

Home > Community > [Artist Interview: Mariana Castro De Ali](#)

Artist Interview: Mariana Castro De Ali

By: **Morgan Levey** , **Mariana Castro De Ali**

Mariana Castro De Ali is a multimedia artist based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Originally from Mexico, she immigrated to the United States in the early 1990s and has been creating art ever since. Her works [Tribute](#) and [The Flowers That I Lost](#) were featured in I.M.O.W.'s "Exhibiting You" in January and February of 2009, while her submission [Domestication](#) was a Museum Pick from January 21 - February 2, 2009.

I.M.O.W. intern, Morgan Levey, interviewed Mariana, gaining insight into the artist's inner world.



Mariana Castro De Ali created *True Colors*, a gay flag made out of tampons and thread, to honor her gay friends and the gay members of her family who are sometimes hurt by people who do not respect their sexual preferences. [View Larger >](#)



With *Domestication*, the artist wanted to make people question themselves, their unquestioning use of agrochemicals and the human losses that we are all suffering along with the erosion of the agricultural fields. [View Larger >](#)

Can you tell me about your past, where you were born and why you came to the United States?

I was born in Ciudad Obregón, Sonora Mexico, and I am the oldest child in my family. I left Mexico for economic reasons a few years after NAFTA was signed and the so-called "December mistake," which caused an economic recession in my country, took place. We left because my family was no longer able to sustain itself economically.

Your new work focuses on immigration using bird migration as a metaphor for immigrants. How does this metaphor depict the plight of those who must cross international borders?

Migratory birds and humans share the same experience of fighting for life. People move around in search of a better life. However, in the United States, the American dream seems to be failing: people are losing their homes, their savings, their social services and their retirement plans. Actually, we are now seeing some reverse migration. People are going back home because they are unable to find work or because their homes were foreclosed.

I use printed receipts and price tags as artistic mediums to portray the reasons that brought most of us to the United States; reasons that are no longer valid.

What challenges did you face when you first immigrated to the United States?

I met my Pakistani husband the day I arrived in the Bay Area. We could not communicate with words because he spoke Urdu and English and I only spoke Spanish at that time. As a result, we used drawings to communicate with each other. I find that words can be a source of misunderstanding; many people misunderstand the point you are trying to express due to the limitation of language. This does not happen with art pieces; instead, people develop their own dialogue or personal connection with art.

Has the language barrier served as inspiration for your art?

Definitely. I do not speak English very well and people often discriminate against me. I started to create art to express myself.



You make powerful social statements with your art, expressing the struggles of minorities and victims of discrimination. Do you believe art is an effective political tool that can have an impact on the public, minorities and oppressors?

Absolutely. In an art exhibit I had in Ciudad Obregón, Sonora, the town where I was born, people who usually do not attend art events came to my show because they agreed with the social commentary of the pieces. They came and told me their own experiences of family members suffering from cancer due to agrochemicals. The piece called Domestication was created to give tribute to my Tia Esther. She died of breast cancer a few years ago, after living on an agricultural land where they sprayed fertilizers to grow corn.

Issues like discrimination against gays and lesbians, violence against females, eating disorders caused by socially competitive environments, lack of social services for the lower classes, and others hurt me at a deep level. Art is my way of coping with all those issues. For example, the piece True Colors, which is a gay flag made out of tampons and thread, was created to honor my gay friends and the gay members of my family who are sometimes hurt by people who do not respect their sexual preferences.

Periods of festival celebrates women, while at the same time, the stick represents the things such as cancer, poverty, mental disorders, discrimination and violence that the artist wishes she could beat out of women's live. [View Larger >](#)

Combining traditional art-making practices and mediums with unconventional materials like tampons, coffee filters and conversations from daily life, you create a dichotomy in your art. Why portray serious social issues with such common items?

I live in a mundane world, so I create art with the mundane things that surround me. I do, however, have a deep respect for all kinds of materials. I enjoy the juxtaposition of opposite elements -- traditional materials and the mundane -- it makes my art credible, real.

Similarly, I like to use voices in my sound installations. For example, in Fall of Eve, I pair up sacred elements such as the reading of the Bible and the Koran with vulgar jokes, clichés and small talk: Sacred scriptures and profane jokes are both part of our human experience.

More so than other materials, tampons are a true mainstay in your art. What significance do these feminine products hold in your art and what do they mean to you?

Tampons are an effective vehicle for gender commentary. Beautiful, dainty pieces made of cotton, thread and plastic, they go inside a woman's body, they touch her on the inside, her most personal parts. And yet, they get disposed of as undesirable objects. When an object is so close to a woman, a relationship inevitably forms with that object -- a love-hate relationship most of the time -- but nevertheless a relationship.

I have created a piece called Periods of Festival. The piece is an abstract representation of a piñata and it is accompanied by an installation of tampons wrapped as candies and a stick. This piece intends to celebrate women, and at the same time, the stick represents the things that I wish we could beat out of our lives such as cancer, poverty, mental disorders, discrimination, violence, and others.

The title "Domestication" holds a double meaning for your sculpture: the domestication of the corn seed and the domestication of the women who plant and harvest the corn. Is your artwork a celebration of this time-honored tradition or a critique of it?

My work is both a celebration and a critique. Both traditional and modern roles are present in our contemporary society. In order to function as a society, we need to respect the past and respect the present. I do not disrespect the women who choose to stay at home and take their kids to soccer games, but I also honor gay families, working single mothers, blended families and all other forms of family present in our society. On the other hand, I criticize some aspects of modern society such as not giving ourselves the time to see a plant grow or to pass traditional agricultural methods to future generation.

I also see many women threatening their own lives trying to satisfy standards of societal acceptance. Modern times seem to have a fascination with thin bodies and small sizes, which are very difficult to achieve. Television and magazines bombard people with images of slim people that make some women dislike their bodies even though they are of normal

weight. Through my art I want to inspire women to love themselves and feel content in their own bodies whatever their shape, weight or height.

Often your artwork relies on typically female art-making practices and materials. You leave thread to hang off canvases or sew tampons together to create a sculpture. How does "craft," a traditionally female practice, influence your art's meaning -- is it merely a way of making art or are its female connotations significant?

The thread hanging off canvases may seem uncanny, but it is my interpretation of the life cycles. Women have this perfect internal clock that reminds us of our connection with the universe.

Mexico has a crafting tradition and, of course, those traditions inspire me. I cannot escape from the creativity and expression that is present in the collective memory that comes from the repetition of craft styles inherited through generations. Art is a productive attitude that engages me with my ancestors, my heritage, and my history. It brings back the memories of my childhood, the times I spent with my Abuelita Queta, my grandmother, weaving baskets, making quilts and recycling objects such as plastic bottles, cereal boxes, cans, fabric and soda caps to create something else.

Sometimes my grandmother made geometric objects and stars, and other times she made amorphous pieces; I clearly remember an empty bottle of baby powder that she cut in the shape of the Virgen de Guadalupe and decorated with flowers. This piece was a true expression of creativity. However, it never made it to the elite bubble which surrounds the arts. It remained on display in her living room and not in a museum or a gallery of contemporary art.

Many of the social issues that you portray in your art receive little attention on a global level. What do you think is the most pressing social issue in our world today?

I think the major challenge of our times is the focus on individualism and consumerism. Collective memory has been lost. I feel that we need historical memory; we need to remember the issues of the past and not repeat the same mistakes in the present. I create art because art is historical memory.

Rating

(0) | [Add your Comment](#)

Tags:

No tags found.

Add tag:

Like Be the first of your friends to like this.

Comments