

## ARTIST STATEMENT

### Exploring Anxiety And Depression Through Art: Growing, Thriving, y Floriciendo

Verónica Kovats Sánchez

I have been working as a Chicana artist for about twenty-three years now. I was born and raised in Merced, California. During my childhood and teenage years, I was constantly creating pencil drawings of portraits and mermaids. There was no deep meaning behind them, I just enjoyed drawing people. My sister and I started taking informal art classes with one of my dad's friends and I learned the basic rules and structures about how to draw a portrait. This experience encouraged me to continue practicing. My parents helped cultivate this talent by taking us to art museums in the U.S. and Mexico. Having the privilege to travel, I was exposed to the arts and more specifically, representations of my culture. My first formal art class was in seventh grade and I decided to keep taking art in high school. At this point, I could no longer imagine a life or career that did not allow me to create art, which led me to pursue art in college. I graduated from Sacramento State University with a degree in art studio. My work is best described as expressive realism and surrealism. I concentrate my work on a variety of subjects from Chicana/o/x and Mexican culture and history, to anxiety, depression, self-love and acceptance. The most comfortable medium for me to work with is oil, which allows me to include so much detail in my work. My other favorite mediums are watercolor and ink, and I have recently been working with digital art.

My identity is directly tied to my art. Both my culture and lived experiences are represented as the subject matter. For a long time, I felt the way I looked

did not fit into Eurocentric beauty standards and it was hard to express myself as a woman of color. My college experiences helped me find a voice through art. During high school, I felt pressured to distance myself from my culture for a brief moment. I stopped listening to music in Spanish and I did not speak the language either. I even told my mom that I did not want to go to Mexico yet again for the summer. It is not that I resented Mexico, I just wanted to have what I thought was a “normal” summer at home and hang out with friends. The summer of my junior year, my sister was studying abroad in Oaxaca City and we went to visit her. She took me with her friends for a night out, and the experience was really life-changing. It opened my eyes again to how amazing Mexico is and honestly, it was nice to be somewhere where my parents were not.

During my senior year of high school, my perspective changed. I was so proud to be who I was. I flaunted all the cool stuff I would get in Mexico—purses, shirts, jewelry, music—and I started styling myself in a unique way that made me feel complete. I was in a good place and happy to move forward onto college.

In my first year of college, however, I experienced blatant and overt racism from my college dorm roommate. She did not appreciate my Mexican décor, my Spanish-language music, nor when I spoke Spanish to my mom on the phone. She demeaned everything that I had just embraced—all that made me feel proud and happy. I found out about her racist attitude from her boyfriend’s roommate who lived across the hall from us, who informed me that she had said when visiting her boyfriend, “Why doesn’t she just go back to Mexico if she loves speaking Spanish?” I confronted her one night about this comment when she had rudely told me her boyfriend was sleeping in our room and I indicated I did not feel comfortable with him there. She was

surprised that I let her know what she had said but did not respond. It was very heartbreaking for me and, unfortunately, this was not the last experience like this that I had with her, but this one hit hard and I feel that I dealt with it in a justifiable manner. I reported her to my resident advisor (RA) and she talked to her. However, not much was done since there were only two weeks left of school. Fortunately, she did not spend much time in the room because I told the RA that I did not want to interact with her. Our RA basically left it up to us to decide how to deal with the situation. Essentially, I had the room all to myself for the rest of the semester. Our confrontation resulting from her bigoted comments was well-known throughout our dorm, and I was glad that everyone knew her true colors. I do not know if she felt shame, but I was satisfied by putting her in her place. Nonetheless, I was reluctant to show my Mexican pride through clothes or jewelry because I did not want to be a target and have that experience again.

Aside from this incident, there were other microaggressions I experienced. I am bi-racial—a Mexican mother and a white father—and was raised to be proud of who I am. I would describe it as living the best of two worlds. These two worlds were disrupted in my college years when people started making me feel I had to pick a side, that I could not be both. White people would tell me I was too Mexican and Latina/o/x folks would tell me that I was white-washed. Because of these microaggressions, I developed two sides of myself in my art. I had two audiences: one to please with pretty portraits of Eurocentric beauty, and another audience for my art with cultural depictions. I felt that I was skilled in painting both types of subject matter, but was told by one of my art professors to choose one. Instead of choosing, I decided to bring these two worlds together.

One of the ways I did that was by becoming part of a Chicano art collective. I took a class and worked with Ricardo Favela, a well-known local Chicano

artist in Sacramento. In his printmaking class, I also met another one of his mentees who recruited me for an art collective on campus called Brown Syndicate. Being part of this group helped me realize that there was more to art than what I was learning in my traditional college art classes. It was in Brown Syndicate that I felt like I was finally able to express my true self in my paintings. By my senior year of college, I was finally able to explore new art subjects and techniques by adding brighter colors to capture and evoke emotions for an audience I strongly related to.

In addition to uplifting my culture, I use art to visually depict mental health struggles and illness. These traumatic college experiences led to anxiety that I became aware I was struggling with about five years ago. In addition to forming my racial identity in college, I also struggled with body image issues. I was socialized to believe I had to adhere to unrealistically thin standards about body size and became very critical of my shape and now can articulate that what I was experiencing was body dysmorphia. Five years ago, these pressures and anxiety caught up to me and I fell into depression. In this fog, I lost my passion for art. I had built up so much anger as a result of experiencing racial microaggressions and hating my body, causing stress which led to physical symptoms like vertigo. A friend who went through something similar helped me understand that anxiety could cause these symptoms. With the help of my family, I sought professional help and began to take medication. Speaking to a psychologist allowed me to reflect and reconnect with myself and my art. The last two years in particular, I have used my art to explore my own anxiety and depression. As a result, I have started to feel myself flourishing. I was also able to bring my two worlds together in my work. What you see in many of my pieces are versions of myself growing, thriving, and moving forward. It always brings me joy when people find a connection in my work and it offers me a crucial reminder that

we are not alone in our struggles to balance our mind/body/spirit. The brief vignettes below offer specific narratives and details about this awakening that are depicted in the artwork featured throughout this issue.

### **Sanando el Alma**

My mom has always had a green thumb. I used to help her pick out flowers at the hardware store and she taught me how to plant them. At my Abuelita's house, my mom would let me water her plants while she taught me the names of her favorite flowers. When I was spending time in Acapulco as a child, my favorite place to see tons of flowers was at the mercados and the main plazas. Most of the vendors were older women, cutting, stacking and tending to these bright beauties. The flowers that really caught my eye were the gladiolus and calla lily, which are also my mom's favorite. When I was about three years old, I was dressed in a traditional Indigenous outfit from Guerrero and went down to the main plaza with my mother to buy some gladiolas, and went to the church to be part of a celebration for La Virgen de Guadalupe. These memories are still present for me and are why I chose gladiolus and calla lilies in this piece. They are a reminder of an afternoon setting en el zócalo, enjoying a paleta, and people-watching. Flowers give such great positive energy with their vivid, spectacular colors that I love to use them in my paintings.

### **Florecer**

Music serves as a muse for some of my pieces. A lot of songs that inspire me are slow tempo indie rock electronica, both in English and Spanish. One song in particular by Joe Goddard, called "Make it Better" is an upbeat indietronica track that always puts me in a better mood when I'm feeling down. The lyric "Put the sunshine back to my veins" inspired me to create a visual representation of this process. I imagined flowers leaving my body—floreciendo. When I began visiting a psychologist about four years ago and

started taking medication to ease my anxiety, I came across this song. Part of my healing was to focus on things that made me happy. Upon hearing it, an image of how I wanted to depict this lyric materialized, so I wrote it down and set it aside as I was still easing my way back into art. My idea with this piece is to make visible the resurgence of life, coursing through the woman's veins. I was showing how to bring sunshine back into my life in order to draw out the spirit of the flowers that represented my growth. The flowers I chose remind me of springtime: the start of new beginnings, progress, the blossoming of new things and birth. When listening to this song, it gives me a profuse sense of joy and both the song and this piece serve as a reminder that I was able to get out of that dark hole I was in.

### **Bombazo**

I was introduced to bomba, Afro-Puerto Rican music and dance, by my older sister who is a member of a bomba group. While we do not have ethnic ties to Puerto Rico, we are committed to a common history of resistance. Bomba represents resistance and its roots are grounded in the active preservation of African traditions and history in Puerto Rico. Having attended several Bombazos—live spaces where dancers and musicians come together—I was truly inspired by this form of expression. There is a powerful relationship between the dancers, drummers, and singers and I wanted to honor that energy by capturing the postura of a bomba dancer, her movement and facial expressions. This energetic relationship is described as a challenge from dancer to drummer. The postura illustrated in this piece is one of the many gestures provided by the dancer for the drummer to follow their movements. Bomba also includes a solo singer and three or more other singers. The solo singer sings a verse that is repeated by the other singers. The background provides a sense of movement that flows with the dancer and gives her gesture a celebratory energy.

### **Love Is a Place for It**

I created this piece with my sister in mind. She has a chronic illness called interstitial cystitis (IC), a painful bladder condition. It started a few years back right before what could be considered the worst moment of her life when she was betrayed by the person she thought was the love of her life. This treachery made her physical and emotional pain even worse. She went through a lot of hardships. She had just begun her doctoral program at San Diego State University, all while figuring out how to file for divorce and visiting multiple doctors to diagnose the cause of her illness but not getting any answers. While the chronic pain was taking over, she was also trying to heal from the betrayal, which caused her to lose her self-confidence and self-worth. She eventually was diagnosed with IC, and had to learn how to manage the chronic pain. As her sister, I, too, had to educate myself on this illness so that I could be part of her support system. She is currently a postdoctoral research fellow and lecturer at San Diego State, a folklorico dancer, and DJ. She gradually found happiness within herself and established greater connections with her family and community. It was also a reminder that physical and mental health are more important than anything in life.

Looking at this piece, the nude figure is laying in a relaxed position with vines wrapped around the arms and thighs to represent the slow growth and recovery my sister has experienced. The thorny vines wrapped around the thighs and hips could be seen as a painful but pragmatic journey that has developed into a loving relationship with the body itself. Roses are the symbol of love, gratitude and peace.

### **Connection**

This painting emerged at the beginning of the pandemic. During this time, I longed to connect with my community, friends, family, and, especially, other

artists. As lockdown began, I felt that it gave me a chance to improve skills with other mediums. Watercolor is one of the hardest mediums to use. It is best to prepare the image and know where to go before executing and have some sense of control with the water. Much like the pandemic, we cannot always control what happens to us, some things are just inevitable and we have to learn how to adapt. It is the same with the process of creating a watercolor painting: you just have to let loose and see what happens and work with that unwanted change of direction the water takes on the paper. It was around springtime when I created this piece, therefore to me, the mixture of flowers set the mood of a tranquil atmosphere. I also love red poppies. This image shows a time in the future where the stems and vines will eventually interlace with each other. This painting represents losing my in-person connections, and the injustices that have amplified during this time, but as a community we can manage to find ways to stay connected, inspired, and resilient.

### **Rosebud**

I enjoy painting the nude form because it is very powerful to me. There is always a stigma around nudity, especially with brown or black skin. I focus on painting darker skin, as a way to challenge the mainstream Eurocentric art world. In 2015, I did a series of portraits for a local art show in Sacramento. There was no specific theme, but all participating artists were free to paint what we wanted. We had to create twenty-five, eight-by-eight-inch pieces. I decided to create portraits of different women, with the idea of showing how different we are. Unknowingly, I only painted fair skinned women with light colored eyes. My sister pointed these choices out to me, making me realize I was still unconsciously bound by those limiting beauty standards.

Formal art training teaches you the basics: composition, color, value, form and brushwork. From my earliest art classes, studying portraits and facial



features means you are also taught the “basic” form. When I say basic, I mean white features, straight noses, small nostrils, medium lips, and light-colored eyes. At this young age, I did not notice the lack of inclusivity, which unknowingly kept me from painting and drawing non-Eurocentric features, negating my own image and that of my ancestors. I didn’t question that training through middle and high school or even my first years in college. Even though in the college art classes I took, I was encouraged to capture my own personal technique for portraits, but my technique never changed.

*Rosebud* is honoring my growth and appreciation for myself as a Mexican American woman. The veins in the body are replaced with vines on her back that again, symbolize growth and self-development. I chose white and pink roses to represent peace, the gratitude I have for my skin color, and overall, they are wrapped around the body and arm to illustrate self-love.

### **Facade**

After painting many versions of women in a flourishing state, sometimes it is overwhelming to be positive all the time, particularly when dealing with mental illness. This painting represents those moments when we must step into the darkness in order to process our healing. Moments of darkness that I experienced through this pandemic were not being able to leave the house for social events, not getting to see my friends or go on mini-vacations. I had to keep myself distracted, but the boredom showed up anyway. I struggled with recurring sadness and outbursts of anger because the government was not taking care of its people. I lost my job as a part-time after school art teacher. It is really hard to stay positive and content when all of these things are happening. This piece illustrates that all these feelings can lead to overgrowth and your situation can change into a very intense and hard thing to deal with. I wanted to make this piece darker, which is why I painted

a black background. I chose a variety of flowers to depict a hectic feeling or environment that I sometimes see in my head. This leads to the hands covering the face because I just cannot get through this overwhelming feeling of vexation. The facade is the pretty lively flowers that can be seen as a cover up for those feelings.