

## ARTIST STATEMENT

### A Voice Without Words

Josie Del Castillo

Like most borderland cities, my hometown of Brownsville is culturally and politically complex. In my artwork, I resist negative representations and stereotypes of this region and its border communities often circulated by politicians and news media. Instead, I focus on representing the region with warmth and positivity through colorful depictions as vibrant as its people.

I paint self-portraits, portraits of community members, as well as the scenic landscapes of the Río Grande Valley. Most recently, I have incorporated my fondness for plants into my work, which I see as a symbol of growth. We all grow under different conditions and have specific needs that we need to remember to nurture. I hope the plants in my art convey this.

#### **The Development of my Artistic Journey**

As a little girl, I would draw my plush toys, TV cartoon characters, and my own made-up figures. Drawing was something that came to me naturally. When asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would always respond by saying “an artist.” I took a few art classes throughout my compulsory education, entered a few art contests, but never saw my skills as more than average.

It was not until I entered college at University of Texas at Brownsville (now the University of Texas, Río Grande Valley) and Texas Southmost College, that I decided to major in art because that was the only pathway I thought I might be good at. I did not consider myself a bright student. I struggled with a lot of basic courses, and art classes were the only ones I would get As in.

My late professor and mentor, Carlos G. Gomez, taught me how to paint and talk about art. He taught me the basic principles of painting, how to build painting panels and even ways to work with salvaged materials like metal, rocks, and old wood panels. I fell in love with painting, the process, and the finished work. In my undergraduate art courses, I became intrigued with portraiture and self-portraits. I was fascinated with painting people.

As I got closer to finalizing my requisite senior exhibit, I knew I wanted to focus on portraiture, but I still struggled with articulating what I wanted to say with my work. I was dabbling into the themes of mental health, identity, and pride for my Mexican American culture.

If it was not for academia, I do not think I would be where I am at. As an undergraduate, I learned about developing my skills and craftsmanship. I learned about the hard work needed in the studio. I learned about research. I learned about community engagement. I learned about mentorship. I learned about supportive friendships, and most importantly, I learned about myself.

After graduating, I enrolled in a master's program. Although many students move away to attend college or graduate school, my limited financial means made this option impossible for me. Student loan debt has always scared me. I still have student loans to pay, but staying close to home saved quite a few thousand dollars. Therefore, I continued my higher education in my hometown, at the same university I attended for my bachelor's. Sometimes, I wonder what my career would look like if I would have gone somewhere else? Would I be doing the same work I am currently working on? Would I have stopped painting? What other opportunities did I miss? Ultimately, I do not regret my choice, because I believe it motivated me to do more than your average art student.

I was determined to be the most hard-working student in my program and took advantage of as many learning opportunities as I could. I worked as a gallery assistant, graduate assistant, and teaching assistant. I applied for scholarships, earned awards, studied abroad, went to residencies, and exhibited my work.

My success did come with some challenges. At first, I had a lot of self-doubts, negative self-talk, and struggled with criticism from others. There were so many times that I felt I wasn't good enough, and that no matter how hard I tried, there was something always holding me back. Driven by the goal to support myself as a full-time artist, I still faced a lot of exhibition rejections, residency rejections, people critiquing my work, and all the other crap that puts you down. Nonetheless, just like anything in life, I pulled through and it made me more resilient.

Throughout my graduate study, I learned to refine my concepts and although I was pushed to experiment with different mediums and ideas, I was certain I wanted to focus on portraits and self-portraits depicting issues of mental health, celebrating the female figure, and extolling the vibrancy of la frontera. I felt the need to refine, polish and strengthen these themes so that I could use my work to talk about things that mattered to me. Technically, these concepts define me as an artist and as a person. I was unaware that I was simultaneously working on forming my own identity, but I guess that is the beauty of art: you are learning about yourself all the time, both subconsciously and consciously.

Part of my graduate work also enabled me to learn how to research topics that mattered to me. I started reading about Chicano art, figurative artists, female artists, art history, and its impact on art movements and other artists. I also learned about putting exhibitions together, putting proposals together, and how important it is to be involved in your local art community.

### **The Artwork**

In 2018, I created the painting, *Don't touch me, I am sensitive*. When I was creating it, I was struggling with understanding my emotions. I was hurt. I was heartbroken. And I was constantly pushing people away. I depicted myself as a nopal, painting my skin color green. I used espinas as an outline, and tunas as a necklace. This is one of my first self-portraits where I had engaged in deep self-reflection. I was hurting inside, and like a nopal with espinas, I was using my espinas to push people away. I used to be mean to others and myself. At the time, I did not know I was building a deteriorating barrier around me. I did not know I was being hurtful to others because I was hurting myself.

This painting was a stepping stone to the direction that I wanted to go with my work. I wanted my work to be personal, to communicate with others who had a similar experience, to dabble into the topics we don't normally talk about, and to incorporate cultural elements. *Don't touch me, I am sensitive* was also the first painting that got me into the highly competitive student exhibition, the AXA Art prize in 2019. This was the first time I was part of a traveling exhibition that took place in Chicago, San Francisco, and New York.

In 2019, I painted, *My culture, my body, my soul*. Around this time, I was working on several self-portraits, the majority of them nude. With these pieces, I was working on bettering myself, learning to love myself, and learning to represent my culture. In this image, I am standing firm and looking back at the viewer. I wanted to depict myself as a strong woman who despite my flaws, is strong and beautiful. In the background, I broke down the colors of the serape in waves. These waves have always been with me, but I am learning to represent them positively.

While working on this series of nudes, one of the challenges I faced was that when people would see my nude self-portraits, they assumed I was this

confident and self-centered woman, or that I was painting myself nude for attention. However, none of these things were true. In reality, I had low self-esteem: I cared too much about what other people thought or said about me and I hated my body. I hated my fat body. I hated the fact that my body was not your typical “plus-size.” And to prevent these voices from making me doubt myself more, I began to speak up about body positivity. In recent years, there has been a shift in beauty standards and more inclusivity for all body types, especially for fat women. However, even the celebrated “plus-size” women looked a certain way: small waist, big hips, big breasts, and, of course, gorgeous faces. I thought to myself, “Well, fuck this. I don’t even look like them. Am I really that ugly?” To counter those thoughts, I worked on more nude self-portraits to show that all bodies can be beautiful.

Following this painting, the colors of the serape inspired me to create a portrait of my mom titled, *A todos nuestros padres inmigrantes, gracias/To all our immigrant parents, thank you*. This was only the second time I painted a family member. The first one was a portrait of my grandfather before he passed away. I wanted to depict my mom in a significant way. I thought about the *Mona Lisa*, and how it is one of the most famous paintings in the world. Even if you’re not that familiar with art, you know it is a well-known painting. Therefore, I composed a portrait of my mom modeled after the *Mona Lisa*. I wanted her to wear a serape as a rebozo y una blusa bordada que hera hecho a mano. Behind her, you can see the Río Grande. With this painting, I wanted to show appreciation for the sacrifices, hard work, and challenges immigrant parents go through to give their family a better life. Both of my parents are from Tamaulipas, Mexico, and crossed over to give my sisters and I a better life. The best way to pay them back for all their sacrifices is to pursue my true passion—art.

As part of my journey as an artist, I sought professional counseling to guide me in self-reflection, confronting my past, and addressing the various traumas of my life. I believe that for some people, the creative process—whether it is music, art, performance or writing—is a form of therapy, as it is a source of joy that balances the pain we carry.

The painting, *I tend to hurt others while I am hurting*, was a piece that came to me during one of my counseling sessions. My counselor explained to me that people often project the pain they feel onto others. She made me realize that I was not a bad person, but I was a person who was hurting and I needed to heal. This was eye-opening to me and I burst out crying. At that time, I was overcoming something traumatic that happened to me, and I was being mean to the people close to me, such as my family and friends. Similar to my painting, *Don't touch me, I am sensitive*, this self-portrait came out from the emotional pain I was going through. This was also a wake-up call for me. I needed to learn to heal and love myself first to treat others with love and respect.

Through art, I have learned so much about myself. I learned that as a fat and brown woman, I am strong and beautiful, who is using her art to empower other women of color. I used to let negative comments about myself or my work get to me, and it took me years to build boundaries and stand my ground. The painting, *Que te valga*, features my friend, a badass woman who does not give a fuck about what others have to say. In other words, I was using the power of manifestation and positive affirmations to become this empowered woman. I can say I have come a long way when it comes to speaking up for myself, being true to myself, and not letting people get to me. In this painting, I incorporated a mal de ojo necklace around the central figure to help keep the malas vibras away.

Once I earned my master's in fine arts and studio arts in spring of 2020, I acquired a part-time position as an adjunct professor teaching art appreciation. I only held this position for one year because it was not what I wanted and it was not bringing me joy. I wanted to take the big leap and resign from my “professional” job to pursue being a full-time artist.

Being a full-time artist has not been easy. It is not the typical, “follow your dreams and be happy” kind of thing. I have faced more internal challenges than I have ever faced before. I struggle with artist block, lack of motivation, lack of discipline, painting daily, and learning to separate my home from my home studio time. I know I am facing new challenges, and I hope I learn to overcome them and continue to create meaningful work.

One of my most recent paintings, *Personal growth* focuses on self-love and learning to take care of myself. During the pandemic, my love for plants grew and I started noticing similarities between them and people. Both plants and humans grow at a different rate. Some plants require more care than others, and others are more sensitive to the type of water they receive. In the painting, I am laying down like a landscape and have a pothos plant coming out of my breast. The plant represents nurture, love, and progress. These are the things that I have been focusing on to better myself.

For years, I wrestled with anxiety and depression, sometimes they switch places and one is more prominent than the other one. I like to think of them as cousins that come and go all the time. For my painting, *I am fine, it's just my anxiety*, I am depicting how uncontrollable my anxiety was and the awful panic attacks it caused. They felt so bad that at times I thought I was going to die. It is remarkable how anxiety manipulates your mind. It overpowers you and makes you feel so fragile. A coping mechanism I have begun to use

is that whenever I feel anxiety or a panic attack creeping up, I start checking my pulse as if it reassures me that I have a heartbeat. I used to hide this habit from people because I did not want them to think I was going crazy.

We all deal with our issues, both internal and external differently. I believe that as long as we are constantly working on ourselves, we will be okay. Life is crazy, we are just trying to survive.

I want to continue making work that makes other women feel represented. Working with the figure has given me a greater appreciation for the human form and allowed for greater self-awareness of my insecurities, identity, and surroundings. I want to make work that speaks about struggling with one's mental health. I want to make work that highlights my culture in a positive and reverential way. I want to continue working because it makes me feel alive. It heals me. It teaches me. It provides a voice for myself without using words.

I also want to make work that resonates with others. Painting has made a difference in overcoming self-doubt, and I hope that the viewer can relate to my message or feel represented in my work. I want my work to make you feel connected. I want to create work that makes you feel proud of who you are. I want my work to make you feel that you are not alone. As for myself, I want to continue working as a full-time artist. This is what I am meant to be. I dream of my work collected by a major museum, so when I am no longer here in the flesh, my presence will live on through my paintings.