

ARTIST STATEMENT

In Search of Self: Art as Rebellion, Healing, and Reclamation of our Ancestral Strength

Ruby Chacón

I was born into rebellion. I carry it through the act of my given name. My mom defiantly named me Ruby—after my Tía Ruby—at the disapproval of my father. Virginia, my mom, can be a walking contradiction. She preached male and female roles yet modeled for us girls to stand up for ourselves, to fight against wrong. She consistently reminded us, “I am the mother and father.” At the same, she wanted what any traditional mother wanted—for us to meet a “good man” who would come home to us every night. There were so many nights my mom went out looking for my father. After a long search she would come home, put his clothes in boxes, and throw them outside. The last time she put his clothes outside would be the last time she would go out to find him. I, however, never stopped searching for my father. My brush would later take me on a journey to get closer him. I began to use creativity as a tool to imagine and to find meaning. In the same way my mother chose my name, I rebelled against a one-dimensional way of being.

As a child, I drew all over the walls and furniture despite reprimand. It was my way of being heard. Second to youngest of six children, we were all one to two years apart in age. Drawing was my way to find meaning; to stand out and be heard from a crowd of loud siblings. Once I learned to draw on paper, I recreated images I saw from *Lowrider* magazine. I saw myself in those magazines. My siblings and I were descendants of the Pachucos/as. I found an identity in the way we dressed, the music we listened to, the food we ate, and through the

images in *Lowrider* magazine. These were experiences very different from the people who surrounded me, and those with whom I attended school. Salt Lake City, Utah, was everything you might imagine if you have never been there, at least in the 70s and 80s. Most people, in those early days of my upbringing, had blonde hair and blue eyes. I remember looking in the mirror and thinking my hair and eyes were too dark, and I inherited Grandpa Jacobo's Apache nose. We clearly were not White, and not Mormon. I didn't know it then, but those early drawings were what saved my spirit. They were my resistance to feeling displaced. Through my drawings, I found belonging.

My Grandpa Jacobo filled photos of us in his home, including those of my Pachuca mother. Those pictures confirmed our existence. Photos paired with oral stories confirmed generations of perseverance. My grandma's grave was the place we experienced the life of Grandma Genera, the womxn whom I picture to be Grandpa Jacobo's first love. I don't have my own memories of my grandma. My memories are recreated through the stories of my mother. Every Memorial Day and whenever Mom listened to ranchera music, she reminisced about Grandma Genara. The stories of Grandma remind me of the artist Frida Kahlo; perhaps that's why I thought I "knew" Frida when I opened up a book and saw *Wounded Deer* for the first time. The way those arrows pierced the skin symbolized the way microaggressions pierce our spirits. To me, they represented the imposed oppression of Mexican womxn during Frida and Grandma's time. At age thirteen, and still playing with dolls, Grandma was given to her thirty-year-old husband through an arranged marriage. She later met Grandpa Jacobo, who was fifteen years younger. She divorced him and again married a younger man, this one by twenty years. Like Frida, Grandma bucked convention with her larger-than-life presence; she wore a ton of jewelry, loved to have parties, and wore bright red lipstick. During Prohibition she was a bootlegger, and later she boarded military men. This is the context in which my own mother grew up.

However, my mother was not allowed to marry. Mom was the one child selected to take care of the family. My father later “stole” her and married her against my grandma’s wishes. For this reason, Grandma cursed the marriage. My parents divorced three years later (before I was born).

Grandma Genara died when I was six months old. She was hit by a drunk driver while walking across the street. I can imagine my Tía Ruby as she sat at the four-way stop sign, on her way to pick her up. My grandma grew impatient waiting for Tía Ruby to arrive with the car and left walking. I imagine how Tía Ruby’s heart must have jumped into her throat and down to her feet in a millisecond as she saw her mother’s body about to be struck by the car. The drunk driver swept up my Grandma Genara and sent her body flying through the air and bouncing on the pavement like a ball. I imagine the stark silence immediately following the collision; the world flashing, and her heart attempting to jumpstart after halting in sudden shock. Years later my mom would tell me, “The hardest thing about it (the death) was seeing this man driving around the neighborhood the next day.” The driver who killed my grandma was a White man. I suppose that’s why my mom would always suggest that her daughters “marry a White man,” and why my Tía Ruby disliked anyone White. Sometimes when I paint, I can hear my grandmother speak her justice. She was not a womxn of her time, and she passed on her rebellious nature to my mom, who in turn, passed this onto me.

Generational stories of oppression, like those of my grandma, motivate me to search for justice. We were not included in the heroic stories of Utah. We are seen only in mainstream media’s depiction of us as criminals, narratives that cause us to be feared in schools and in the court system. My child’s imagination could not make sense of what I learned in school alongside my mother’s stories. Mom went to school until the second grade, long enough to learn English. She

passed the only knowledge she knew about our surviving identity: that we were Mexican, Chicano/a, and that meant we were part Spanish and part Indian (as we called it then). Through her eyes, we were hard-working, loyal, and proud. Sometimes, she contradicted herself and repeated what the media said about us. I could never follow a single storyline, and mostly, I felt confused.

As children, we played cowboys and Indians, reflective of the stories we heard in Utah history. None of us identified with the cowboys, so we flipped a coin to see who would have to be them. The stories we heard in school were about the Mormons who came to freely practice their religion in 1847, one year before the Treaty of Hidalgo Guadalupe was signed, a fact I didn't hear about until I took a Chicano studies class in college many years later. Although Utah has five tribes—Ute, Paiute, Shoshone, Diné, and Goshute—we learned about them as if they were from the distant past. Every 24th of July, this history was reinforced through a huge Independence Day celebration called Days of '47. Therefore, many stories about the Mormon pioneers diluted our own stories of survival. Somehow, I lost my way for many years trying to recover that nudging feeling that I had to tell a better version of our stories, but I didn't know how. One thing was certain. I still needed healing from the internalized oppression I experienced in school.

My high school seemed to house every minority in the whole city: Pacific Islander, Cambodian refugees, Chicanx, Native American, African American, and the minority poor White. My counselor could care less if I attended school or not. I rarely received a consequence for skipping school. I thought if I transferred to a new school, they would care more. I was wrong. I did get more attention, but it was not the kind I wanted or needed. In my new school, I was always called into the counselor's office and soon discovered that she didn't want me there. I needed to escape the sound of her voice while she repeated

in her agonizing voice, “Why do you keep doing everything you are doing?” She always appeared to be in a state of deep frustration. “You won’t graduate anyway. Why put yourself through this?” There didn’t seem to be a place for me in school, and I couldn’t see myself graduating. Back then, I thought that wearing a cap and gown was a mere dream and not for someone like me. At the same time, I refused to drop out like many students of color who shared my same counselor. I felt obligated to be the first in my family to graduate. Even though I felt anxiety everyday walking into a hostile and unwelcoming place, my rebellious nature kept me going. My senior year, I saw my name on the list of seniors who were graduating. I truly thought the school made a mistake. Dr. Hunter, my counselor, never called me into her office again.

After graduation, I moved to Santa Barbara and started college. I was terrified to see a counselor and was ready to block out the disapproving voice of all counselors. Rebellion helped me cope thus far. However, to my surprise, this counselor wanted to help me! John Díaz was my first Chicano counselor, and for the first time, a counselor affirmed that I belonged. I even saw students of color on campus. This was eye-opening. For the first time, I didn’t have to convince myself that I belonged in school. When I returned to study in Utah, I knew I could continue as a student because I had witnessed people of color in these roles. There was no unlearning the beautiful vision I saw in Santa Barbara.

When I was about to graduate college, my three-year old-nephew Orlando Chacón was murdered. Just as family members warned, the media took the story and turned our Chicano family into villains. Their stories stayed with us and pushed us down with force, like the bully who knew he could win. This horrific moment kicked me in the gut so hard; I thought I would never catch my breath. I had witnessed death and close calls to death so many times before, but nothing prepared me for losing a child who was my own son’s age and

playmate. I watched baby Orlando grow, babysat him, and even breastfed him! My family and I would never again be the same. That's when that nudge to tell our stories resurfaced with fierce drive.

I went to speak with my only surviving grandparent—my paternal grandfather Cosme Chacón. He lived five hours away in Monticello, Utah. When I asked Grandpa Cosme where in Mexico we came from, he told me, “No somos de México, somos de aca.” The border crossed us. Telefora, his wife and my step-grandma, gave me an article about my grandfather's great, great grandfather José Ignacio Chacón, who was wanted for murder. The article read like a wild-West story. When Sheriff Joseph Smith came to arrest José Ignacio, José came out firing two guns. José was known to be an excellent gun handler, so the sheriff feared for the safety of his posse and retreated. When I went to ask relatives in New Mexico about the story, they laughed. Apparently, the real story was not that exciting. What occurred to me though, is that these racist stories penetrated our hearts and souls so deeply, it devastated communities that did not have tools to fight back. I began to realize the power of oral tradition as a counter-narrative to the stereotype. We lacked our grandparents' stories, so we had nothing to resist the power of the conqueror's story. I remembered my Grandpa Jabobo's photos and the feeling of belonging but it all disappeared when he died. That's when I used my brush with clear intention—to uncover the violent tales that have reshaped our identities and retell them from the perspective of our ancestors.

When I finally gathered and painted my first exhibit about my paternal lineage, images of brown people filled the gallery space. I got to share for the first time my story—our stories—like the stories of survival of my own tías, the first women coal miners in Helper, Utah. My Tía Rosa was also the first Mexican to serve the public in a restaurant. Mexicans were supposed to work in the

back where they could not be seen. We declared our own freedom to practice religion (like the Mormons) when the community built the first Catholic Church, so we didn't have to go to Colorado to perform a baptism, wedding, or quinceañera. My Great Grandfather Antonio Chacón built the second cabin in Monticello. We were the pioneers, the Indigenous, those who persevered and survived. Finally, I got to share about how segregation disrupted lives for Mexican and Native Americans in Monticello, Utah. This was a new part of history that most never heard about. During this exhibit, we were not the colonized, the second-class citizens, nor the undesired immigrants. We were and are the warriors. When my dad came to the opening and pointed to a painting I did of his father, the oral tradition strengthened. He told me stories about shepherding with his father and, for a moment, I saw his eyes gloss over. That was the first time my father told me anything about himself and the first time I saw my father for the gentle man he was. Telling our stories through my artwork healed my relationship with my father. This was only the beginning.

While the national dialogue back then, and still today, perpetuates the rhetoric about our lack of *ganas*, the womxn in my life have disrupted these deficit discourses and achieved more than has been expected of us. We survived and resisted through our own knowledge and creativity: art, scholarly work, writings, spiritual practices, and our own talents that build and strengthen community. The womxn presented in these portraits are from three different series. *In the Spirit of Itz'apalotl, Venceremos* (2017 series) is a collaboration with photographer Flor Olivo, and the scholarly research of Dr. Sonya M. Alemán and Flor Olivo. *Itz'apalotl Spirit* is a feminine energy "grounded in an indigenous worldview that reveres women as fierce protectors of the domains that produce life, ideas, and knowledge" (Alemán and Olivo, forthcoming). She is the guiding and driving energy for the first Chicana editors (modeled in this series) for the University of Utah newspaper *Venceremos. Generations*

of *Womxn: An Expression of Gratitude* (2016 series) acknowledges muxeres as the collective energy who rise up in unity in support of one another “as one.” *Multigenerational Womxn Danzantes* (2014–15 series) are those who carry our spiritual and cultural traditions that ground us and guide us as we move forward with strength and grace. All three series are an expression of identity, social justice, collaboration, and the reclamation of our own power.

Collectively, we stand on the backs of giants: our ancestors, parents, grandparents, friends, and communities who have broken down barriers to be the social equitable activists and artists we are today. Our collective work sustains and strengthens our communities. Despite experiencing life in some of the harshest realities, we have done so with grace, unconditional love, forgiveness, collaboration, humor and validation for who we currently are and represent. My intention is to honor these experiences and reinforce this beautiful existence we share “as one.”

References

- Alemán, S. M. and Olivo, F. (forthcoming, May 2019) “Guided by the Itzpapalotl Spirit: Chicana Editors Practice a Form of Spiritual Activism,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*.