Meet LA’s Art Community: “I Always Was Able to Imagine Myself as an Artist,” Says Beatriz Cortez

An interview series spotlighting some of the great work coming out of Los Angeles. Hear directly from artists, curators, and art workers about their current projects and personal quirks.

by Elsa Wourl Almoro
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This week, we interview Beatriz Cortez, an artist whose work explores memory and loss in the aftermath of war and the experience of migration. Cortez holds an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts, and a doctorate in Latin American literature from Arizona State University. Since 2000 she has worked as a professor in the Department of Central American Studies at California State University, Northridge. Her work has been included in numerous solo and group exhibitions including Trinidad: Joy Station at Craft Contemporary; Made in LA 2018 at the Hammer Museum; Paroxysm of Sublime at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions; and Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas at the Queens Museum, New York and at UCR Arts in Riverside, California.
Where were you born?

I was born in San Salvador, El Salvador. Very close to a volcano with a beautiful name: Quetzaltepec, or the mountain where the Quetzal birds live.

How long have you been living in Los Angeles?

I have been living in Los Angeles for 19 years and four months. This means that I have lived here for more than the 18 years and 11 months that I lived in El Salvador. That is so strange to me.

What’s your first memory of seeing art?

I don’t remember. There were art books on our shelves that my parents had brought with them from the time when they lived in New York before I was born, there were my dad’s paintings, and also there were some works by Salvadoran artists in my house including paintings and ceramics. My aunt, Elena Castro Morán, was an artist since the time when I was little, and my brother is a musician. My mom took me to see ancient Maya sites, which impacted my understanding of art; the most important was Joya de Cerén, where ancient Maya structures had been preserved by a volcanic eruption. All my life I was surrounded by art, and I always was able to imagine myself as an artist.

Do you like to photograph the art you see? If so, what device do you use to photograph?

Yes, I love to photograph art to see it again lots of times, and I carry lots of photos in my phone.

What was your favorite exhibition this past year?

This is a very hard question to answer, there are so many exhibitions that I have loved this past year. In Los Angeles, I loved starting 2019 with Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s work wrapping the exterior facade of MOCA on Grand Avenue, a show that opened in 2018. Also, one of the great highlights this year was to be at the opening of Kara Walker’s exhibition, *Fons Americanus*, at the Tate Modern.

What’s the best book you’ve read recently?

I have been reading *Más allá del duelo: Otras formas de imaginar, sentir y pensar la memoria en Centroamérica* by Yansi Pérez. She is a brilliant Salvadoran scholar, the chair of the Spanish Department at Carleton College in Minnesota. She recently spent a year here, mapping memories of Central Americans in Los Angeles. In this case, her book explores the construction of memory after the end of the war that brought so many Central Americans to migrate, and forced
several generations of Central Americans to learn how to process what they or their parents had lived during the time of the war. She explores all this from the perspective of literary and cultural production.

Do you prefer to see art alone or with friends?

I love to see art alone and with friends.

What are you currently working on?

Currently, I am working on a sculpture called “Glacial Erratic,” it is a large rock that I am making to be installed at Rockefeller Center next spring. I am also making the work for my solo show titled “Other Frequencies,” it will open at Commonwealth and Council in March. In addition, I am working with my friend Kang Seung Lee on a collaborative project about disappearance. And I am making a work to honor the Japanese elders who made a beautiful garden for the children forced to grow up in Manzanar. Now that many children are in detention centers, I appreciate so much these role models and I am grateful for their teachings.

What is one accomplishment that you are particularly proud of?

I am particularly proud of having survived the war in El Salvador and the subsequent migration it propelled to the United States. I am also proud of having co-written with my friend Douglas more than 30 different interdisciplinary courses on the transnational Central American experience and the diversity within it. These courses made it possible for us to create the first Bachelor of Central American Studies in the United States, which we inaugurated in 2006 at California State University, Northridge. It has been amazing to see almost 200 of our former students go on to grad school, to become professors, lawyers, community leaders, actors, journalists, teachers, artists, etc.

Where do you turn to for inspiration for your projects?

Each of my projects has a life of its own, but usually I draw inspiration and information from different archives, from books — I read a lot of literature and philosophy. I also draw inspiration from ancient art and culture from the Americas, from contemporary Indigenous thought, from the life and dignity of immigrants, and in general, from daily life in San Salvador and Los Angeles.