

Encounters with “Latin American Art” in Canada

From Toronto to Vancouver, 1999–2021

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FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH LATIN AMERICAN ART IN CANADA

I moved to Canada in 1999 to pursue a master’s degree in Fine Arts at York University, located in the traditional territories of the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Huron-Wendat, and the Mississauga of the Credit First Nation, who are the current treaty holders of what is otherwise known as Toronto, Ontario. At the time, I was developing a career as visual artist in Guadalajara, Mexico, the city where I was born, which is located in the territories where the Purhepecha, the Coca, the Tecuexe, the Huichol-Wixarica, and the Nahua communities have lived for centuries. Back then, my work consisted of mixed media, large-scale installations, body sculptures, and drawings, mostly made with ephemeral and colorless materials such as wax, latex, and Plexiglas, and sometimes with clay, bronze, and silver. I was inspired by the work of Ana Mendieta, Eva Hesse, and Louise Bourgeois. After having several solo and collective shows, I sought opportunities to study abroad.

During my first studio critique session at York University, a faculty member asked me why my art was so colorless and looked so unlike all the rich and dramatic figurative Latin American art that she had seen. Perhaps this was a provocation on her part. I was surprised and did not know how to respond. I was indeed an artist from Mexico, born in the city where José Clemente Orozco painted one of his most famous series of murals in the Hospicio Cabañas (which I religiously visited throughout my elementary school years), but I was trying to escape this nationalist and sexist heritage. Back then, I did not know that Mexican feminist or conceptual art existed—a sculpture of María Izquierdo had not been erected yet at the Rotonda de los Hombres Ilustres de Jalisco.¹ It took me a lot of unlearning, researching, and traveling to

discover that feminist and conceptual art existed in both Mexico and Latin America, as well as to comprehend the reasons why I have never studied them and why Canadians did not know these histories either. At the MFA program at York, I was the only Latin American female international student in my cohort. Armed with no critical theory and insufficient art historical knowledge, I could not begin to craft a response to such a question that would satisfactorily position myself in the Canadian context.

This text describes my encounters with the term Latin American art in Canada as I moved from Toronto to Vancouver. I employ autobiography to narrate and position myself as a member of the AKA art collective (2012–16) based in Vancouver and examine our conflicting relations with the Latin American art category. At times understood as a necessary evil and other times emphatically negated, this category has the potential to provide visibility to the cultural resources and initiatives that migrants from the region bring to the Vancouver art scene, known for its embrace of photo-conceptualist male artists.

The presence of many artists of Latin American origin in the region is determined by a complex web of political, economic, and cultural interests combined with personal circumstances. Their presence also reflects international circuits of artists and curators, as well as migration policies that include welcoming refugees, attracting international students, and accepting migrant workers through temporary work agreements. Following a discussion on some salient aspects of the question of identity in Latin American modern and contemporary art, I describe some institutional and independent spaces that support Latin American culture in the region and their relation to three influxes of peoples to Vancouver: the arrival of Chilean refugees in the 1970s, the presence of Cuban art in the

1. In 2018 a sculpture of the painter María Izquierdo Gutiérrez (1902–55) was placed in the Rotonda de los Jaliscienses Ilustres (called Rotonda de los Hombres Ilustres until 2000), a public plaza that honors important

men and women in the science, arts, and culture from the state of Jalisco. She was the third woman to occupy a place in the plaza.

late 1990s, and current flows of Latin American international students and temporary agricultural workers. These flows frame the activities of the AKA art collective and serve as a foundation for ongoing efforts to bring visibility to Latin American modern and contemporary art in Vancouver, in the context of profound cultural and political changes currently underway. Loosely framed by two personal encounters, the first in Toronto and the second in Vancouver, the text weaves in reflections on how the question of identity (cultural, gendered, individual and collective) has informed my work and experiences in Canada since 1999.

IDENTITY IN LATIN AMERICAN ART

The question of identity in Latin American art is a contested issue. As a construct, it refers to the creative production of people from more than twenty countries and five dependencies of different races and ethnicities and an ever-expanding group of diasporic artists. Beginning with the nation-building projects of the 1920s, Latin American art has been mobilized to serve national, regional, and economic interests. In the late 1950s, Cuban art critic José Gómez Sicre's promotion of this category became a discursive tool of the Pan-American Union in the context of the Cold War and its imperialistic plans for the region. In the 1970s, the topic was renewed and reappropriated by Latin American experts who debated how to manage the distinct cultural geographies that make up the production and histories of Latin American art and its politics.² Simultaneously, the development of art biennials, particularly the Bienal de São Paulo (1951), the San Juan Biennial of Latin American and Caribbean Engraving, Puerto Rico (1970), and the Bienal de La Habana (1984), significantly influenced the mobilization and a renewed interest in Latin American modern and contemporary art among international collectors. This interest solidified an academic field of research internationally, followed by a plethora of international exhibitions that circulated a homogenous perspective of Latin American art, a distorted representation that curator Mari Carmen Ramírez labeled as "The Fantastic."³ Indeed, the circulation of this art reinforced the othering strategies that have

sustained the exclusionary politics of the modern art canon: the use of categories of identity to mark and differentiate the Other vis-à-vis nonmarked artists from the Anglo-American and European regions. As art historian Rita Eder pointed out in the early 1990s, "every time the issue of identity in Latin American visual arts is discussed, what is really on the table is its legitimacy, or the exercise of conceptualizing the modern."⁴

As neoliberal economic policies were implemented across the hemisphere and globalization emerged as the new world order, conversations and debates on the existence and characteristics of Latin American art continued. These debates reached one of its many high points with the publication of curator Gerardo Mosquera's essay on Latin American art ceasing to be, in the context of ARCO Madrid in 1996.⁵ By declaring the end of Latin American art, Mosquera referred to two processes that were taking shape simultaneously. Within art production, he observed an internal process of overcoming what he called "the neurosis of identity among critics, curators and artists."⁶ Through this process of interiorization, a simplified and homogenous notion of Latin American art ceased to exist, allowing for richer and more varied artistic discourses, practices, and recognition of differences. On the other hand, Mosquera discussed an international process in which Latin American art was being "valued as an art without surnames."⁷ This internationalization was developing a third space composed of diverse international art circuits that flowed in multiple directions. For Mosquera, these interconnected processes allowed for a recognition of difference, one that is not free of the dangers of quantitative internationalization and identity quotas but had the potential to transform the dominant circuits of global art by creating alternative circuits to the hegemonic center-periphery. Concomitant to these transformations was an abundance of curatorial projects and academic programs that significantly expanded the understanding of this art. Breakthrough international exhibitions aimed at decentering dominant narratives by providing regional or global variants, such as *Global Conceptualisms: Points of Origin, 1950–1990s* (1999), *Inverted Utopias* (2004), and *Radical Women Latin American Art, 1960–1985*

2. Rita Eder, "Art and Identity in Latin America" in *Being America. Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Rachel Weiss and Alan West (New York: White Wine Press, 1991), 29–38.

3. Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Beyond 'The Fantastic': Framing Identity in U. S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art," *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 60–68.

4. Eder, "Art and Identity," 29.

5. Gerardo Mosquera, "El arte Latinoamericano deja de serlo," *ARCO latino*, Madrid (1996): 7–10.

6. Gerardo Mosquera, "Good-bye Identity, Welcome Difference," *Third Text* 15, no. 56 (2001): 27.

7. Mosquera, "Good-bye Identity," 27.

(2017). In addition, there were a series of solo exhibitions of Latin American artists in US museums (Lygia Clark at MOMA, 2014, and Hélio Oiticica at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2017). Other projects emerging from a Latin American perspective included Luis Camnitzer's *Conceptualisms in Latin America* (2007) and *La red conceptualismos del Sur* (2007), directed by Ana Longoni in Buenos Aires. Correspondingly, the establishment of Latin American collections such as DAROS Latino America (2002) and the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection (starting in the 1970s) increased the visibility of Latin American artists internationally and fueled an incipient art market.

In a recent talk on identity in Latin American contemporary art, Mari Carmen Ramírez offered a current assessment of Mosquera's assertions. She explained the positive effects of these transformations in displacing widespread distortions and market-driven stereotypes that have characterized the art from the region.⁸ However, she is cautious of triumphalist perspectives that celebrate the erasure of cultural identities and the obliteration of the center-periphery paradigm, because they fail to consider the uneven playing field in which these processes take place.⁹ The unequal terms of economic exchange of the global economy have not significantly changed the power relations and hierarchies of the art world. For Ramírez, these uneven conditions continue to preclude the possibility of giving Latin American art institutions the authority to legitimize art from other parts of the world.¹⁰ Hence, despite the increased participation of Latin American artists and curators in global circuits of contemporary art and more broader understandings of their creative productions, the othering strategies of the modern art canon that Eder described have not altogether disappeared.

In the last decade, as feminist, queer, and decolonial discourses have given way to more fluid ways of understanding Latin American art identity, the emergence of the category "Latinx" along with social demands emerging from #NiUnaMas, #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter

8. Mari Carmen Ramírez, "From 'Identity' to 'the Global': The Contemporary Art Program in Latin America," a lecture in the Interrogating Global Contemporary Art series organized by the University of Houston MA in Art History Program, streamed live October 13, 2020, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5R1OedroVY>.

9. Ramírez, "From 'Identity' to 'the Global.'"

10. Ramírez.

movements continue to reveal the exclusionary politics of the art world and the paradoxical workings of identity markers. On the one hand, these markers can be productively mobilized to reveal oppressive social mechanisms such as the racist, sexist, and Anglo-European structures that dominate the art world. On the other hand, artists divest themselves from identity categories in search of recognition on an equal footing with nonmarked artists. But as with any other social construct, cultural identities are fluid, malleable, and extremely complex. A current case in point is discussed by Arlene Dávila in her recent book on Latinx art. Dávila points out how the category of Latin American art in the United States is marshaled against Latinx artists who do not have strong connections to their home countries.¹¹ Nonetheless, most of the discourse and debate on the topic of Latin American and Latinx art tends to exclude artists living north of the United States. This exclusion responds to art market imperatives and to the historical interconnections between the United States and the Latin American region, which Canada is not excluded from. Like the United States, Canada has benefited extensively from the flows of Latin American migration, the cultural and economic resources migrants bring with them, and the extraction of natural resources from the region.

LATIN AMERICAN ART AND CULTURE IN VANCOUVER

In a recent article on the presence of Latin American art in Canadian museums and universities, art historian Alena Robin describes interest in it as uneven and lacking a clear goal.¹² This interest has responded to specific waves of migration to different regions, to the personal interests of private donors and collectors, and to global connections of curators and artists who regularly attract touring or curated exhibitions. As Robin tells us, "the first donations to museum collections [of Latin American art to Canadian museums] were at the beginning of the [twentieth] century; the first temporary exhibitions were organized in the early 1940s; and universities started hiring specialists in the field in the 1970s."¹³ In Vancouver there has been fluctuating interests in Latin American art

11. Arlene M. Dávila, *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press; 2020), 9.

12. Alena Robin, "Mapping the Presence of Latin American Art in Canadian Museums and Universities," *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2019): 33–57.

13. Robin, "Mapping the Presence," 35.

and artists since the 1970s. Its contemporary art scene and vibrant artist-run centers have attracted many traveling shows and a diverse range of artists and curators to show, study, and curate exhibitions. However, when faced with Vancouver's "provincial and protective contemporary art scene," as curator Keith Wallace describes it, these initiatives are seldom permanent.¹⁴ The attention given to modern and contemporary Latin American art does not compare with the interest and support that exists in eastern Canada, mainly in Toronto and Montréal, where galleries with a special focus on Latin American contemporary art exist as well as significant collections of Latin American Art in art museums and public galleries.¹⁵

The main academic institutions in Vancouver, the University of British Columbia (UBC) and Simon Fraser University (SFU) have provided platforms for students and scholars to study, research and build careers related to Latin American culture (including my own). Both universities offer courses in Latin American and Caribbean history, literature, and culture. They also host two vibrant Latin American studies programs. The Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at UBC holds The Blanca and Ricardo Muratorio Collection, the largest collection of Latin American art and artifacts in the city.¹⁶ However, currently neither SFU nor UBC have faculty members devoted to teaching modern or contemporary Latin American art full time, nor are these fields meaningfully incorporated into their art history curriculums.¹⁷ A brief exception took place during 2002–3, when Rita Eder was awarded a Canada Research Chair to teach modern and

14. For example, independent curator Michèle Faguet directed the artist-run center Or Gallery during 2006–7 after having directed galleries in Bogotá and Mexico City. For a reflection on Faguet's programming and the Vancouver art scene, see Keith Wallace, "Artist-Run Centers in Vancouver; A Reflection on Three Texts," Fall 2010, accessed November 18, 2021, <https://fillip.ca/content/artist-run-centres-in-vancouver#notes>.

15. In Toronto, the Sur Gallery was the first established in Toronto to exclusively promote Latin American art in the city. It is part of the not-for-profit organization Latin American Canadian Art Projects (LACAP), established in 2005 to promote Latin American art and culture. In Montréal, Galerie Lilian Rodriguez was founded in 1984 with a focus on contemporary Latin American art. For collections, see Robin, "Mapping the Presence."

16. This collection has no emphasis on modern or contemporary art. For more on MOA, see Robin, "Mapping the Presence," 52.

17. Robin, 52. For a list of Latin American courses at UBC, see <https://las.arts.ubc.ca/all-courses/>, for SFU, see <https://www.sfu.ca/students/calendar/2021/fall/courses/las.html> (as of September 1, 2021). Emily Carr Art and Design University, another important art school in the city, offers no courses in the area either.

contemporary Latin American art history in the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory (AHVA) at UBC.¹⁸ Eder joined the well-known art historians Marvin S. Cohodas, who had been teaching and researching the arts of Indigenous Latin American and other non-Western peoples in AHVA; and Serge Guilbaut, who taught modern and contemporary art from the mid 1970s on. Cohodas was actively involved in establishing an interdisciplinary undergraduate program in Latin American Studies at UBC. Guilbaut had strong connections with Latin American art historians and curators. During his time at UBC, he organized various symposiums and promoted exchanges across the Americas and Europe, putting AHVA on the radar of an international network of scholars interested in modern and contemporary Latin American art.¹⁹ Those efforts ended after Eder departed and both Cohodas and Guilbaut retired.

Parallel to this uneven institutional interest and beginning with the influx of Chilean refugees in 1974, several independent projects promoting Latin American art and culture have been established in Vancouver. The legacy of Chilean refugees in the Canadian literary field has been widely acknowledged. In Vancouver, the Chilean community has significantly contributed to all fields of cultural production.²⁰ Through my research meetings with feminist activist, journalist, educator, and award-winning author Carmen Rodríguez, I learned of the long-lasting cultural impacts of the Chilean community in the region.²¹ Beginning with establishment of the bilingual (in English and Spanish) magazine *Aquelarre, a Magazine for Latin American Women*, established by group Chilean women exiles in Vancouver in 1989, to the most current initiatives such as the Vancouver Latin American Film

18. See <https://arthistoryincanada.ca/by-the-numbers/>, accessed February 15, 2021.

19. Some symposia organized by Guilbaut at UBC included "Threatened Identities: Self-Imagining Mexico and Canada" in 1992, "The Exotic Gaze and the Mexican Appeal: Views for North America 1930–1960" in 1995, and "Solitudes and Globalization: Post–World War II Art and Culture across the Americas" in 2006. See <https://ahva.ubc.ca/persons/serge-guilbaut/>, accessed February 15, 2021. The Belkin Art Gallery at UBC has sporadically hosted Latin American art exhibitions and academic programs. See <https://belkin.ubc.ca/>.

20. See Francis Peddle, *Young, Well-Educated, and Adaptable: Chilean Exiles in Ontario and Quebec, 1973–2010* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014).

21. "A Conversation with Carmen Rodríguez," video, 10:26, available on the website for the event organized by May Chazan and Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, *Manifesting Resistance; Conversations on Intergenerational Memory across the Americas*, March 7–10, 2018, accessed September 15, 2021, <https://www.agingactivisms.org/manifestingresistance>.



FIGURE 1. Manuel Piña, *Sin título*, de la serie “Aguas Baldías”/from the Water Wastelands series, 1992–93 (photograph provided by Manuel Piña under Creative Commons license BY 4.0)

Festival (VLAFF) established in 2003 and the Vancouver Latin American Cultural Centre (VLACC) established in 2012, Rodríguez and an ever-growing Latin American community have enthusiastically worked with precarious funding to develop independent initiatives to make up for the dearth of institutional spaces dedicated to Latin American culture in general.²²

The most sustained impact in the field of contemporary art in the region is related to the global interest in Cuban art that took hold in the 1990s. In 1994, the Vancouver-based Canadian curators Scott Watson and Keith Wallace visited the Fifth Bienal de La Habana and experienced the energetic and defiant art of what the Cuban artist, curator, and art critic Antonio Eligio Fernández, known as Tonel, describes as “the generation of the first stage of the special period.”²³ At that point, Watson and Wallace established a relation with a number of Cuban artists and curators including Juan Antonio Molina and Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, then members of the curatorial team of the Havana Biennial and later involved with Daros and the Cisneros Fontanals Art

Foundation (CIFO). Watson, Wallace, Molina, and Valdés worked on a research project that culminated with the exhibition *New Art from Cuba: Utopian Territories*, March 22–May 25, 1997, installed simultaneously in seven venues in Vancouver.²⁴ The ambitious programming of *New Art from Cuba* included the work of twenty-three artists, eight of whom came to Vancouver to supervise installation.²⁵ This show would lead to a series of exhibitions of Manuel Piña and Tonel’s work, as well as curatorial collaborations between Wallace and Tonel in various galleries across Vancouver.²⁶ Known for his large-scale black-and-white photos, Manuel Piña was hired as an assistant professor of photography at UBC in 2004 (fig. 1). Tonel moved to Vancouver for personal reasons in 2005; besides his independent and

24. Before *New Art from Cuba*, Valdés wrote texts for two exhibitions at The Contemporary Art Gallery, when Wallace was its director, one for the Fernando Arias exhibition in 1995 and the other for *Mexican Art, Tendencies: New Art from Mexico City*, curated by Ruben Gallo and Terence Gower in 1996.

25. Other participating art galleries included the Charles H. Scott Gallery at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, ACCESS, OR Gallery, Artspeak Gallery, and Western Front. See the exhibition web page, accessed January 16, 2020, <https://belkin.ubc.ca/exhibitions/new-art-from-cuba-utopian-territories/>.

26. Some of these exhibitions included *Tonel: Lessons in Solitude*, curated by Valdés and Watson in 2000 at the Belkin Art Gallery; Arni Haraldsson and Manuel Piña, *Displacement and Encounter: Projects and Utopias* at the Presentation House Gallery (now Polygon Gallery) in 2002; and *Spaces in Between: Contemporary Art from Havana*, curated by Tonel and Wallace at the Belkin Art Gallery in 2014.

22. Her recent induction as Honorary Elder of VLACC attests to Carmen’s involvement with the Latin American community in Vancouver. See “VLACC Inducts Awarded Chilean-Canadian Writer Carmen Rodríguez as Its Honorary Elder,” VLACC, March 2021, accessed October 7, 2021, <https://vlacc.ca/carmen-rodriguez-honorary-elder/>.

23. Sujatha Fernandes, “Vitality in Precarious Conditions: Conversation with Artist/Art Critic Tonel,” in *The Cuban Hustle: Culture, Politics, Everyday Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 32–43.



FIGURE 2. Tanel, *Nota al Pie (De Mayor a Menor)/Footnote (From Major to Minor)*, 1993–2000. Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation (CIFO), Miami (photograph courtesy of the artist)

international work as artist, curator, and art critic, he works as an adjunct professor of drawing also at UBC (fig. 2). The presence and connections of both artists in Vancouver continues to bring attention to Cuban art and was instrumental in motivating a group of predominantly Latin American artists to establish the art collective AKA.

SECOND ENCOUNTER WITH LATIN AMERICAN ART IN CANADA

In the summer of 2012, Manuel Piña, whom I had met in 2004 as a student in AHVA, invited me to a meeting to discuss strategies to intervene in the Vancouver visual art scene. At his house, a group of his former graduate students, including Guadalupe Martínez from Argentina; Emilio Rojas, Nelly César, and Carlos Colín from Mexico; the Cuban artist Tanel; Mónica Reyes, a curator from Chile who was in the midst of opening an art gallery in the city; and the poet and photographer Josema Zamorano and myself, also from Mexico, discussed the need to come together as a group to discuss our art practice and possibly form an art collective. We debated the identity and the objectives of our group. The fact that we were all

Latin American artists in Vancouver became a point of argument. While we all recognized that at the time there was not much attention to Latin American art in the city, the majority of us felt uncomfortable with labeling our group as a Latin American art collective. We all came from countries in the region, we were all making art in Vancouver, but our work responded to our local environment and was informed by our personal experiences as migrants from different regions in the Americas. For Tanel, both the idea of Latin American art and Latino art are highly problematic in Canada. “Not only do these two constructs try to fit artists into certain categories that they may not belong to, but in particular the label Latino seems to emerge from a US context.”²⁷ Certainly, Tanel’s views resonated with many of us during our first meeting in 2012. We decided to not self-impose a label that could determine and restrict our identity as a collective. As Mónica Reyes recalls: “the lack of an organized Latin American community or institutional support in the city

27. Tanel, phone conversation with the author, February 4, 2020, Vancouver.



FIGURE 3. *Diffractions of the Local # 1*, 2013, Mónica Reyes Gallery (Back Gallery Projects), Vancouver. From the back and left to right: Manuel Piña, Nelly César, Guadalupe Martínez, Emilio Rojas, Josema Zamorano, and Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda (photograph courtesy of the author)

made us more open and empathetic to other communities who, like us, were not from Vancouver.”²⁸

We adopted the name AKA in reference to the abbreviation of “also known as,” as a way to defer any fixed name or label, as well as a play on the Spanish word *acá* (here). We organized a two-part exhibition at Mónica Reyes Gallery (then the Back Gallery Projects) entitled *Diffractions of the Local*, taking place in November 2013 and March 2014, that reflected on the idea of the local from different perspectives. Rather than present a cohesive statement, we attempted “to interrogate how artistic sensibilities, world visions, political stances and modes of social engagement formed elsewhere morph, adapt and contribute to Vancouver’s artistic landscape.”²⁹ The first exhibition showcased work by Nelly César, Carlos Colín, Guadalupe Martínez, Manuel Piña, Emilio Rojas, Josema Zamorano, and myself (fig. 3). The second included work by Tonel, Sarah Shammash, Russell Wallace, and Rodrigo Hernández-Gómez.

28. Mónica Reyes, phone conversation with the author, February 8, 2020, Vancouver.

29. *Diffractions of the Local* exhibition web page, accessed January 17, 2020, <https://www.monicareyesgallery.com/aka-collective—diffractions-of-the-local.html>.

In the exhibition, I presented *Escribiendome* (2013–14), a video that explores language as a marker of cultural and gender identities and the condition of living in two cultures simultaneously (fig. 4). Influenced by French feminist ideas on the role of language and writing in the process of subject formation, in the video I write words in English and Spanish that are used to identify me, one language in each video channel respectively. The words in English include alien, immigrant, landed immigrant, permanent resident, citizen, minority, spouse, mother, woman, Latina, Mexican, friend, artist, designer, and self-employed. The words in Spanish include *hija, nieta, hermana, tía, sobrina, prima, amiga, esposa, mamá, cuñada, madrina, artista, diseñadora, mexicana, and tapatía*. As the video progresses, I write words on top of the previous ones, making them unreadable as the writing turns into a black blotch of ink. The process of creating illegibility through the act of writing represents my reflections on the dynamic and fluid nature of our identities, a process marked by the acquisition of language. Writing as a performative and embodied practice emerges in the video as an act of agency in the process of identity formation and identification through language, since this experience

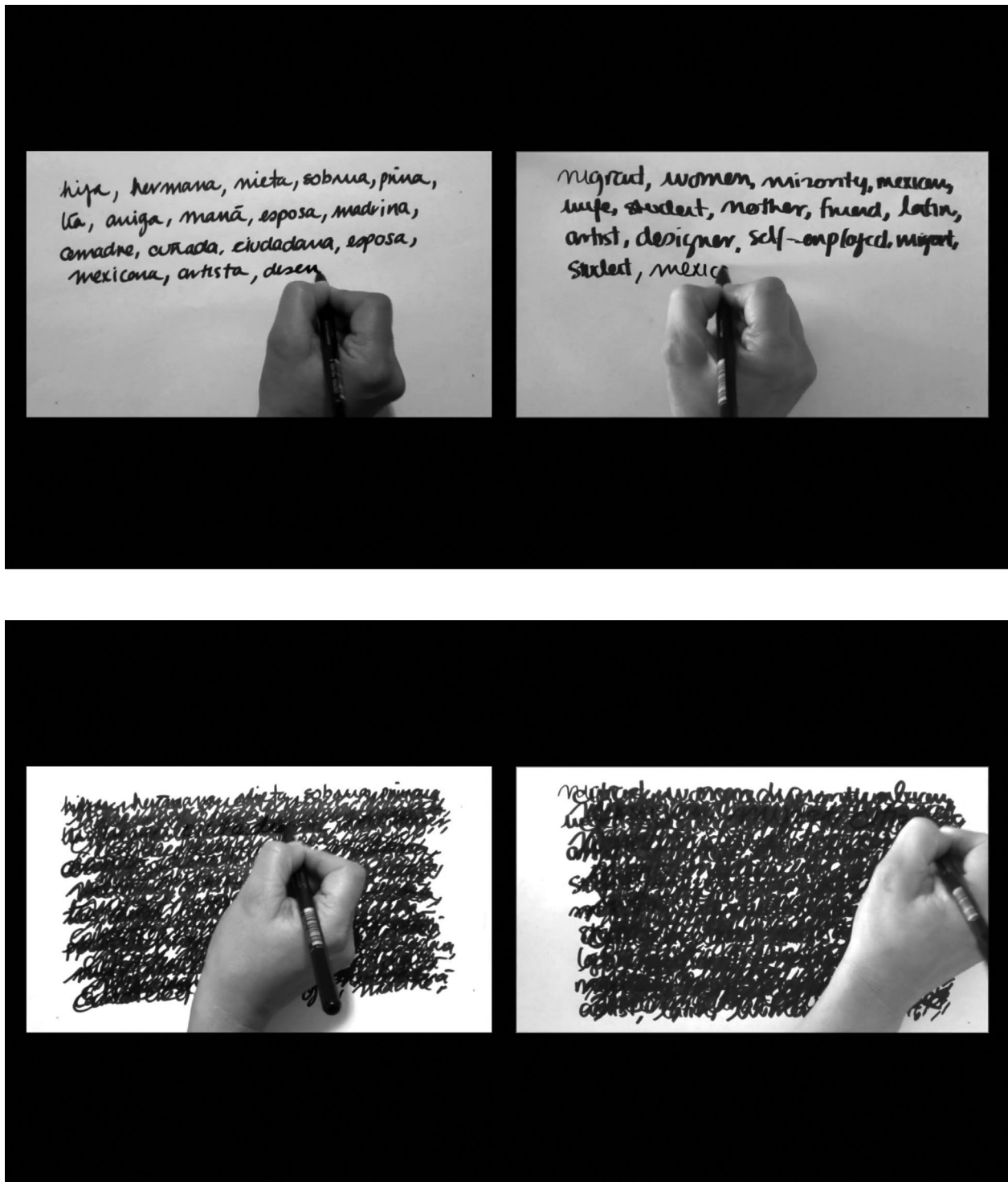


FIGURE 4. Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, two stills from *Escribiendome*, 2013–14, two-channel, black-and-white video, 14:25 (photographs courtesy of the author)

becomes particularly acute (though not exclusive) for those who live in between cultures.

In 2015, Jayce Salloum, a Canadian artist of Lebanese and Syrian ancestry; Alessandra Santos, Brazilian

professor of hispanic literature at UBC and performance artist; Canadian curator Denise Ryner; and the artists Oswaldo Ramírez from El Salvador, Damla Tamer from Turkey, and many others joined



FIGURE 5. AKA collective, *Emergencia poética no. 1 Constellations of Performative Words*, March 2015, Vancouver Public Library. Top image from left to right: Alessandra Santos, Guadalupe Martínez, and Jayce Salloum. Bottom image from top to bottom: Rodrigo Hernández, Karin Ng, Nancy Espinoza, Jayce Salloum, Josema Zamorano, Hilda Fernández, Laura Cisneros, Guadalupe Martínez, Manuel Piña, Gabriela Aceves, Pia Massey, and Alessandra Santos (photographs by Josema Zamorano, courtesy of the author)



FIGURE 6. Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, *breath(e)*, *respira(o)*, part of AKA collective, *Emergencia poética no. 1 Constellations of Performative Words*, March 2015, Vancouver Public Library (photographs by Josema Zamorano, courtesy of the author)

AKA.³⁰ That same year, Alessandra Santos and Guadalupe Martínez proposed to create a series of random interventions in public spaces in and around Vancouver that they called *Emergencias poéticas*. They circulated a call within our group, inviting us to host a series of urban interventions grounded on a collaborative process based on the Brazilian word *mutirão*, from the Tupi word *motyrō*, for “cooperative work,” which refers to collective mobilizations based on mutual aid provided free of charge to achieve a common goal.³¹ The first action, *Emergencia poética no. 1 Constellations for Performative Words*, consisted of an exploration of words that at the time resonated with us through movement, as individual bodies, or as a collective. The task was for each one of us to bring one or two words printed on a T-shirt to the atrium of the downtown Vancouver Public Library, where we “explored, experimented and played individually and with each other in an attempt to learn about the relationship between meaning and embodiment, signifying and being signified, performing and being performed, making meaning and *slippage*” (fig. 5).³²

I selected the word *breath* in English and *respira* in Spanish because of their performative connotations of movement, sound, and action. In the final layout of the

T-shirt, I added an extra letter to each word inside parenthesis to signal the instability and multiplicity of linguistic meaning including the gendered dimension present in the Spanish words and absent in English (fig. 6).

In 2016, Jayce Salloum organized a yearlong program of curated exhibitions entitled *ThirstDays* at VIVO Media Arts Centre in Vancouver.³³ Tonel and Denise Ryner curated AKA’s participation, which consisted of a night of live performances and screenings. Sarah Shamash, Oswaldo Ramírez, and I screened a video entitled *Acá Nada/Acá Elsewhere*, an experimental audiovisual portrait of AKA (fig. 7).

The video combined still images of AKA members and their families, cartographic drawings, and a series of recorded conversations regarding what made us come together as a collective.³⁴ The title of the video plays with a colonial theory that suggests that the name Canada originated when Iberian explorers, having explored the northern part of the American continent and unable to find gold and silver, wrote “El Cabo de Nada” (Cape Nothing), “*acá nada*” (nothing here), on their maps. In the video, Carlos Colín recalls that the issue that brought us together as AKA was the need to understand ourselves as artists making art in a new context, as migrants, as diaspora. For Rodrigo Hernández-Gómez, the motives were not important, what mattered was that AKA was a community of support. For Alessandra Santos it was a need for action that she shared with Manuel Piña, who,

30. Other participants included Hilda Fernández, Brit Bachman, Nancy Espinoza, Laura Cisneros, Beatriz Álvarez, Karin Ng, and Laura Bass.

31. Alessandra Santos and Guadalupe Martínez, *Emergencia poética no.1/Poetic Emergency no. 1. Constellations for Performative Words*, document circulated among AKA members, AKA, March 2015.

32. Santos and Martínez, *Emergencia poética no. 1*.

33. The complete yearlong program of *ThirstDays* is available at <https://thirstdays.vivomediaarts.com/>, accessed February 10, 2020.

34. See *Acá Nada/Acá Elsewhere*, uploaded April 29, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/164774016>.



FIGURE 7. Sara Shamash, Osvaldo Ramírez, and Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, *Acá Nada/Acá Elsewhere*, 2016 (photographs by Josema Zamorano, courtesy of the author)

after more than ten years living in Vancouver, was ready to intervene and create a space for artists that were not receiving attention. For Manuel, the need to do

something, to come into action, to come together as a group with colleagues and friends regardless of their origin was the driving force and the key to creating an

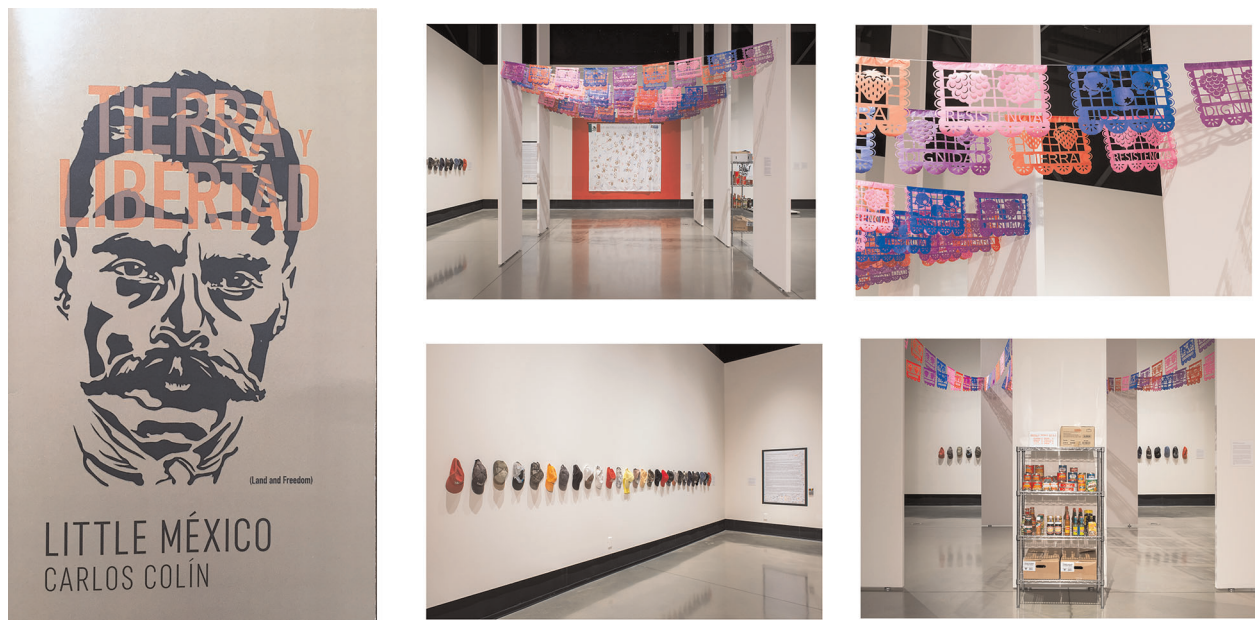


FIGURE 8. Carlos Colín, *Little Mexico*, 2019, installation views. Reach Gallery Museum, Abbotsford, BC (photographs by SITE Photography). Cover image *Tierra y Libertad (Land and Freedom)* 2019, limited-edition silk-screen poster, 35 x 23 in. (88.9 x 58.4 cm), from the exhibition catalog published by The Reach Gallery Museum, Abbotsford, designed by David Williams (courtesy of the artist)

identity (both collective and individual for each of us) that went beyond representation. For Manuel, as for many of us, Latin America as a construct was and still is a colonial invention, and Latin American art is a currency, a necessary evil, and a paradox for artists that forces many of us into self-exoticism. As AKA struggled with its identity as a Latin American art collective, its activities dwindled. It slowly turned into a community of support, one that continues to create ripples in Vancouver.

Some of those ripples are present at *Little Mexico*, a recent exhibition by Carlos Colín featuring a flow of Latin American migration to the region that brings economic and cultural resources but is rarely recognized. Colín came to Canada as an international student to pursue his MFA at UBC in 2009. Since then, he has become one of the most visible Latin American artists in the city, obtaining the Emerging Artist Award in Vancouver's Mayor's Arts Awards in 2016.³⁵ His work investigates how contemporary art, artists, and art institutions are involved in current social movements and, by extension, how art contributes to social change and social activism in Latin America.³⁶ In *Little Mexico*, installed at The Reach Gallery in

Abbotsford, BC, from May to September 2019, Colín engaged with the community of workers who are part of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) (fig. 8). Since 1966, SAWP has brought thousands of workers from Mexico every year to work on Canadian farms for up to eight consecutive months. In this body of work, which included sculpture, installations, screen prints, and text-based art, Colín aimed to bring visibility to the significant economic contributions of these workers, contributions that are largely invisible to the broader community and importantly fuel the agricultural industry.

In *Proclamation*, a large-scaled print of a petition submitted to the Mexican Consulate in Vancouver on May 23, 2012, Colín presents a window into the lives of temporary workers and a gesture of solidarity (fig. 9). This petition was submitted in protest when it was discovered that the consulate maintained a blacklist of Mexican migrant workers who complained against unfair working condition and abusive employers. The information was shared with Canadian farm owners, who prevented black-listed workers from coming back to Canada.³⁷ In the exhibition, viewers were invited to sign the petition as a sign of solidarity.

35. For more information on Colín, visit <http://carloscolin.mx/>, accessed August 10, 2020.

36. <http://carloscolin.mx/>.

37. Adrienne Fast, "Carlos Colín: Little Mexico," in the exhibition catalog (Abbotsford, BC: The Reach Gallery Museum, 2019), 1–36.

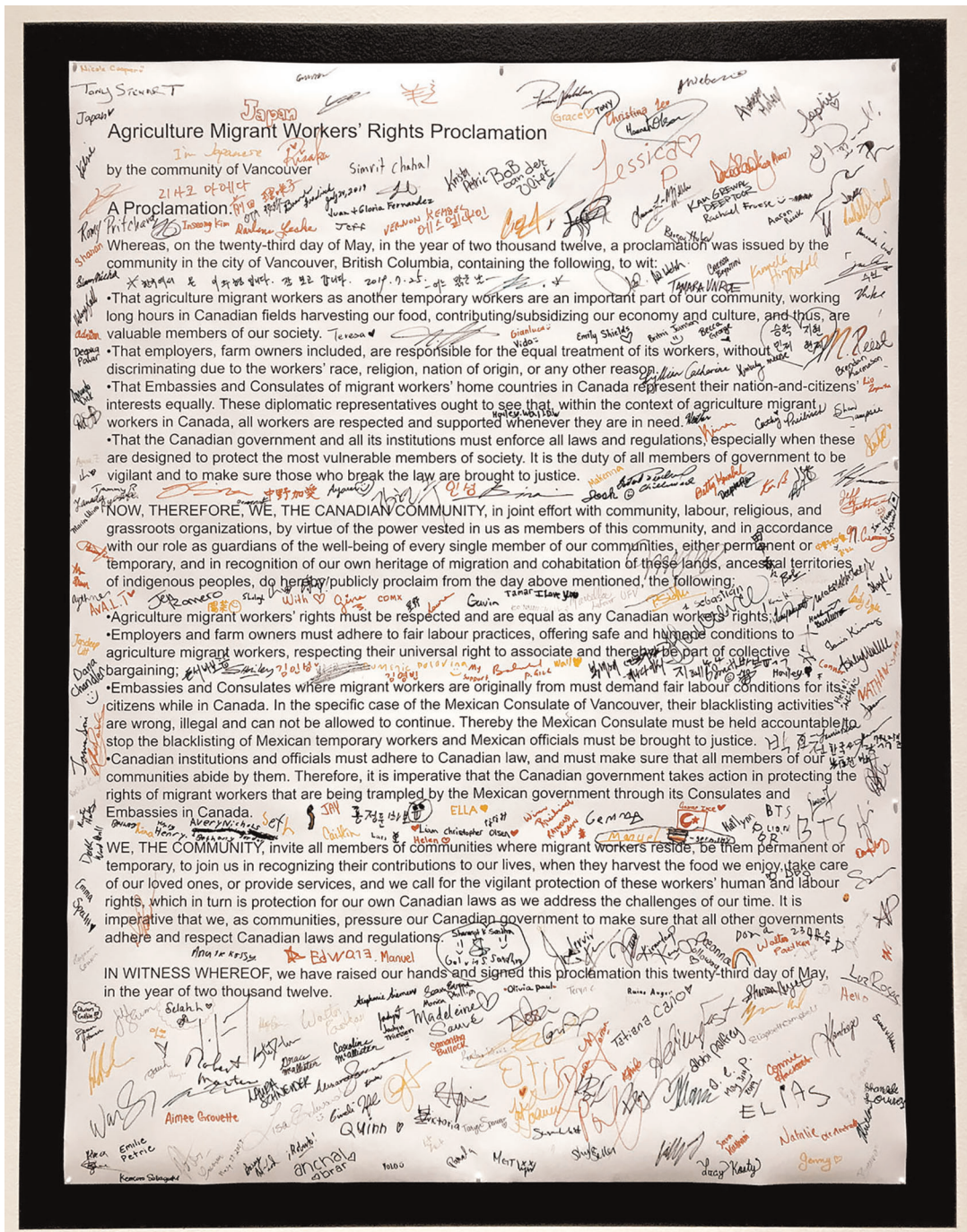


FIGURE 9. Carlos Colín, *Proclamation*, 2019. Reach Gallery Museum, Abbotsford, BC (photograph by SITE Photography, courtesy of the artist)

I take Colín’s *Proclamation* as a signpost that makes visible the contemporary flows of money, bodies, culture, natural resources, affects and desires that traverse the greater Vancouver region and connect it to Latin America.³⁸

International students, temporary workers, global artists, curators and refugees search for a new home in the region just as Canadian mining companies fly down to Latin

38. According to the Canadian International Development Platform, British Columbia accepted the second largest number of permanent and temporary residents in 2019, after Ontario. Mexican temporary workers

residing in British Columbia in 2019 amounted to 6670, while international students also from Mexico totaled 2615. For data about other Latin American countries, see <http://cidpnsi.ca/migration-flows/>, accessed July 15, 2020.

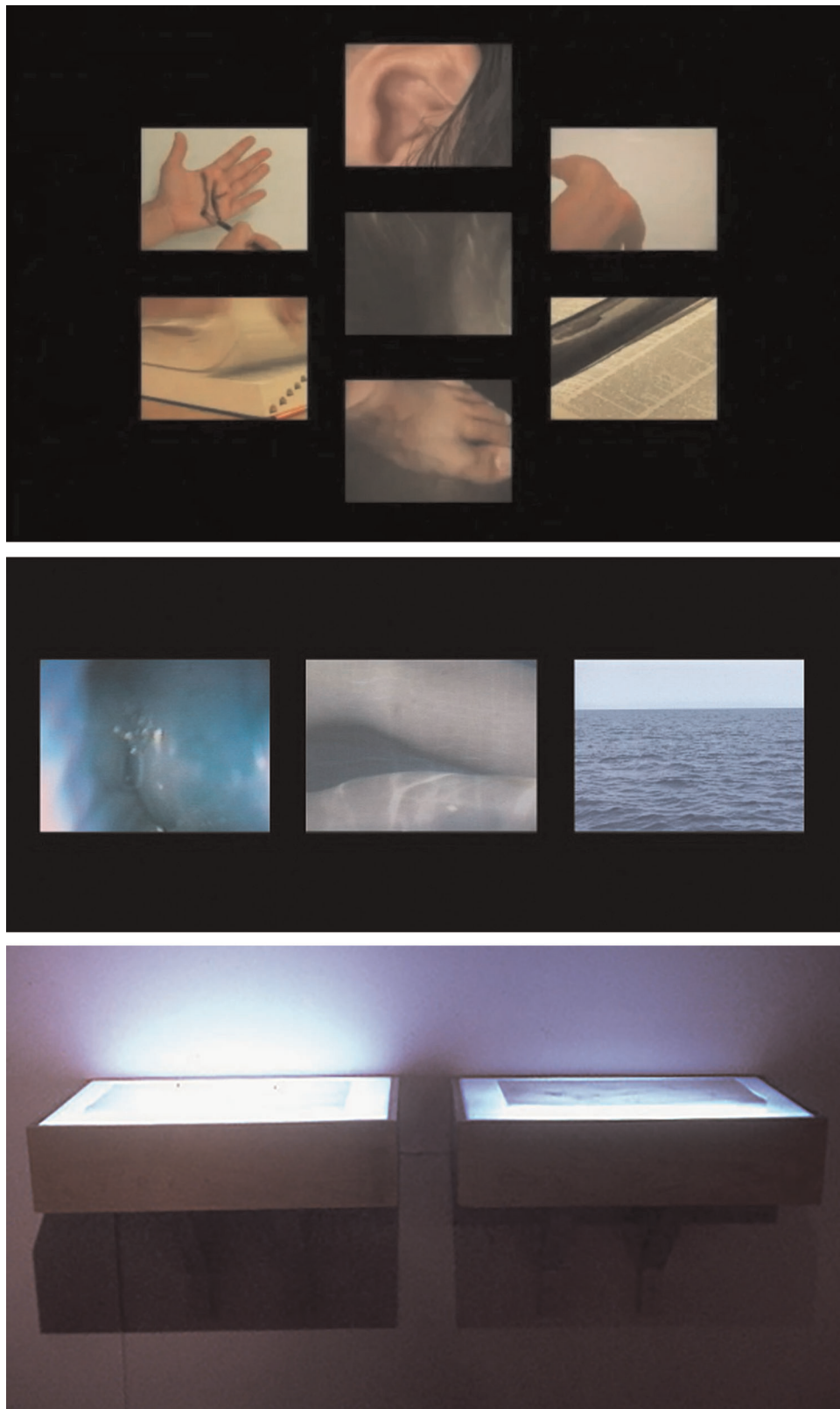


FIGURE 10. Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, three installations. Top: *La Coyolchauqui (Or Prelude to the Fragments)*, 2003–4, seven-channel video installation; middle: *En Tres Mares*, 2001–3, three-channel video installation, video still; top: *Se Ven*, 2001–3, ink drawings on wax panels and light boxes (photographs courtesy of the author)

America in search of investments.³⁹ If art follows money, mining oligarchs based in Vancouver have yet to fulfill the philanthropist promise of investing in art (in this case Latin American art) to cover for their extractivist trail. Is their lack of interest combined with institutional neglect a strategy to obscure the presence of Latin Americans in the region to deter them from grassroots organizing? Or is this disregard a side effect of the hauntings of colonialism and the uneven terms of economic exchange in our globalized world?

IN A CONSTANT STATE OF CHANGE

As an immigrant in Canada, the question of identity has permeated and guided my artistic and scholarly practice for the past twenty-two years. My work asks questions about the unstable, multiple, and dynamic nature of cultural identity and its intersections with gender, race, ethnicity, and other markers of identity, rather than providing answers. At York University, I began to read critical theory in my attempts to understand my experience of living in between two cultures simultaneously. These readings were helpful in understanding the constant feeling of inadequacy in communicating through a foreign cultural lens, the incessant nostalgia for home, and the experience of crafting a new identity in a new cultural context. In my MFA graduate exhibition *Change of State* (2001), I reflected on the instability of gendered and cultural makers of identity by exploring how language and historical narratives are implicated in the process of subject formation.⁴⁰ The exhibition included three installations, characterized by the use of colorless materials such as beeswax and the use of duotone color palettes in video editing (fig. 10). Each of the three installations employed the physical properties of materials such as wax, light, and water to change state (from gas to liquid, from liquid into solid, or—in the case of video—from electric signal to image) as a metaphor for the fluid nature of cultural and gender identities and our ever-changing sense of self, in the context of a process of immigration.

Back in Vancouver, the experience of motherhood exacerbated my sense of strangeness while simultaneously forcing

39. In 2013, Canadian mining investment in Latin America totaled approximately USD \$19.4 billion. The largest investments are in Mexico, which accounts for \$4.8 billion of the revenue; then Chile, Peru, Argentina, and Brazil, which account for another \$12.75 billion. See “Canadian Mining in Latin America,” Canada International Development Platform, updated July 2013, accessed July 15, 2020, <http://cidpnsi.ca/canadian-mining-investments-in-latin-america/>.

40. Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, “Change of State” (master’s thesis, York University, 2001).

me to plant roots in a land where I am an uninvited guest. I continue to produce colorless and muted toned artworks. I understand the aesthetics of my work as firmly rooted in my life experiences as a bicultural artist, scholar, mother, daughter, and wife, and not through some distorted assumptions of what Latin American art is or should look like.

Recalling my first encounter with the category of Latin American art in Canada at York University and my inability to craft a response to position myself as a Latin American artist, I now frame the aesthetics of my work as being informed by the work of a genealogy of feminist artists who have explored the female body as site of cultural, biopolitical, and technological inscriptions. These artists, all of whom have transgressed disciplinary boundaries and expectations of what counts as art with their practices, include Pola Weiss, Mónica Mayer, Rosa Martha Fernández, Ana Victoria Jiménez, Maris Bustamante, Sonia Andrade, Leticia Parente, Sandra Llano Mejía, Marta Minujín, Teresa Burga, Lygia Clark, Lotty Rosenfeld, Carmen Barradas, Jacqueline Nova, Elizabeth Ferreira, and Alicia Urreta, in addition to the work of Ana Mendieta, Eva Hesse, and Louise Bourgeois, to name a few.

For many artists like me, making a living in the diaspora, Latin American art continues to be a changing construct enmeshed with questions of legitimacy, power, and representation that have yet to be debated and recognized in the west coast of Canada. For others, who are slowly starting to organize spaces and build networks of support through artistic and cultural nonprofits such as VLAFF and VLACC, it seems more useful. In holding the label, we are staying with the trouble, as Donna Haraway put it in another context.⁴¹ We are engaging in and struggling with a conversation about what Latin American or Latinx art is or could possibly look like in Canada, with the hope that these initiatives will evolve into more visible recognition and inclusion of these artists and its productions in local collections and academic programs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda is Associate Professor at the School of Interactive Arts and Technology at Simon Fraser University where she directs cMAS, an interdisciplinary research creation studio. She is the author of the award-winning book *Women Made Visible: Feminist Art and Media in post-1968 Mexico* (U Nebraska P, 2019).

41. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).