

TRADICIONES TEACHER GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Tradiciones examines thought-provoking cultural traditions that celebrate the beauty in life and death. Featured are paintings, installations and film by a select group of Latino artists, including Javier Chavira, Maria Tomasula, Marcos Raya and Carlos Rolón / Dzine, plus filmmakers Brian Ashby, Emmanuel Camacho and Gabriela Fernandez.

Javier Chavira draws on traditional Mexican sources of imagery influenced by his Catholic upbringing – the iconic depictions of saints that adorned his childhood home resonate through his powerful portraits of humanitarian and political activists.

The stunning paintings of RAM Collection artist **Maria Tomasula** are reminiscent of 17th century vanitas. Rich jewel tones, pulpy fruits and gem-encrusted crowns give her paintings a luxurious beauty while her use of symbolic references captures an undertone of religion that heralds back to her childhood, where she was raised in a working class immigrant Latino neighborhood in South Chicago.

Marcos Raya, often called “The Outlaw Artist of 18th Street,” delves into the dark psychological experiences from his upbringing in Mexico and later in “the nightmares of barrio existence.” Gritty, political and deeply personal, Raya created an on-site installation that reflects the obstacles, loneliness and turmoil of life in the barrio.

Created as the focal point of his Ghost Bike Project, **Carlos Rolón / Dzine** uses ghost bikes in a site-specific installation to explore universal themes of grief, memory, love and loss. This towering 12-foot sculpture, fabricated in Rockford with more than 100 ghost bikes, serves as a symbolic metaphor—and collective memorial—for the lives of those we have loved and lost. His work is heavily influenced by the duality of his rich Puerto Rican heritage and first-generation immigrant upbringing. *For more about Dzine’s public art installation follow @ghostbikeproject #ghostbikeproject on Instagram.*

Also featured is the award-winning documentary “Botanicas de la Villita” by filmmakers **Brian Ashby, Emmanuel Camacho and Gabriela Fernandez**. Botanicas (literal translation: “botany stores”) can be found in Hispanic and Caribbean communities in cities across the United States. Most botanicas purvey goods and services including herbal and folk medicines, religious items and holistic health advice, while a smaller subset offer spiritual procedures such as cleansing or spell casting. In Chicago, more than a dozen botanicas can be found operating along or near 26th Street from Kedzie to Kostner in Little Village, the heart of the city’s Mexican immigrant community.

CURATOR STATEMENT

Life and death – two simple yet complex truths that have been interpreted and expressed in myriad traditions by every culture across every era of human history. While visiting Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood during the Mexican holiday Dia de Los Muertos, I was struck by the stark contrast between many cultural traditions in the Latino community—the permeating emphasis on family, food, music, and religion—and my own Swedish upbringing. The enticing beauty resonated throughout the organic expressions of these traditions and rituals through the entrancing murals and botanicas that peppered the streets, engulfing me with their mesmerizing energy and begging to be examined. In creating this exhibition I sought to share the overwhelming sense of love, passion and beauty I experienced that fall day in Pilsen.

The artwork on view by this group of Latino artists is compelling and fascinating. From the gritty, somber memorial installation by Marcos Raya to the flawless paintings of Maria Tomasula, to the iconic portraits of activists by Javier Chavira and Carlos Rolón / Dzine’s genius *Ghost Stories* installation, to the award-winning documentary short “Botanicas de la Villita” by Brian Ashby, Emmanuel Camacho and Gabriela Fernandez – my hope is that *Tradiciones* will challenge and inspire viewers to celebrate the beauty in both life and death.

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Carrie Johnson
Curator, Rockford Art Museum

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Brian Ashby, Emmanuel Camacho and Gabriela Fernandez

Botanicas de la Villita, 2013

film (looped video, run time: 6 min, 53 sec)

Courtesy of Scrappers Film Group

Brian Ashby's co-directorial debut, *Scrappers*, won Best Documentary at the 2010 Chicago Underground Film Festival and made Roger Ebert's list of top documentaries for that year. Emmanuel Camacho is an instructor at Yollocalli Arts Reach, an initiative of the National Museum of Mexican Art; he recently shot and acted in the narrative feature *Maydays* (2013 Chicago Latino Film Festival). Chilean Gabriela Fernandez is a journalist and travel writer who recently arrived in Chicago after earning her MA in International Development and Cooperation. Title credits by Akemi Hong who is Senior Designer at JB Chicago and an instructor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

This short film originally appeared as part of *The Grid*, a documentary web series profiling Chicago businesses, subcultures, and landscapes, on Gaper's Block, a Chicago-centric web publication.

Carlos Rolón / Dzine (American, b. 1970)

Born in Chicago, Carlos Rolón / Dzine attended Columbia College Chicago with a concentration in painting. Drawing from art history, popular culture, subculture, post-conceptual methods, appropriation and the institution, his work addresses these issues through site-specific installations and a studio practice viewed through a lens of spirituality, romanticism, preservation, memory, faith, folklore and craft making – all heavily influenced by his rich Puerto Rican heritage and upbringing as a first-generation immigrant. Questioning beauty, identity, the diaspora and its relationship to art, his carefully crafted hybrid artworks, artifacts, performances and installations are playfully situated between the contradictory worlds of conspicuous faux and luxury, the baroque and blue-collar culture. This language stems from the artist's upbringing and childhood home that was adorned with faux venetian wallpaper, patterned colored walls, porcelain tchotchkes, ornate chandeliers, mirrors, decorative gates and other objects that refer to upper-class culture. Originally used within the home to impress—out of necessity, ego, or simply for comfort and a cultural connection—these works of self-reflection and imagined luxury allow the public to rethink the objects presented outside of their original setting. The work is at once melancholic, excessive and exuberant, poised somewhere between celebration and regret – illuminating how the masculine can become delicate and the how the ornate can be minimal. The result proves to be universal and painstakingly honest.

Rolón is a recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award for Painting and Sculpture. His work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions presented by museums

worldwide, including the Dallas Contemporary; Bass Museum of Art, Miami; BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, England; Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, San Juan; Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis; Marta Herford Museum, Germany; Museum Het Domein, Sittard, The Netherlands; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; Museo de Barrio, New York; Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno (CAAM), Canary Islands; and the Ukrainian Pavilion in the 52nd Biennale di Venezia, Italy. He has participated in residencies at the Nairobi National Museum, Kenya; Instituto Buena Vista, Curacao Centre for Contemporary Art; and as the Kraus Visiting Professor of Art at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh. Rolón is represented in many public and private museum collections, including the Bass Museum of Art, Miami; Brooklyn Museum, New York; City of Chicago Public Art Collection; Museo del Barrio, New York; Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, San Juan; Museum Het Domein, Sittard, The Netherlands; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City; and Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev. The artist lives and works in Chicago.

Javier Chavira (American, born Mexico 1971)

Javier Chavira is an artist who has no misgivings about creating images that straddle the line between realism and abstraction. He is as much at home with the technical rigor of academic tradition and the liberating nature of formalism. His aim is to represent and at times unify those temperaments to create, as the great Oscar Wilde once wrote, “a work of art that is useless as a flower is useless.” The artist’s diverse catalog exists for its own sake and it is not explainable other than in the terms of itself. The useless and beautiful object created with great delight can hopefully provide the viewer “a moment of joy by simply looking at it.”

Chavira earned an MFA from Northern Illinois University’s School of Art in 2002 and has exhibited nationally and internationally. His work is in numerous public and private collections, including the National Museum of Mexican Art, the Bank of America Corporate Collection, and the Center for Latino and Latin American Studies at Northern Illinois University. Aside from being an active artist, Chavira is also an educator. He is an associate professor of painting and drawing at Governors State University in University Park, Illinois, a position he’s held since 2003. Chavira is represented by 33 Contemporary Gallery, Chicago, and currently resides in Crown Point, Indiana, with his wife, Sarah, and their daughter, Paloma.

Marcos Raya (American, born Mexico 1948)

It is not easy to capture the essence of Raya's work, which consists of fragments multiplied in different mediums. There are several Rayas – or rather, there is a single Raya with many faces, which we can attribute to his constant reinvention. His work does not subscribe to any school, follow trends, nor does it aim to please the commercial galleries, neither is it part of an ideological and artistic "ism." Before fame knocked at his door Raya's murals had already captured the attention of art historians and fellow

artists. Since the mid '70s, Raya was regarded as one of the master muralists in Chicago. He regarded his murals as merely acts of "intellectual resistance against capitalist and military aggression undertaken by American polices during the Cold War on a global scale." A decade earlier Raya had received a wristwatch as a gift and later destroyed it. For him, conventional time existed along 18th Street. His personal time was spent in alleys and hideouts where winos and bums—the so-called "lumpen proletarian bohos"—hung out. For Raya, the bums had more freedom to dream. As he explored the art of his environment, his vision as an artist broadened: "I saw art in factories, bars, hospitals, streets and alleys." This is how he lived the "dog years" for two decades. Raya later reflected, "Oscar Wilde said we are all living in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." His odyssey into the dark side of the street, the nightmares of barrio existence, often lent his work a harrowing, hallucinatory intensity, with delirious dream images made real. After plumbing the underworld, he could return to the land of the living and make art that looked his devils straight in the eye. Characteristic of Mexican culture, it often mocked death with macabre humor and irony. Raya also began collecting debris and objects from the streets and junk stores and in the sensibility of Rasquachismo (the aesthetic display of everyday materials for decorative purposes) created Dada-like installations, assemblages and ofrendas (offerings to the dead). This period saw the genesis of some of the artist's iconic images. With their wine bottles wrapped in brown paper bags and bound with twine, the largely autobiographical works symbolically linked Raya's illness with social and economic ills on the streets around him. He has taken his place in Chicago's art scene as a true artist of his own lived experience outside of the dictates of mainstream art world trends. Rare is the artist who can achieve this today.—*excerpted from the introduction essay "Marcos Raya: The Lumpen Years, 1972–1995" by Francisco Piña for the 2004 book Raya: Fetishizing the Imaginary*

Maria Tomasula (American, b. 1958)

ARTIST STATEMENT

I'm interested in how we come to be constituted as individuals, and in giving visual form to that dynamic in the medium of paint.

It seems apparent that we're shaped by forces outside of ourselves; that we develop in a sort of feedback loop between our biological bodies and the cultural matrix we live in. But, how do you give a notion like that visual form? For me, it centers on making images in a way that eliminates any trace of an individual mark, with all its historical associations of agency and uniqueness. I try to paint with marks that are virtually nonexistent. I use a process using such tiny marks that you virtually can't see them. I then further eliminate them by blending, and in the final reworking of every layer, I stipple to try to erase any visible trace of my hand, thereby symbolically eliminating 'myself' as I paint. I'd like to make paintings that look as if they could have been made by mechanical means, like with an airbrush. The process is meticulous, precise, cool and utterly methodical. But the image that emerges from this process is totally centered on

the notion of subjectivity. I pick every element in these pictures for its expressive values; the paintings are meant to be affective, eliciting responses centered on reflection and feeling. It's an aesthetics founded on the senses, even of the erotic, of sensation that conjures the tactile quality of material experience. In other words, it's an aesthetics founded on the embodied self. So, all I'm really trying to do in these paintings is to symbolically enact—in visual form—the sensation of being, a feeling that for me centers on the persistent sensation of particularity, but a particularity that hasn't grown out of a condition of freedom to self actualize, but rather, a sensation of individuality that's qualified and complicated, even countered, by the knowledge that it's been formed within conditions of constraint. The visual metaphor that I mean to be operating in these pictures is that an accumulation of tiny strokes rendered invisible through overlap creates the ground out of which an image of sentiment emerges. It's supposed to be symbolic of the way we have interior lives of depth, but those lives take on their recognizable contours only within the constraints of the conditions we live in.

EXHIBITION VOCABULARY

BOTANICA. (literal translation: "botany stores") can be found in Hispanic and Caribbean communities in cities across the United States. Most botanicas purvey goods and services including herbal and folk medicines, religious items, and holistic health advice, while a smaller subset offer spiritual procedures such as cleansing or spell-casting.

ICON. Loosely, a picture, sculpture, or building, when regarded as an object of veneration.

INSTALLATION. Art that is or has been installed (arranged in a place) either by the artist or as specified by the artist.

MEMORIAL. A monument to the memory of someone or something, which is sometimes an event or group effort. Monuments can range widely in size, from the smallest and most intimate and personal to very elaborate.

MURAL. A large design or picture, most commonly created on the wall of a public building.

OFRENDA. Offering

SYMBOL. A form, image, or subject representing a meaning other than the one with which it is usually associated.

ACTIVITY #1

MAKE A MEMORIAL

RAM's exhibition includes a Ghost Bike installation, created by Carlos Rolón / Dzine. Ghost Bikes are small and somber memorials for bicyclists who are killed or hit on the street. A bicycle is painted all white and locked to a street sign near the crash site, accompanied by a small plaque. They serve as reminders of the tragedy that took place on an otherwise anonymous street corner, and as quiet statements in support of cyclists' right to safe travel. These bikes serve as a symbolic metaphor and collective memorial for the lives of those we have loved and lost while advocating bicycle safety and increasing community awareness. In this lesson, students will create a memorial for someone that they have loved.

Materials

paper
paint
pencils
markers
photographs
glue
scissors
other materials as needed

Instructions

Discuss the idea of loss with students. Losing objects can be difficult, especially if we never see them again. Sometimes we lose people because they move away, and it can be hard to think that they might forget us. Sometimes we lose a friend or a pet or a family member, and that can be the most difficult loss to comprehend.

Throughout the whole world, many people have grappled with the subject of loss. When we lose people, we try and think of ways to remember them. The most common way to remember someone or something that we have lost is to create a memorial. A memorial can be something simple, like creating a photo collage with pictures that remind you of that person or thing, or it can be incredibly elaborate, such as a building or monument.

Have students research some famous memorials. Suggestions may include the Taj Mahal, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (The Wall), the Adams Memorial in Rock Creek Church Cemetery in Washington, D.C., the Arc de Triomphe, the Hachikō statue in Japan, etc. As a class, brainstorm ideas of types of memorials that students could create themselves. These could include a drawing or painting, a collage, a memory box, a plaque, etc. Students will then apply their knowledge of memorials by creating an object in memory of a person or pet to whom they felt close, or to someone they admire. It is important to emphasize to students that their memorials don't have to be of someone who has passed away.

When completed, create a classroom *ofrenda* where students may leave their memorials. An *ofrenda* is an altar (not for worship) that is set up to remember and honor the memory of deceased loved ones.

ISBE Standards: 1C, 3A, 3B, 3C, 4A, 4B, 25A, 25B, 26B, 27B

ACTIVITY #2

Dia de los Muertos Prints

Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is a holiday celebrated by people in Mexico and parts of Latin America on November 1 and 2. Rather than grieve over the loss of loved ones, they instead celebrate and honor those that are no longer with us.

One artist who heavily influenced the way that death is portrayed on this holiday is Jose Guadalupe Posada. In this lesson, students will create a monoprint inspired by his work.

Materials

6x9 Scratch Foam (1 per student)
9x12 construction paper in bright colors
masking or painters tape
tracing paper
black printing ink
brayer
plexiglass
pencils
erasers

Instructions

Discuss Jose Guadalupe Posada with students and show them his artwork. Posada's work reflected the times in which he lived. His illustrations made the stories, news articles, and advertisements that accompanied them easy for people to understand. Posada was regarded as the voice of the common man, and his art helped communicate the public's unhappiness with their government. *La Catrina* is one of his most famous works, and is one of the most recognizable images at Dia de los Muertos celebrations. (INSERT IMAGE OF LA CATRINA)

Have students view Jose Guadalupe Posada's work for inspiration. Students will draw their design on a 6x9 inch piece of tracing paper. Using tracing paper will make it easier for students to transfer their design to the Scratch Foam. Once their image is complete, tape their design to a 6x9 piece of Scratch Foam (This should be taped on backwards so that the image they are tracing is opposite of what they first drew. This will ensure that their image prints correctly).

With a dull pencil, have the students tracing over their lines onto the Scratch Foam, pressing hard enough to leave an impression. Remove the tracing paper and trace one more time.

Add a small amount (about the size of a dime) of printing ink to the plexiglass. Spread the ink using a brayer, then roll the ink onto the Scratch Foam. Have students select a piece of colored construction paper. Have them put their Scratch Foam on the construction paper, ink side down, and press firmly over the image. Lift the foam from the paper and set the print aside to dry.

ISBE Standards: 1C, 3A, 3B, 3C, 4A, 4B, 25A, 25B, 26B, 27B