

Understanding Home by Carving Visual Narratives

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AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT DISSERTATION

This thesis of Reinaldo Alexander Gil Zambrano, submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Arts with a Major in Art and titled "Understanding Home by Carving Visual Narratives," has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates below, is now granted to submit final copies to the College of Graduate Studies for approval.

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ABSTRACT

Life is a journey in the search of the idea of home shaped by past memories, present situations, and future possibilities. The remembrance of the past through storytelling has been a critical tool used by humankind to preserve and celebrate its collective heritage. The present, engaged with external world, constantly challenges and transforms an individual's memories and influences their personalities, inner worlds, and futures. The telling of stories recollects events and characters from generations past, contributing to a cultural identity that survives through its dissemination. The use of printmaking as a technique to create multiples empowers accessible storytelling and shared visual narratives. The practice of woodcut relief printing offers accessible yet complex graphic qualities that reflect the storytelling impulse.

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my family for the unconditional support and love to defy physical distance while pursuing this goal.

Dedicated to those whose stories prevailed in time thanks to those who continue to tell their tales.

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CHAPTER I. CELEBRATING THE PAST.

The beginning.

Anibal Zambrano packed up his dreams that morning for the last time. He was fourteen years old and the need for a new beginning knocked on his door at an early age. Anibal, the youngest of seven, embodied the product of race mixing in times of colonialism in the new continent. He carried in his bag treasures in the form of underwear and a cooking notebook, a few coins and an old military jacket from his cousin. In Anibal's mind, however, there were the tales of heroic moments from his ancestors, as well as the essence of the jungle and of childhood foods provided by his mother's daily meals. He stepped out of his bahareque¹ house taking his first steps towards adulthood and the capital city. Once he climbed into the bus, his nostalgia was quickly replaced by excitement. While the landscape switched continuously and rapidly through the window, he felt his whole childhood pass in front of him like rapid strokes of watercolor. Daydreaming of the future, he imagined becoming a father of five and later on "Nonno Ani"², the pillar of a family that lived from telling stories, keeping traditions alive. Even when his decedents decided to pursue their dreams in foreign lands they were connected to their roots. Anibal, as many said, was a skillful liar, or as I prefer to say: a person with a great imagination who used hyperbole to his will, altering the past, and making mundane characters and events unforgettable through time. As writer Eduardo Galeano says "narratives are the first attempt of humankind against death"(pag.45)³. The storyteller has the gift to creatively reimagine events and characters, enabling them to defy the adversity of their times and serve as inspiration for the present and future. Experience grows into new stories which add to the cultural narrative, and preserve cultural identity for future generations.

¹ Mixed clay from dirt, water and rocks used for construction of buildings.

² Italian expression for grandfather

³ Galeano, E. (2012). *Los hijos de los Días*. Ediciones Akal, S.A.

Metaphors in storytelling: A tool for learning.

It seems like yesterday, during a warm night in August when the full moon decided to reveal herself after a rainy day. All the cousins sat around a bonfire, happily perplexed by a couple of finger puppets brought to life by my uncle Alberto. The allegory of a being that didn't want to share oranges with others in need, made this character grow uncontrollably as a consequence of its gluttony. It was not until the being asked for the support of others that the curse was broken and was returned to his normal shape. These puppets introduced me to the world of metaphor as a window to understand the world and learn how to behave. Karma was the concept that later replaced the lesson learned that day; the poetics of storytelling was the other. Visual aids like puppets and images create metaphors and allegories making information accessible and relatable. These engaging magical tales and mental images were etched in my mind like fine lines on a copper plate coming out of its acid bath. This experience was permanent and sublime and its one that I seek to create through my work.

Where do those magical beings in our stories come from? What makes the characters from our history unique and real? It appears that they experienced life just like everyone else, yet with more wisdom and far less luck. My great uncle Luis, famous for his captivating narrations, has the gift to engage with others with the same humor and passion in every retelling of his stories, fascinating us as if it were the first time we heard them. He could describe a dog defecating and make it entertaining and epic. The craft of delivering stories was practiced by his family members in the times without television or radio. The idea of something ordinary that becomes epically out of proportion simply through the voice of the narrator as the ability to keep magic alive. After passing from lips to ears to lips, those characters became stronger, and magical, even extraordinary. The question is raised: what would these characters say if they heard their own stories in the present time? They might be surprised to realize how extraordinary their feats have become through the eyes and imagination of those reconstructing their stories. We will never know. The performance of the storyteller offers visual aids that reinforce oral language with a visual stimulus for a receptive

audience. The idea that stimuli from the outside world have the power to evoke memories of place and home (without the need for the physical structure of a house) is how I hope my work can function.

Understanding the universal idea of home through memories.

I was lucky to grow up in a family that was hungry for learning and experiencing the world. From an early age, even before I was born, my parents had a constant desire to know our homeland through adventure with friends. The idea to know every corner of the country or place where you grew up made you its proud owner and defined who you were by where you came from. “Tell me where you have been and I’ll tell you who you are”, Anibal used to say.

Anibal once suggested that I start a journal to keep and easily remember my experiences. This journal became my sketchbook where I collected my memories in the form of doodles and images. For me, such images were not only visual but also sensory. My aunt Mercedes makes a delicious milk-base soup “*La Pizca Andina*”. The smell of it even today transports me back to home. I have attempted to celebrate this memory by the combination of the bowl of soup and the physical place where I get transported in a woodcut relief print titled “*La Sopa: Como Decía Mamá*” (Figure 1).

After trying that Pizca I was able to visualize the faces and moments of those who defined that happy place where I spent my childhood. The revival of a memory that can take us back to a place of comfort which is independent of the structure of a house that we can call “Home”. The emotional feeling and sensorial attachment to a moment or place of comfortably is what I denominated “home”. Wherever I reside my physical place of origin will never change. After moving to Costa Rica to the international United World College, the only physical connection I had with home was in the form of picture and amulets. The accumulation of new experiences deceived my interpretation of the past, developing fake memories making me feel alienated. It was

through strong memories and stories that I maintain the security of my inner world and identity.

Is it possible to construct a shareable reality so others might understand your memories?

After two years of experience in that international school and seven more in North America my artwork has been dealt with a hybrid iconography with a universal link beyond the barriers of language. These icons become the tools for the connection of visual narratives with the hope that others find home in the celebration of their own memories and imagination.

CHAPTER II. UNDERSTANDING HOME.

Home beyond the image of a house.

The structure of a house is usually associated with the idea of home. However the icon of a house has been previously used as an allegory to describe socio-economic issues. A song titled "*Cardboard houses*" written by Venezuelan Ali Primera utilizes the images of a house as the subject of protest. Primera illustrates the poor living conditions and fragile morale of the Venezuelan working class in the 60's and early 70's. The working people, oppressed by the lack of benefits and insufficient salaries, struggle with found materials to build homes for their families. Primera considers, the figure of the house a symbol that represents the quality of life of a specific group (poor) of people. Like Primera, I use the house as a symbol to represent poor and wealthy, but I also try to explore other socio-economic dimensions. As I intended in the installation also titled "*Cardboard houses*" (Figure 2), I showcase a flickering light and the smell of coffee to represent family values and unconditional love, to illustrate non-material components of an ideal environment for familiar growth. The emotional qualities of "home" are not attached to physical structure, either humble or fancy. The physical and emotional character of houses can vary greatly even in the same community. For me a family can live happily in any conditions if love and genuine emotional components are present.

The fragility of the housing conditions on the slums in Latin America showcases the real cruelty of poverty. The idea of the American dream with the iconic two-story house with green gardens is a perpetual desire and illusion for the common Venezuelan worker. After graduating from Costa Rica and moving to the United States I had the chance to live the reality of these "fantasy" houses. The spacious prefabricated structures with many articles and appliances like: dishwashers, microwaves, etc that make life practical are almost universal. In my present situation, I recall and compare the physical characteristics between the improvised, fragile houses built by the people in the slums and the pretty-looking prefabricated houses owned by the American

middle class. I decided to juxtapose and compare both realities while exploring the practice of reduction woodcut print and layering multiple colors. By using a reductive method of relief printing (AKA suicide block) I started to shape and built a humble, vibrant and nostalgic colorful kitchen from the Venezuelan Andes where the preparation of breakfast is a ceremony. In contrast, I printed a dark and cold American kitchen with multiple cans of food. In the print, a faint light bulb hardly illuminates the immensity of that massive empty kitchen. Both prints create a Diptych titled: "*The kitchen from the other side 1 & 2*" (Figure 3), which is intended to show the essence of a home through the presence of non-material character in one of the two illustrated realities.

Adding illustrations to children stories.

A storyteller, makes complex information accessible to a broad audience in the form of a visual allegories. Illustrated stories shape the values of people by showing social problems in the form of metaphors. When I was younger, older people could not explain certain situations to me, rather they told me "you will understand one day". Venezuelan children book illustrator Rosana Farias, describes children's books as a window to educated through the universal visual language of creativity. Farias' work supported my reading learning while immersing me in a wonderful and vast world of imagination. Farias' illustration in the story: "*Niña Bonita*" introduced me to racial discrimination in Venezuela. Farias' work reinforces the language that empowers a Venezuelan Afro-Caribbean little girl whose beautiful black skin is honored even worshiped. Venezuela celebrates European light white skin as a symbol of beauty, neglecting certain adjectives to be attributed to other color skins. "*Niña Bonita*" elevates the black-skinned character with the use of multiple adjectives of beauty. The sequential illustrations of the story offered me an understandable narrative beyond my limited comprehension of the written language. The acquisition of common sense and equality are present in Alejandra Fuenmayor's work titled "*La Cama de Mamá*"/*Mommy's Bed*" (1990). This story shows the importance of gender equality and celebrates the virtue of being imaginative. Fuenmayor's work shows the use of

imagination for play avoiding stereotypical gender-based toys. This book showed me the importance of cleaning up, sharing and respect to others, values that I still practice on daily basis. Books like these inspired me to create images based on stories that individuals can enjoy and learn from.

The fantasy and subtlety of these illustrations introduce basic values that are later taught and reinforced by the family unit. Many time children are isolated by technological devices, which do not allow them to celebrate their own creative drive. Other times familiar practices and traditions can categorize sexual orientation as a taboo. I consider myself a storyteller staging immigration, self- discovery, nostalgia and home into printed visual narratives. The prints that I create are not illustrations based on a preexisting written narrative or story. My work consists of pictures that stand alone but also become part of an extended universe that is still unfolding with every new print I create. My subject matter is often derived from personal experience and the collection of social encounters, conversations and movies while traveling around Latin-America, United States and Asia.

CHAPTER III. CARVING NARRATIVES.

Printmaking and the art of multiples

While escaping from a cold night on September, Tim Han saw Reinaldo struggling to finish a ballpoint pen drawing. The shaky hand was hesitant to allow the ink to ruin a precious drawing that was the product of hours of work and imagination. Unable to replicate that drawing, Reinaldo questioned how to make another mark in pursuit of his desired graphic qualities. It was on that night that Tim Han brought to him the media that would satisfy his graphic endeavors and his need for multiples. Reinaldo was introduced to the laborious world of woodcut relief prints. By offering a set of gouges and a piece of MDF board, Reinaldo was baptized into an age-old tradition. Carving that wooden surface came naturally to him, but it wasn't until pulling its first proof that the bond between the artist and the medium was finally made. In the words of Mike Sonnichsen, Reinaldo was transported to the dark side of ink on paper.

Stories are made to share with others, and their dissemination keeps them from dying. Artist Kevin Haas defines printmaking as a gesture confined into a matrix that can be replicated multiple times. Printmaking is an antique art form of creating copies with an origin dated as far back as the use of hands as stencils in cave paintings. Master artist Albrecht Durer took the woodcut relief technique into a new level of intricacy. When the Church decided to expand, it needed images that illustrated their biblical scripts. Durer was commissioned to carve unique matrices that helped people visualize the religious power of church teachings. Just as these multiples helped the Church spread its words, bringing information to the working masses was seen both as a potential threat and an uplifting educational tool. Relief print enabled the voice of the oppressed working class to communicate their discontent for the current working conditions. Mexican printmaker Jose Guadalupe Posada created series of provocative prints, spreading revolutionary ideas against Mexican tyrants. I believe that art in printmaking is found every time that good craftsmanship and concept come together into a powerful design where the intention not simply to decorate but to create

awareness in many. In the piece "*The Ambition of One Upon Many*" (Figure 4) I pay tribute to the activist part of printmaking by making a political print. I illustrate the truth of the competitive system in the U.S and global economy. Success is seen in the form of ambitious accumulation of material goods and power. In order to acquire these goods, the oppression of many into production, is required to satisfy the destructive consumption habits of the few.

Reaching others with visual narratives develops communities linked by exchange of ideas while creating awareness of current common social issues. While people come and go, the need for storytelling and visual aids, I believe, will always remain. I feel it is my duty, being of my present time, to "re-present" important issues through graphic multiples.

Growing up in Caracas Venezuela, means growing up in the presence of a constant contrasting reality. The juxtaposition of those who "have" and those who "have not", illustrates a division of a city where slums and middle class buildings view each other across a valley in a distorted reflection. Like Caracas is divided by socio-economic and political ideals, my work is highly influenced by the use of visual contrast. The two opposite, black ink and white paper are constantly balancing in the reductive process of carving. This value range between light and dark develops a reciprocal relationship that forms my visual narratives. The balance of both counterparts must be precise to turn surface scratches into volumetric illustrations. There is no room for mistake in carving and if one dares to carve too much, the mistake must be assimilated in to work. I am inspired by the fear of wrong cuts and imbalance, just like many Venezuelan are fearful of violence and socio-economic imbalance living in the city. However, it seems that in the arts as in life, balance is managed both by the hand of the carver and by the social conditions of human experience. The only difference, I believe is that in the case of Venezuela, one hand is shaping the reality of 33 million people.

The external world and the inner portrayal: My face is a mask

Walk down the street in Caracas and you will see an ocean of unfamiliar faces. The face is the most identifiable part of our body many times mistaken to define who we are. I consider the face a mask that hides our deepest fears, desires and dreams. The idea of "*My Face is a Mask*" first came while watching the B-movie, "*Face Off*" by director John Woo in Costa Rica. In this movie characters exchange their faces and physical external features however they could not hide their true selves from those who knew them. Traditionally, portraits are often accompanied with customs, poses or icons that tell the story of the person that is being illustrated. I always wonder, why not have portraits that show a bit more of that internal story of the subject? Why not disclose the inner self and make it accessible and vulnerable for others to identify with? . The inner self becomes our ultimate home and its molded by the influence of outside stimuli. In the piece "*Him*" (Figure 5) the inner conflict inside a boy incapable of expressing his sexual desire due to the conservative environment of his parents' house. The house is placed on his throat, incapacitating his voice and ability to express his desires to others. It is in our inner world where we store our most precious intangible treasures in the form of memories and we continue to have faith in continued evolution.

The influence of the changing external world shapes our beliefs and values, molding them into our unique individual personality. Just like roots planted in our heart, the lessons learned from our family members will grow to influence our opinions and way of thinking. In the piece "*Pulling Roots*" (Figure 6) I decided to illustrate the internal transformation of an individual shaped by the influence of contemporary American society. The individual, after being immersed in this new world, decided to pull out some of his roots and build his own opinions and personality. "*Pulling Roots*" derives from the "*Inner Portrait*" series and illustrates the climax of a cyclical journey on the development of an individual, while being immersed in the intricacies and complexities of adulthood. The past is remembered while the present is reformulated which to new potential futures.

It is my belief that the creation of visual narratives using printmaking is a vital contemporary tool to preserve traditional storytelling. The dissemination of representational stories that transcend language barriers is propelled by the ability to print multiple copies from a single carved matrix. In my work, the celebration of memories nurtures the sensitive connection between the self and a comfortable, grounded place of belonging called "home". I believe I have managed to find a place of belonging in my relationship with others and in my personal printmaking practice. The different stages and processes of printmaking: the preparation and drawing of an idea, the carving, and the final printing, offer me diverse and challenging opportunities to explore my inner voice. Teaching and sharing print practices is a means to empower the voices of others by allowing them to share their stories. The current socio-political disparity in Venezuela requires a rebalancing in consideration of the collective and not just one sector of society. Just like the balance between negative and positive spaces in graphic work, I believe that creating strong visual printed narratives that embrace the dialogue between opposites might ideally conclude in social harmony. In my case, using iconography from wrongly named "third world countries", I create engaging visual stories that celebrate the beauty that resides in rich cultural heritage. It is my intention to offer illustrated images that reinforce the commonalities between all people. I will continue exploring the possibilities of using printed matter as I seek to develop visual potentials that defy the dimensionality of the paper surface. I believe in the infinite power of the graphic image and the power that resides in it to communicate a message beyond limitation of the written language.



Figure 1. "La Sopa: Como Decia Mama" 2016 woodcut print on paper



Figure 2. "Cardboard Houses" 2015. Mix Media Installation



Figure 3. "The kitchen from the other side 1 & 2"



Figure 4. "The ambition of one upon many" Linocut print on paper



Figure 5. "Him" 2015 Charcoal Drawing on paper.



Figure 6. "Pulling Roots" 2016 woodcut print on paper

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This lecture consisted on a panel integrated by Kevin Haas, Mary Farell, Chris Dryer and James Bailey on the contemporary practice of printmaking.