the wearers wore them to display their pride and belonging to their respective organization. The associations to gold (or other precious metals) made them that much more desirable as pieces of value, ranking, and status in their community. The metal pendants, also referred to as "tikis," have a very specific role and use in the university "Greek" system and community. Often times, these pieces would be created as a gift for a new member, someone who has recently been inducted. I find myself actively playing a role of bringing them into this "new" life.

With this new skill, I also began to replicate many of the shapes and symbols of pre-Hispanic societies. This allowed me to feel a connection with that ancient past, with the practice of using metal, and then continuing the use of metallurgy for social and ceremonial purposes. The Tumi, for example, was a sacrificial ceremonial knife that was used in pre-Incan cultures. They were created for various rituals and the burials of elite members of society.<sup>11</sup> By replicating and modifying such symbols in the present day, I am actively participating in an ancient practice of ceremony, craft, and heritage.

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<sup>11</sup> Birmingham Museum of Art (2010). *Birmingham Museum of Art: Guide to the Collection*. London, UK: GILES. pp. 91.

## VII. GAME SYMBOLISM

In the process of creating metal pieces and deciding which images to create, iconography from the *Super Mario Bros.* continued to arise. The *Star*, the *Mushroom*, the *Goomba*, and the *Raccoon Mario* were just some of the imagery that I created. It was only later that I realized the importance of those images in contextualizing my work and their importance in society.

The *Mushroom* became one of the most important images. Adapted from a pixelated 8-bit image and cut from brass sheet, the mushroom represents concepts similar to those utilized in ancient times. In the *Super Mario Bros.* series, the ‘mushroom’ is a prize item that is often hidden behind a block of bricks – something that must be sought out and is not immediately visible. When attained and taken within oneself it had very specific benefits. A RED mushroom allowed the character to grow in size. This is reminiscent to stories such as *Alice in Wonderland* in which ingesting a substance would result in magically growing in size. It allowed the player to be able to have a fair chance at existing in this larger than life society. This growing in size added a layer of invulnerability from your enemies. It was like a one-time-use shield, but once you were attacked you returned to your normal and inferior human size. There also existed a GREEN mushroom, that when attained gave one the benefit of an *extra life*. If you were to die in the game play, extra lives would allow you to begin again and continue on your course. The search for these mushrooms (and other items) was a central part of the game because you knew that you needed the aid.

The mushroom image was very curious in that it had a red (or green) cap with white spots. This is very similar to, and arguably a direct reference to the *Amanita Muscaria* species of mushroom. The *Amanita Muscaria* is commonly known as being one of the mushroom varieties that has hallucinogenic properties once ingested. Real life’s “magic” mushroom, now

represented in a widely popular video game. When ingested in real life, it is said that the mushroom causes visions and a certain level of enlightenment and awareness. The Codex Magliabechiano is a pictorial Aztec codex that was created in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish colonial period. Depicted in one of the illustrations is the image of a shaman eating psilocybin mushrooms and a spirit standing behind him, speaking through the mushroom.<sup>12</sup> The shaman would hold very strong plant knowledge and often used medicinal plants for healing and powerful entheogenic substances in ceremonies. The word shaman likely derived from an ancient Tungusic word *saman*, which means “the one who knows.”<sup>13</sup> The ancient shamans of Siberia would gather mushrooms for the entire community and help guide them through the experience. It is no surprise that the correlation in game play is that of ‘growth’, often referred to as a ‘power-up.’ My attraction to and use of the *Super Mario Bros.* mushroom image is not to promote drug use or the *Amanita Muscaria* itself, but rather to show how the *mushroom* is now a popular image of empowerment, especially with the generation exposed to the game’s culture. It continues to perpetuate a new vocabulary of imagery that represents ideas and concepts similar to those of ancient times.

The *Star* is another image used in the video game series. Very similar to the mushroom, it is another prize item that is hidden behind the bricks of the landscape. Pixilated and personified with two eyes, the 5-sided *Star* gave the player the benefit of temporary invincibility. After catching it, the player would begin to glow like a strobe light and for several seconds, no creature could harm the player. *Super Mario Bros.* is not the first (nor the last) game to create and reinvent symbols of power and invincibility, but this particular series was able to do so with such

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<sup>12</sup> Carrasco, David. (2001). *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*. Oxford.

<sup>13</sup> Jan Irvin & Andrew Rutajit, *Astrotheology & Shamanism: Christianity’s Pagan Roots* (Kentucky, Gnostic Media, 2009), 48.

simple and basic shapes – largely due to the limitations of 8-bit graphic technology. It is the simple geometric nature of the shapes that draws a relationship to those of Pre-Hispanic cultures.

*Raccoon Mario* is an image taken directly from the cover of the sequel *Super Mario Bros.*

3. It depicts the hero, Super Mario, flying through the air, arms outstretched, with a raccoon-like tail that he has grown. This is another pivotal image to understanding my practice. It extends beyond the use of ‘symbol’ because it depicts the character himself. The symbol for that particular power would have been a ‘leaf’. What this image begins to portray is the “power” in action. More so, it introduces the concept of hybridity – the joining of one entity with another being, in this case an animal, for self-advancement. The ancient peoples of Latin America also believed in this concept – using hybridity to equate powerful attributes. It was common for the metallurgy of ancient Columbian cultures to depict the image of a human combined with that of a bird or a bat, a winged creature. The Tolima peoples of Colombia, for example produced figured pendants with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic references, which were worn about the neck suspended from cords or thongs. The winged imagery relates the figures to shamanism, enlightenment, and of being able to transcend this world and be closer to the gods.<sup>14</sup> In a similar way, *Raccoon Mario* begins to transcend his own world, aided by his achieved animal attributes. Taking this view towards these symbols, the next step would be to unlock their power and meaning and relate them to my own world.

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<sup>14</sup> Costumed figure pendant [Colombia; Tolima] (1979.206.497)". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000





*Mushroom, 2009*

2.5" x 2"



*Star, 2009*

2" x 3"



*Raccoon Mario, 2009*

4"x4"

## VIII. PROJECTS

### i. *Maieutics*

The First Year MFA group exhibition was one of the first moments where the metal cutouts started having an active conversation with themselves and their “wearer”, which in this instance, was myself. The name of our first year group show (part 1) was “Maieutics.” The name was picked for its definition of “the art of giving birth (i. e., clearness and conviction) to ideas, which are conceived as struggling for birth.” This show was our “birth” within our new community at the university. *Maieutics* also means “relating to or resembling the Socratic method of eliciting new ideas from another,” which becomes very relevant to my metal cutouts and finding the right context for them.

For the “Maieutics” show, I created an installation composed of three elements. The first - *Identity Pectoral* - was a wearable sculpture, created from piecing together a variety of cut out metal elements and images. The sculpture was hung from the ceiling using poly-filament, positioned at the height that it would be worn on my person, at my shoulder/chest level. The majority of the pieces were cut from brass and fastened together with brass wire and jump rings. The imagery for the individual pieces came from the various elements in my life that I considered comprising my “identity.” Starting from the middle, there is a self-portrait from 2004, below, an adapted shield of my alma mater, above that, a pre-Hispanic indigenous symbol from Colombia. To the left and right are portraits of my grandfathers from my mother and father’s side respectively. Below my right grandfather is the *mushroom* symbol. Above my right grandfather is the *Racoon Mario* image. Diagonally to the right is a depiction of my baby shoes.

I also included a few Adinkra symbols. Adinkra are visual symbols which have origins in Ghana and West Africa. I was drawn to this style of symbol because they represent objects that

“encapsulate evocative messages that convey traditional wisdom, aspects of life or the environment.”<sup>15</sup> In *Identity Pectoral*, I included the Adinkra symbol “Denkyem” – The Crocodile, the symbol of adaptability. The Adinkra to the right of that is a bird life image that represents ‘Sankofa’ – “ ‘return and get it’ symbolizing the importance of learning from your past.”

Above my left grandfather is an illustration of ‘Little Mac’ fighting ‘King Hippo’ from the video game “Mike Tyson’s Punch-Out!” It is a testament to overcoming adversity and personal physical disadvantage. To the left of that is *El Escudo de Ecuador*. The top of the entire piece is lined by a collection of small man-like figures strung together, meeting at the center with the words “Desafio,” which is a nickname that translates from Spanish into “Defiant and overcoming challenge.”

Collectively, all of these cutouts came together to represent various aspects of my identity. They speak about personal history, heritage, interests, and character attributes. The *Identity Pectoral* was created to be worn. It can be interpreted in the context of similar pieces made of metal throughout history. People of importance, such as kings or priests, wore such pectorals to display their status. Similarly, the ranking of a warrior or soldier could be portrayed. Such a piece could also serve as a form of protection, or armor.

*Identity Pectoral* also begins to address the idea of time. The piece references an article of antiquity, yet the symbols that make it range from Pre-Hispanic to present day contemporary.

The second component of my installation for the *Maieutics* show was an ink block print entitled *My Inheritance*. I had developed a unique method of making block prints, using my metal pieces themselves, instead of wood, linoleum, or generally used material. They produced a

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<sup>15</sup> Appiah, Kwame Anthony (1993). *In my father's house : Africa in the philosophy of culture* (1. paperback edition 1993. ed.). New York: Oxford University Press

very crisp image in addition to a deep embossment into the paper for added dimension. For this print I used the portraits of my grandfathers, the *Escudo* of Ecuador, and two self-portraits – one from when I was a toddler and the other when I was in college. Through the circular arrangement of the images I wanted to show the progression of a life cycle – going from an infant, to an adolescent, to an adult, and then a senior. It also showed the importance of nationality as being part of heritage and identity.

It is also influenced by the ancient symbol of the Ouroboros, which depicts a serpent or dragon eating its own tail. It is another Hermetic concept that represents the perpetual cyclical nature of life and the universe. “It needs nothing. It is the symbol of the eternal life.”<sup>16</sup> As humans we go through the process of being born, aging, death, and eventually there is also a rebirth. I came from my grandfathers, and they came from theirs, and so forth. We claim Ecuador as our common root. I have been made aware that it is important to look at one’s past and roots in order to understand the reality of self. However, this piece was one of the first steps into looking forward. I would eventually age and the cycle would continue as it has and always will.

Central to the idea of Ouroboros is the idea that it will lead to immortality. Harkening back to the *Super Mario Bros.* series, humanity is constantly looking for ways to live on forever. Aside from trying to live as long as we can, we are all trying to make an impact or leave a legacy that will last beyond our years. Procreation is only one way through which this is possible. In many ways, I am the reincarnation of my grandfathers and predecessors – not only perpetuating DNA and other biological signatures, but I also am continuing their heritage, history, and ideas. As my work evolves, I continue to look for ways of perpetuating the self. *Super Mario* would ingest his mushrooms and flowers. Similarly, humanity turns to science and technology.

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<sup>16</sup> Jan Irvin & Andrew Rutajit, *Astrotheology & Shamanism: Christianity’s Pagan Roots* (Kentucky, Gnostic Media, 2009), 48.

The third part of my *Maieutics* installation was composed of modern day ‘building blocks.’ A tight stack of grey cinder blocks formed the base, and an arrangement of red and white bricks sat atop the cinder pedestal. The bricks created an abstracted eagle or winged figure. This brick arrangement was the connector between the *My Inheritance* print and *Identity Pectoral*. These types of blocks reference urban and modern construction, but in this piece they also formed a totemic monument – like that of a headstone. Similar to the work of the ancient Colombians, the idea of ‘taking flight’ or ‘rising’ was very important. Through these basic building blocks of the urban city that I am a product of, my intent is look for ways to ‘rise’, to find ways of perpetuating the self, seeking immortality, all the while being reminded of my origins. Once again, *Super Mario Bros.* found his salvation within the bricks of the strange new land. Similarly, I turned to the ‘brick’ and the ‘wall’ as spaces for further investigation and discovery.

My group of fellow first year MFA students decided to have a second part of our ‘First Year Exhibition’ entitled *Brood*. *Brood* was the show where we exhibited our larger scaled works, whereas our smaller works were shown in *Maieutics*. Splitting off our shows in this manner was perfectly in line with my way of working in the opposite extremes of scale. Both shows were exhibited simultaneously in two separate galleries on Stony Brook campus. The piece that I created for this show was very much related to the installation in *Maieutics*, once again exploring the origins and facets of my identity, as well as discovering what exists ‘behind the wall.’



*Maiutics* Installation, 2010



*Identity Pectoral, 2010*

15"x14"





*My Inheritance, 2010*

15" x 10"

## **ii. Inside Out, (Brood)**

*Inside Out* was a 12' tall wall installation. I created a false wall at a shallow corner in the gallery. Using pink insulation foam, wooden studs, and drywall, I made it appear as if a piece of the gallery wall had been torn away, exposing the internal structure of the wall and building. The insulation foam was carved to produce a relief mural within the perceived innards of the gallery. The mural, similar to *Identity Pectoral*, was a conglomeration of various icons, symbols, motifs and architecture that related to my self-perceived identity. The Bronx, NY is one of my cultural identifiers, so I included various urban images of the Bronx – varying from the street I grew up on, the architecture of the Project housing apartment buildings in the neighborhood, subway pillars, and piles of spray cans. Depicted were various members of the community, ranging from day laborers, businessmen, students and youth members. The name 'Desafio' was once again emblazoned near the top of the mural, placed next to a large decorated skull atop 2 crossed leg bones. The skull and cross bones is a traditional reference to 'The Jolly Roger', pirate flag, or the symbol for poison. I decided to decorate the skull like a Mexican *sugar skull*. This is a symbol used largely during *El Dia de Los Muertos* (The Day of the Dead) celebration, intended as a celebration of life rather than one of mourning and sadness. The two crossed bones are skeletal representations of legs because I had been struggling with a medical issue that severely weakened my legs and feet, and the condition had permeated itself as an integral part of my self-identity. Also included in the carvings were motifs and symbolic references to Latin American traditional design and architecture.

When you peel back the white walls of a university gallery, which is just another part of the American university system, we start to get a look at the raw and gritty content underneath. I used the idea of the 'broken' wall as a metaphor for taking a look at my insides. While you are

excavating through the drywall, you are unearthing the heart, the pink underlying flesh of my identity. All of the detail of the mural is my *hidden* content, that I can draw power from to compete in this “strange new land.”

Once we have a grasp of our past and our current identity, the next step is to figure out what to do with what we have ‘unearthed.’ How do we take what we have learned from the past and apply it to our future? In the aforementioned video games, the characters inherit super natural abilities after being enlightened with their discoveries. In the real world, humanity is constantly trying to manifest its own super natural abilities. The American Industrial Revolution is a prime example of humans using science and technology to better themselves. They expanded the implementation of machines as an extender of normal human limitations. According to Ray Kurzweil’s “The Law of Accelerating Returns”<sup>17</sup> technology (in particular, computer technology) is improving and accelerating at an exponential rate. At the same time, the physical gap between man and machine becomes increasingly smaller.

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<sup>17</sup> Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, Viking, 1999, p. 30.

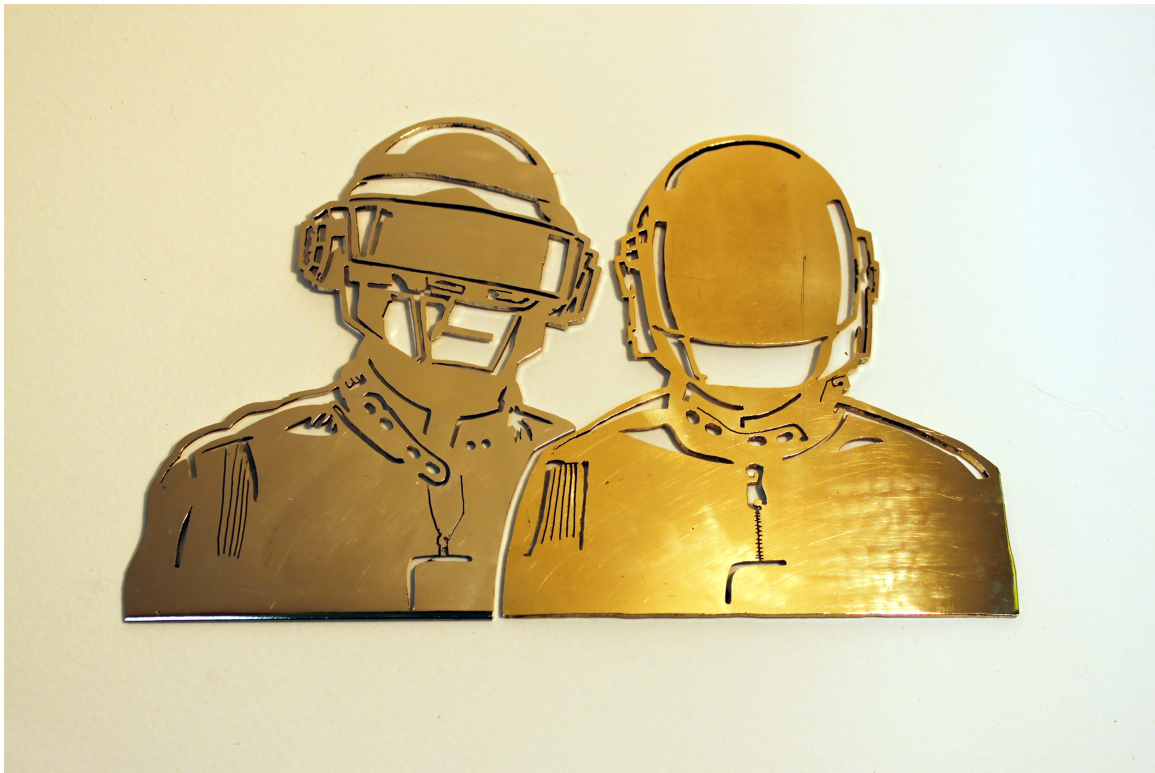


*Insides Out*, 2010

12' x 12'

### **iii. Face to Face**

*Face-to-Face* became a process video of the creation of my metal pieces in order to blur the line between man and machine in my own art making. My metal cutouts are often confused as being made with a laser cutter or other mechanical means because the detail seems to be too tedious and time consuming to be done by hand. By speeding up the recording, my hand and tool appear to be moving as quickly and effortlessly as a machine would. The imagery that I chose for this first recording was the likeness of *Daft Punk*, an electronic music duo. The group is famous for wearing electronically enhanced helmets to disguise their true identity. I chose them because they are an interesting example of hybridity between man and machine, conjuring notions of the cyborg. They request a suspension of disbelief that they are in fact human after all. Their lyrical content also reflects this dynamic of humans possessing machine like qualities. By creating their likeness through my process, I wanted to again represent a modern and progressive idea; that of human evolution with the aid of technology, through a medium that has its roots in ancient metallurgy. Ancient gold was used to depict images of deities or of forces that were not fully understood and revered. We are still evolving as a species and as a society and I believe that science and technology are the modern day revered forces that will carry us into our next stage of humanity.



*Face-to-Face, 2011*

8" x 4"

#### iv. *The End is Near*

As my interest in the future of mankind furthered, so did my exploration for new icons and symbols. *Face-to-Face* was a piece that celebrated the potential of humanity. It argued that combining with the machine was inevitable and progressive. I created another symbol *The End is Near*, which began to touch upon the insecurities with our future instead of the celebrations. *The End is Near*, cut from copper, was a representation of an ancient ‘Mayan’ warrior, with a headdress, shield, and other ‘traditional’ adornments such as a shell necklace, sandals, and patterned cloths. He carries a sign, which read: “THE END IS NEAR.” The combination of elements referenced not only the upcoming ‘2012’ Mayan prophecy, but also represented the typical sign of a sidewalk prophet (whether they were homeless, insane, or otherwise). Once again, this image brings two different time periods together – the ancient and the modern. There was also a secondary message of relating a Mayan, or indigenous, person to someone who is homeless – making a commentary on the displacement or eradication of America’s indigenous peoples.

Whether or not one believes in the Mayan prophecy and astronomical calendar correlations, my intent was to raise awareness of one’s own immediate reality. I want the viewer to seriously question his or her own beliefs about where we are headed collectively and personally. Most will find it humorous, because they do not think the world is going to end, and they will dismiss the warning as they would dismiss the warnings of street prophets. Similar premonitions are made and disregarded in Orozco’s *The Epic of American Civilization*. In one panel, the god Quetzalcoatl is being cast away to sea on a raft of snakes, all the while pointing to the future, warning of the things to come. The things to come would be the bloody arrival of

Cortes, and the Spanish forces to the New World.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, *The End is Near* takes a darker look into our future. It represents the potential disruption of our goal of carrying on and existing forever. How we prepare for this disruption will decide our fate.

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<sup>18</sup> "Tragedy and Triumph: the Drama of José Clemente Orozco 1883–1949". Mexico Connect. Retrieved 2007-09-21.





*The End is Near, 2010*

1.5" x 5"

v. *Mis Queridos*

Death is often seen as life's final end. One is born, lives their life and then the body eventually dies, leaving behind only the memories. Usually it is through religion and other spiritual vehicles that the concept of an "afterlife" exists. My project *Mis Queridos* investigated the perpetuation of one's self through the collection and storage of memories. *Mis Queridos* translates, from Spanish, to "My Beloveds." In my first year of graduate study I began to collect the memories of the deceased loved ones of others and wrote them down in a small black journal. When I solicited for these memories I asked the participant to write down the name of their deceased loved one, in addition to a brief memory of their life that came to mind - no more than a few words or sentences. It became a collection of brief obituaries. I am reminded of the advent of Twitter and the rise of micro-blogging. As a culture we are getting used to expressing ourselves in brief spurts of text, status updates, condensing our thoughts into a finite amount of characters – largely because our attention spans are decreasing, and the amount of different information that we have to take in on a daily basis is increasing. Some may view this quick and concise means of written expression as a detriment to the way humans communicate. However, by asking for shorter entries, I was continuing with this trend of efficient communication for maximized consumption. Then, as I continued to gather the entries, I pondered as to what would be the best way of sharing them. After all, it is through the spread of the memories of a deceased loved one that their memory/legacy continues to live on.

The first manifestation of *Mis Queridos* existed in that small black book, made precious by its size and the personal handwriting of individuals. In hopes of expanding community, I turned to the Internet. I created a website [www.misqueridos.com](http://www.misqueridos.com) where the memories could be simultaneously recorded, stored, and shared. It was the virtual accompaniment to the physical

journal, because as entries were added online, I transcribed them by hand into the book. The same was true of entries written in the book – they were then entered into the website database.

This project was the first in which I interacted and engaged with my community. The book had the limitations of face-to-face interaction – I had to hand you the book and personally request your participation. By opening it up to the Internet, I increased the scope of community and could interact with a larger audience. The public now had a direct influence on the work. The journey of the memories has been an interesting one. They start out as physical life experiences – character traits and specific moments from an individual’s life. Those experiences are then carried on through the memory and recollection of their loved one – who picks and chooses which parts of their lives to document. Once collected, they become a shared experience with everyone else that participates in the project.

It is important to note the current status of the website, in regards to the longevity of Internet based projects. Over the years, the website became corrupted as the project lost momentum, and is presently not operational. Later on in this thesis I will again address the blessing and curse that is the digital record. It is a wonderful tool for reaching the masses, but it is also very fragile, it’s permanence still relying on human effort.

The next manifestation of *Mis Queridos* came through an installation at the Stony Brook University Medical Center. It was an attempt to give the memories of the deceased a new embodiment. The memory entries were printed on hand-cut ‘papel picado’, a form of decorative paper cutting popular in Mexican folk art. These were hung from the ceiling, in front of a mural background, representative of the ‘African’, ‘Iberian’, and ‘Indigenous’ roots that create ‘Latinidad’. Standing in front of the mural was a sculpture of a headless female figure with arms out stretched. In her hands she held the small black book of memories, with a gesture of

“offering” it to the public and encouraging them to take, read, and create new memory entries.

The focus of the installation, in conjunction with the event, was to focus on the celebration of the dead and the perpetuation of their lives through memory.

Memory is one of the cornerstones to understanding my artistic practice. I began my discussion with the memories of a video game that I played as a child. It had such an impact throughout my developmental years that it has etched memories of visuals, sounds, and experiences that I relate to how I perceive the world. At the same time, I am examining the idea of inherited memory. By inherited memory I refer to feeling a connection with a time period, event, or place that we have never experienced.

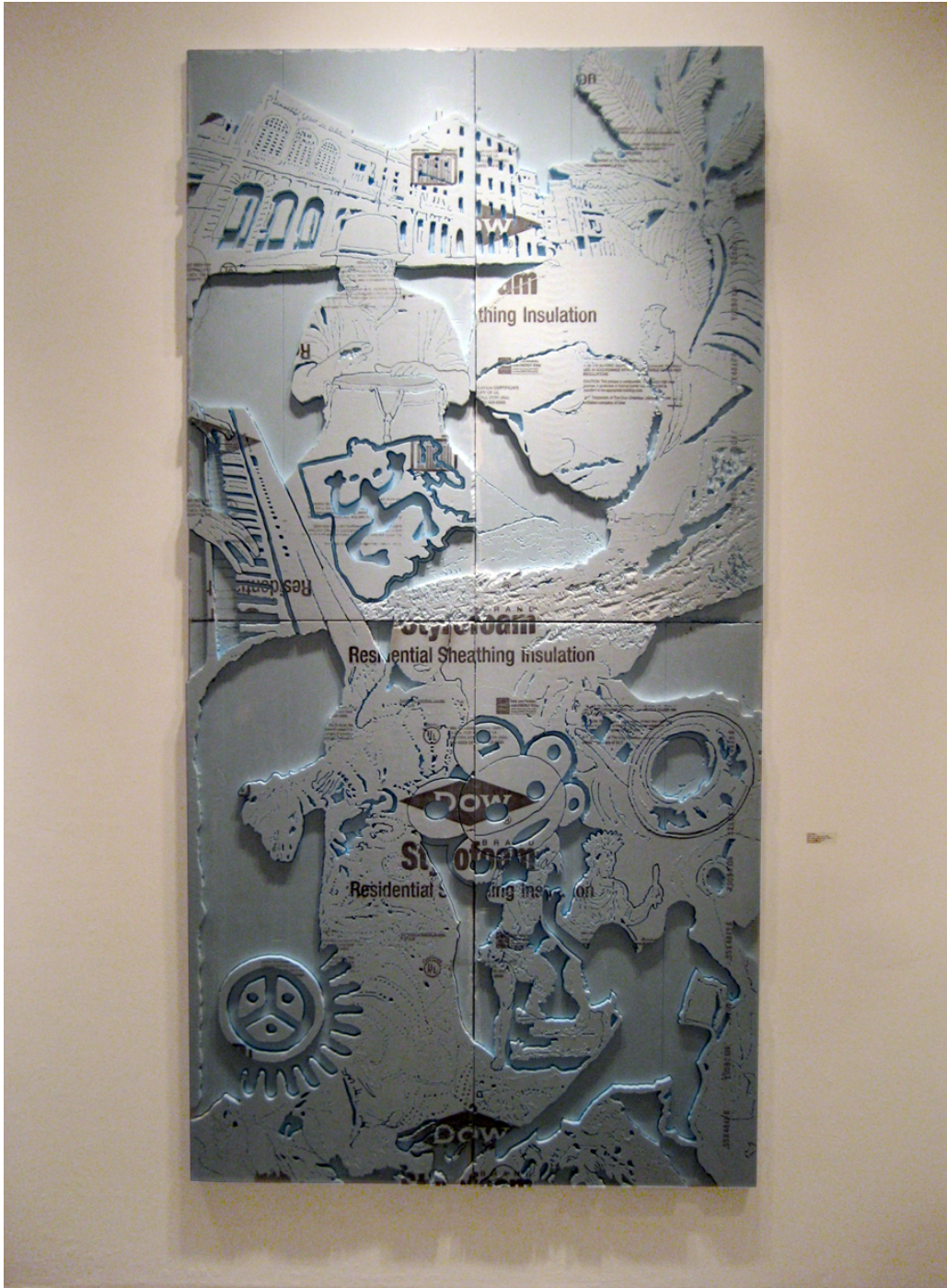


*Mis Queridos, 2011*

16' x 9'

## vi. Origenes

*Origenes*, (Origins) was a piece in which I tried to address this idea of inherited memory and once again relating it to a very important aspect of Latin American culture: Salsa. Carved out of blue insulation foam, it covered a grid of 4 panels, telling the story of Salsa as I came to understand it. I chose Salsa because of my interests in a Pan-American appreciation of history and culture. Salsa music and dancing originated in Puerto Rico and Cuba, but it became popularized and institutionalized throughout Latin and North America. Similar to the *My Insides Out* carvings, *Origenes* employed a diverse mixture of symbols and imagery that attempts to tell the story of the origins of Salsa. Similar to *Latinidad*, Salsa has Caribbean indigenous, African, and Spanish roots. I employed images and symbols of the Taino people of the Caribbean, juxtaposed with the architecture and landscape of Puerto Rico and Cuba and with the representations of the important instruments of Salsa music. The image of a bearded man, pensive, with his eyes closed and head cocked downwards, attempts to capture my intent of recalling inherent memory. Music is a time machine of sorts, having the ability to instantly transport you to a moment of memory – whether that moment was connected to a feeling, like love or happiness, or history that you are a part of, but had no direct involvement with. When one listens to Salsa music, a connection is felt with a specific time and place, perhaps never personally experienced. The male figure in *Origenes* embodies this phenomena, closing his eyes, traveling back through time – to the time of his grandfathers, back to the time of the conquistadors, and further back to a time before Columbus.



*Origenes, 2011*

4' x 8'

## **vii. *La Bodega***

Within the spectrum of time there exists the past, the present, and the future. Within the brick and mortar structure of Stony Brook University, I created *La Bodega*, a project that would become my main vehicle for navigating through time and space. It would be my time machine, my time capsule, my laboratory, my cultural identifier, and most importantly, my means of engaging with my community. *La Bodega* was both a physical installation and a conceptual model for community building.

The initial concept of *La Bodega* started off as a joke in passing conversation, based upon the neighborhood in which I grew up (in the Bronx, NY) and where I then found myself in the Fall of 2010 (Long Island, NY). Many MFA students at Stony Brook University are fortunate enough to be given their own studio. Mine just so happened to be located at the corner of our building, one of the first studios that you encountered when entering the ‘MFA Headquarters’. I became a go-to person for the everyday needs of my colleagues. Be it a hammer, a drill, a sewing needle, or change for the vending machine, I was often able to provide these small services to my micro community. “Wouldn’t it be funny if I made a Bodega?”

“Yea, you can sell sandwiches and spray paint.” –Colleague

“Bodega” is a Spanish word for a local neighborhood convenience store, often located on the corner of an urban city. It literally translates to “warehouse.” I was already marked as the provider of common, everyday items – items that an MFA student would need. So I began construction on my homage to the cultural identifier of an urban, ethnic, community. Double doors textured and painted to look like steel pull down gates, a counter from which to work behind, a customized awning bearing my family name, and that unmistakable shade of yellow began to transform my assigned studio into *La Bodega*.



Bodegas play many roles, one of which is that of a community center. It is the place where neighbors encountered each other – a place to catch up on gossip; a place to discuss politics, a place to share recipes, a place of familiarity. I had similar hopes for my own bodega. I wanted to serve my community as a hub for hanging out, exchanging ideas, and sharing art. Thus, I further converted my studio into a hybrid working-studio and exhibition space. It was still my place of ‘business’, but I wanted to open it up for others to engage in.

I became aware of the work of Francesc Ruiz, most notably his *Kiosk Downtown* (2006) installation. He reproduced a local Philadelphia newsstand in the gallery space, arranged with invented magazines and periodicals that he had constructed to tell a narrative about the city. He also utilized items from popular culture, mostly from comics. With *La Bodega*, I used a similar local icon of commerce, also hoping to uncover and “animate the local unconscious.”<sup>19</sup>

I began by hosting a series of art exhibitions in my newly transformed space. These were group shows, granting access to artists and creative talents ranging in concentrations and level of expertise. The scope of my community began to increase. No longer was I just serving the micro-community of my fellow MFA students, but I was beginning to engage with the greater Stony Brook University student community.

The shows were fairly well attended, but as rewarding as my first few group exhibitions were, I wanted to even further expand the community that I was reaching. As in *Mis Queridos*, I once again turned to the Internet.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.philagrafika2010.org/artist/francesc-ruiz>



*La Bodega, 2011 – Exhibition Reception*

Installation View

### **viii. Ojeda's Bodega Podcast**

*Ojeda's Bodega Podcast* became my solution to serve an ever-growing community of people, while still sharing the physical space of my studio. I began conducting artist interviews, which were broadcast live over the Internet. There was both an audible and visual component to the broadcast. A viewer could watch the interview stream live as it happened or watch it at a later time. Similarly, a listener could download the audio of the interview at any time through iTunes. This flexibility allowed for the possibility of a potentially infinite audience while still providing the intimacy of a live broadcast. The viewer was able to engage with the interview through a connected chat room server.

This project came at a time of great personal technological access. An increase in storage, memory, and advancements, alongside an overall reduction in costs, resulted in great possibilities for individual success. Because of websites like YouTube, anyone can be a television star, filmmaker, or director. Blog sites and twitter give everyone a voice and an opportunity to be heard. I was able to affordably create my own radio/television station from within *La Bodega*; an endeavor that would have once been a multi-thousand dollar venture.

The crux of *Ojeda's Bodega Podcast* was the sharing of ideas and artwork. The interviews were roughly an hour long – conversations about the guest's artistic beginnings, interests, current events, and thoughts on the future. A question that I would ask every guest would be, "What is your forecast for the state of humanity 10 years down the line? What will the world be like?" After the interview portion, we would both start making working on our own projects. The guest would come prepared with a piece of art that they are currently working on. In return, I would begin carving a linoleum print of their person.

The sharing of art and idea existed on many fronts:

- i) The direct exchange of ideas between artist and interviewer;
- ii) The exchange of artwork between the artist and interviewer;
- iii) The perceived exchange of the art and interview by the public; and
- iv) The interjection and participation in the interview by the public.

Once again, I was capturing and storing memories. Just as in *Mis Queridos*, there was the digital element of the broadcast and website, and the physical component of the artwork.



*Ojeda's Bodega Podcast, 2012 – w/ Alvin Black III*

### **ix. Keeping Shop**

*La Bodega* was my vessel for exploring ideas of community, culture and history. I began to focus on my role as the facilitator of the project. *Keeping Shop* was an installation that I created in the Lawrence Alloway Memorial Gallery at the Stony Brook University Library where I transported *La Bodega* into the gallery space. I explored my created identity as the “shop keep” - the proprietor of a business, the director of this created community space. I was now more directly serving the community composed of Stony Brook University undergraduates, as they were the library’s main patrons.

My goal was to interject my experiences of New York City bodegas into the far removed part of Long Island that is Stony Brook. The project was met with mixed reactions. Some students found comfort from the presence of a Bodega. Perhaps they also grew up in a neighborhood where a Bodega was their community center. Conversely, perhaps a student, when presented with a Bodega, only conjures up ideas of an impoverished neighborhood, where a Bodega was a front for drugs, gangs, and otherwise shady activity. Regardless of their preconceptions, I engaged the student body on a daily basis. In *Keeping Shop*, the gallery became my studio where previously, the studio became the gallery. I began occupying the space during every waking hour, when I wasn’t otherwise teaching or attending classes.

A Bodega is a place where one goes to shop for goods. Thus, I introduced the element of commerce to my installation. I set up a series of shelves for my “products and merchandise”. The shelves were filled with a series of goods the public was welcomed to purchase. Out of ceramic, I created a collection of recognizable items: The honey-bear, Mrs. Buttersworth, The Death Star, a spray bottle, and the malt liquor bottle. Similarly, I made prints of items common to a bodega, such as various fruit, cigarettes, candies, intermixed with the printed images of my interviewees.

Together, they were a collection of common items, preloaded with their own identity in the paradigm of a popular culture, which changed within the context of the space and in relation to each other. For example, the honey bears became precious idols or relics, as if representing a stoic ancient deity. By presenting these items for sale within the gallery space, I was blurring the lines between art and product, commerce and cultural enrichment.

I can also align *La Bodega* to the work of Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. He is known for his interactive projects intended to reach a broad general audience. Like myself, he is also an artist who blurs the line between the studio and the gallery, once installing a recording studio in a museum, and in another instance replicating his apartment for the use of gallery visitors. His work often utilizes “the simplest of materials and the most accessible of gestures.” Similarly, I have been drawn to using common construction materials for my sculptures and installations. I appreciate his views on the accessibility of the artwork and his willingness to share with his audience, like in *Untitled 2005* where he offered free blueprints to raise awareness to FCC regulations and First Amendment issues. We are both examining the role of the public in relation to broadcasting. Some of his early work comprised of sharing meals with the gallery audience, a genuine gesture that I respect, as I am always looking to personally connect with the viewer and learning from our socializing.



*Keeping Shop, 2012*

Installation View



## x. Bound

Having examined my roots and heritage, then understanding how it influenced my life in the present day, it was finally time to look forward - to my own “death.” For the group MFA Thesis Exhibition, *Bound*, I created an installation that was representative of my post-death entombment. By creating a space that marked the end of my life, I was simultaneously documenting my past and making premonitions towards the future.

Upon entering the gallery space, the viewer encounters a looming modular structure, appearing to be made of large blocks. Insulation foam, painted with a granular texture, alluded to the blocks being made of stone. The viewer is immediately confronted by an irregularly cut segment of “stone” wall perpendicular to the gallery wall. On this wall is the image of a child, painted in black and white spray paint, amongst a background of indiscernible graffiti-like text and markings. To the right of the child reads the inscription, “Desafio. 1985-2012.” This first wall makes reference to an urban street memorial mural. In some neighborhoods in New York City it is not uncommon to come across a memorial mural. They are usually painted on the sides of local business, or on metal pull-down security gates. They are tributes to members of the community who have passed away – depicting a portrait of the deceased, and perhaps quotes, flags, or religious imagery. Thus, I begin the progression through my installation with this image of myself as a child, marking my own start and expiration.

When one turns the corner of the first wall, the color and treatment of the wall takes a shift. It still references stone, but the reference is to a more ancient quality – like that of ancient Egypt, or of Meso-American ruins. Instead of the painted image, relief carvings cover the entire interior walls. The imagery is that of two converging suns. The suns are actually the amalgamation of Taino, Inca, Aztec, and Native North American sun imagery. This is why this

part of the installation is entitled *Mi Sol, Los Soles*, which means “My Sun, The Suns.” The sun has been revered since the dawn of human consciousness. Different peoples and cultures have their own interpretations and depictions of the sun, but I wanted to combine them to further my desire for unity – as we all live under the same sun. The sun image in my installation is not complete as only the upper half is shown, giving the appearance that it is a “rising” or “setting” sun, a sun in transition. In the progression of the installation, the sun represents the progression of one’s life and the ambiguity of death – is death the end as the sun sets, or is it a new beginning as it rises?

The third part of the *Bound* installation is entitled *My Life in Transit*. It is a wooden sculpture modeled after a *New York City MetroCard Vending Machine*. This piece sits to the right of the installation, helping to enclose the tomb space. From the front of the piece, the viewer is engaged with the replica of the MTA interface. The video on the screen replicates the design scheme used on an actual MetroCard machine, but it does not operate by touch screen. Rather, it guides you through a simulation of questions, options, and selections. What the viewer gathers is that they are purchasing the memories of the artist, the person entombed, in the form of Facebook memories. Once “purchased”, the viewer has the option of putting money into the machine as “tithing”, offerings to the deceased.

Facebook Timeline is an interface that was released in 2011. Facebook invites its users to “Tell your life story with a new kind of profile.” “Share and highlight your most memorable posts, photos and life events on your timeline. This is where you can tell your story from beginning, to middle, to now.”<sup>20</sup> What this interface allows its over 901 million active users<sup>21</sup> is the ability to keep an online record of their entire lives. Facebook was launched in 2004, but

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<sup>20</sup> Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/about/timeline>. 2012

<sup>21</sup> Mark Hachman (April 23, 2012). "Facebook Now Totals 901 Million Users, Profits Slip". *PCMag.com*.

Timeline allows for pictures/posts/memories to be dated to any time in your life, starting with your birth. One important thing to note is that these memories are all constructed. The user can choose which photos or posts remain on their respective Timelines, giving the user the ability to edit, manipulate, and control their public, digital, record.

In *My Life in Transit*, once you purchase the artist's memories, my Facebook Timeline appears on the screen. It begins to slowly scroll down and cycle backwards through my life, beginning with the present, and speeding up as it gets to my birth. Posts before 2005, the year I first got a Facebook account, are blurry – ironically showing the lack of “clarity” in memories now afforded to us by this new technology. Once it reaches the post about my birth, it scrolls even faster upwards, forward in time, back to the present day. I was trying to emulate the sensation of “having your life flash before your eyes” the moment prior to your death. I see this video, along with Facebook Timeline, as the possibility of a modern obituary. Facebook users are recording their own legacy and history on a daily basis, which at the end of it all, can then be easily downloaded.

Once you place “tithing's” into the front of *My Life in Transit*, you hear it fall inside. What the viewer discovers is that there is a second half to the piece on the opposite side. Upon looking at the back of the “machine”, the viewer encounters the inside of an enclosure, sealed off with Plexiglas. The interior is lined in a manner similar to the sun carvings, so it appears as if we are looking into a small, stone room within the tomb. The carvings inside depict some of the same Mesoamerican design motifs from the *Insides Out* installation, as well as the carving of *E. 233 Street – The Bronx*, the hometown of the artist. Placed on top of the carvings were various metal cutouts, a less constricted continuation of the ideas in *Identity Pectoral*. A life-size figure of the artist is found in the lower right corner, as we discover this to be his final resting place.

Bound and seated in the fetal position, the figure is draped with a traditional Andean cloak, and wearing the *Identity Pectoral* around his neck. The figure is wearing a glazed ceramic mask, depicting the likeness of the artist's face. It is important that he is in the fetal position, because this is the traditional burial practice of the Quito people of Ecuador. This continues the idea that death is viewed as the precursor to a rebirth. Sitting alongside him, the viewer sees various vessels of popular and consumer culture (the same ones from *Keeping Shop*). It was not uncommon to find people buried in tombs along side similar vessels – which represented their worldly possessions that they would like to take with them on their next journey, or they were the physical vessels of their mummified organs (which they would also take with them). Dispersed among the vessels were the “tithing’s” dropped in by the gallery viewers. In this way, the viewer could further participate in the ritual of making an offering for the deceased, a practice held by many religious institutions across the world.



*Bound* Installation, 2012 – *Mi Sol, Los Soles & My Life in Transit*

Installation View



*Bound* Installation (Front), 2012

Installation View



*My Life in Transit (Front), 2012*

4' x 3' x 7'



*My Life in Transit (Back)*, 2012

Installation View



## IX. CONCLUSION

All together, the various elements of my *Bound* installation show the progression of a journey that is my own, but it also questions the future of humanity and how we document our existence. Ancient stone carvings have existed for many centuries, and can continue to exist for many more, barring any natural disasters or human defacing. Stone remnants are perhaps the best time-tested method of preserving the memories that we create. Part of my fascination with the Mexican muralists is their use of fresco and encaustic – methods that were more durable and permanent. Paper, and the printed medium, has encountered tragic ends. The book burnings by the Nazi party in Germany and the burning of the Library in Alexandria are just some examples of how easily vast amounts of information and memories can be lost. With the progression of technology, more and more of the information that we produce as a global society is being recorded in the digital form. Bookstores are closing their doors and newspapers are experiencing a vast decrease in printed sales as more people are turning to the Internet and digital means of accessing textual information.

The value of digital information comes into question, especially in relation to its longevity. New technology allows for more information to be disseminated and consumed by a wider audience than ever before in human history. At the same time, we are becoming closer to one another; the boundaries of nations and territories are slowly being blurred into a singular informed entity, aided by the Internet. The idea of “community” continues to expand to a global scale. However, who can guarantee that all of the richness and plentitude of our newly digitally recorded existence will continue to last well beyond our time on this planet?

The focus of my practice has been to help increase the growth of the various communities of which I am a part of. Starting with myself, I encourage others to look internally to for the

personal identifiers and influences that will help propel them, and our society, into the future. Simply stated, my goal is to live forever. Just as the *Green Mushroom* in the *Super Mario Bros.* series represented an extra life, more time and opportunity, I am also constantly in search of ways to infinitely prolong my existence. This can be achieved through a physical means – preserving one’s current existence through health, and scientific advancements. More pertinent to my practice, it can be achieved through the communal collecting and sharing of memory. The lives and memories of my neighbor become my own, and vice versa. As long as this network of information and inspiration continues to expand and sustain itself, we will all live forever.

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