

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Painting the Bootleg

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Abstract

The focus of my written thesis is to illuminate concepts in my artwork around the complexity of American identity. My interdisciplinary body of work comes out of a need to create objects that reflect a material and symbolic visual language of nuance. This writing discusses a number of works blurring distinctions between painting and ceramics and referencing ideas of cultural mixing, the duality of symbols, appropriation, and vernacular materiality. My concepts are supported by research developed mostly by artists and thinkers of color deferring to diverse epistemologies. I look to these scholars as models as they understand and outline issues such as the overwhelming underrepresentation in art institutions for artists of color including Latinos and Colombian American artists like myself.¹ It is important to note I identify as Latino and Latinx² as opposed to Latin-American and will use this identifier throughout this thesis. My thesis will outline how my artworks resist accepted ideas and markers of ‘Americanness’ and expand definitions of this term through a process I refer to as “bootlegging.”

Preface

The initial interest in my thesis work was to interrogate the term ‘Americana’ and create space for my experience as an American and as a Latino. *Americana* is defined by Merriam Webster as: “Materials concerning or characteristic to America, its civilization or its culture.” (Merriam-Webster-Dictionary.com, 2020) and a Google search of Americana will elicit images of eagles, baseball bats, horses, barbecue grills, bombshell cowgirls with guitars, chickens, and

¹ A 2019 study called *Diversity of Artists in Major U.S. Museums* shows a predominance of white male artists in collections of art institutions across the United States of America <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6426178/>

² Latinx is currently defined by writer Ed Morales in *Latinx: The New Force in American Politics and Culture* as (“pronounced “La-teen-ex”) is the gender-neutral term that covers one of the largest and fastest growing minorities in the United States, accounting for 17 percent of the country. Over 58 million Americans belong to the category, including a sizable part of the country’s working class, both foreign and native-born. Their political empowerment is altering the balance of forces in a growing number of states. And yet Latinx barely figure in America’s ongoing conversation about race and ethnicity. Remarkably, the US census does not even have a racial category for “Latino.” (Morales, 2019)

Confederate flags. I posit that this definition is problematic as “America, its civilization or culture” are not understood to everyone in one way. There is no unified popular imaginary about America. The images that have come to define ‘Americana’ were filtered through an Anglo American perspective. My work uses the visual markers of what is widely understood as “Americana” and appropriates them. The work is then customized into new objects reflectant of a fusion in a process I refer to as ‘bootlegging.’

‘Bootlegging’ is the process by which I take an existing cultural product and remake it with resourceful tact to fit new needs and ideals. I do this to emphasize the process by which the intersections of diverse cultures create new ideas and realities. The process of ‘bootlegging’ serves as a conceptual metaphor for my idea of America, a confluence of diverse peoples with different perspectives.

In the essay “The Multicultural Paradigm” post-colonial Latinx artist and theorist Guillermo Gomez-Peña describes the plurality and fluidity of identity in the U.S. despite the media’s portrayal stating, “Unlike the images on television or in commercial cinema, depicting a mono-cultural middle-class world existing outside of international crises, contemporary United States society is fundamentally multicultural, multilingual, and socially polarized. So is its art.” (Gomez-Peña, 1994) This is still true today as women and artists of color are disproportionately represented in art institutions across the United States.

My work addresses the shortcomings of the term ‘Americana’ and works within and outside the visual associations of the term in order to create new ones. This aspect of construction is intriguing to me because through the process of painting I can copy, reorganize, and remix the original. My “bootlegged Americana” creates a spectrum of meaning and expands notions of the term American.

Chicano theorist Tomas Ybarra Frausto says, “U.S. Hispanic artists are the mediators between the poles of fusion and dismemberment, between the worlds of here (United States) and the worlds of there (Latin America).” (Ybarra-Frausto, 2012) This quote illustrates this subject position of being between two worlds where many Latinx or U.S. Hispanic artists exist. This in-betweenness is intrinsic to a Latinx subject position and provides a framework to combat unsophisticated understandings and aesthetics of American art.

1. I Against I

Growing up in New York City in the borough of Queens, I was shaped by the worlds of hip hop, punk and metal, graffiti and skateboarding. I would also spend summers of my childhood in the Andes region of Colombia where my parents were born. I am a child of immigrants who are part of a large exile Colombian community in Queens. After immigrating to the U.S. in the late 1980s, they eventually acquired citizenship under Reagan’s immigration reforms. I say this to illustrate the broad spectrum of influences that exist in my work.

My experience as a Colombian-American artist is distinct and different from Colombian artists such as Fernando Botero, Doris Salcedo, Oscar Murillo, or Beatriz Gonzalez in that they are Latin American. I am Latino or Latinx. Unlike these household names I wasn't born in Colombia. I grew up in the United States and found a different language in the semiotics of American subcultures. These outsider cultures and their symbols gave me the language to process the intersections of my identity.

2. DecoTroca

One of my earliest works from graduate school was the *Truck Church* series. These works apply the logic of melding disparate cultures using a spectrum of techniques, materials, aesthetics and references.



Edward Salas, *Truck Church 3*, Polymer Clay and airbrush on panel, 24 x 30 in, 2018.

These paintings were made after arriving at Alfred University and noticing the amount of pick-up trucks in surrounding areas decorated with racist, sexist, xenophobic, pro-violence and pro-Trump bumper stickers. The decorative aspect of the stickers on American pick up trucks reminded me of public transport trucks in Colombia called *Chivas* decorated with bright colors and local icons like saints, cartoons, and animals. I wanted to fuse these various ways of thinking about decoration in order to complicate a uni-cultural read.



Edward Salas, *Truck Church 1*, Polymer Clay and airbrush acrylic on panel, 40 x 60 in, 2018.

I chose the frontal perspective of the truck grill because they resemble scary anthropomorphic monsters or masks. The design of the truck grills form niches that when customized with color and ornament resemble baroque altars seen throughout Latin America. In these works I appropriate symbols of white rural culture like the pick-up truck and confederate flag, often a visual marker of hate, racism and exclusion. Using saturated airbrush paint and relief sculpture while referencing sources like the Colombian Chivas trucks, these pieces transform the bumper sticker-laden pick-up trucks into ornate, ultra-baroque altars.

I often think about cultural mixing or *mestizaje*³ as a native of Queens, the most ethnically diverse county in the United States and as a Colombian-American. Colombians have been called the most highly *mestizo* country in the world.⁴ My ideas of remixing, customizing or

³ *Mestizaje* or *Miscegenation* refers to the interbreeding of people considered to be of different racial types within the Latin American context in relation to colonization. <https://www.thoughtco.com/mestizaje-in-latin-america-4774419>

⁴ William Ospina discusses in his essay *Colombia's Secret*: "It [Colombia] is, perhaps the most highly *mestizo*, country in the continent." (Ospina, 1994)

“bootlegging” as a process and aesthetic derive from my exposure and knowledge of cultural mixing. Lucy Lippard unpacks the complexities of cultural mixing in her essay “Mixing,”

Contemporary artists from hugely diverse backgrounds are currently approaching the prospect of cultural mixing on a grander, if more carefully scrutinized scale than ever before. As a result, a magnificent tangle of contradictions arises. To mix means both to mate and to battle. Mixing is the central metaphor, the active social component of the intercultural process. It incorporates the interethnic violence that characterizes the history of this hemisphere, as well as the possibility of a “rainbow future,” when everyone is of “mixed race” and the barriers of race-as-class are destroyed. The term applies here not only to “racial” blending, albeit to cultural and even esthetic mixtures and collaborations, introducing a full spectrum of contradictory decisions about identity and change. (Lippard 1990)

My work uses strategies of mixing in theory and content in addition to process and material. For example in my *‘Truck Church’* series I hand-build multitudes of roses, flowers, angels, snakes and eyes out of polymer clay, a material associated with hobby crafts. I then stamp the symbolic patterns of flames, flowers, and diamonds throughout the composition with airbrush, a painting technique used by mechanics and blue collar workers. These works mix the mediums of sculpture and painting, high and low art, and symbols from but not limited to North and South America.

3. Yin-Yan

Part of our graduate program involved living and working in Dusseldorf, Germany for two semesters. While in Dusseldorf, the concepts of duality, satire and the carnivalesque, previously present in my works, were further emphasized after attending Karneval.⁵ I saw Germans masquerading as Native Americans, police, military, and cowgirls in a historical Rhineland ritual that’s been around since medieval times. Similarly, I’ve attended carnival in Colombia and Brazil

⁵ Carnival is a Western Christian festive season that occurs before the liturgical season of Lent, Karneval or Rheinischer Karneval is the Rhineland German version. Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). "Carnival". Encyclopædia Britannica (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

and saw comparable masquerading. These festivals are large-scale, city-wide celebrations taking place in tandem with the liturgical calendar before Lent.⁶ In the Latin American sphere carnival can also be associated with the inversion of social status as well as race, gender and sexuality. Both in Brazil and Germany I saw the fluidity and softening of social identity markers through masquerading.

The carnival goers in masquerade inspired me to use popular tropes like the clown, devil, cowboy and embed them with problematic personalities. The use of the carnivalesque in my paintings allowed me to create complicated characters with a spectrum of good and bad traits. The inclusion of both negative and positive natures is related to duality, a concept artist Hulda Guzman speaks on in the 2019 exhibition catalogue called *The Other Side of Now: Foresight in Contemporary Caribbean Art*:

“The phrase “be kind to your demons” illustrates the concept and process of accepting our own darkness, or shadow, by befriending it, inviting it in to our intimacy, greeting it instead of repressing it. We must learn to recognize the thorough and primitive duality of man: our essence is one of contrasts and opposing forces. Two natures contend in the field of consciousness. Behind or underneath the mask we display to others exist antisocial and destructive traits, desires, and impulses. Western culture in its striving for “progress”, is continually searching for light and clarity while neglecting the dark side.”

By creating problematic images, the symbols depart from idealized notions.

⁶ Lent is a solemn religious observance in the Christian liturgical calendar that begins on Ash Wednesday and ends approximately six weeks later, before Easter Sunday. The purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer for Easter through prayer, doing penance, mortifying the flesh, repentance of sins, almsgiving, and self-denial.



Left: Edward Salas, *Father and Child (Refugio de Pecadores)*, 50 x 40 cm, Acrylic on linen, 2019.



Right: *Nuestra Señora de Refugio de Los Pecadores*, anonymous Mexican retablo, 1875, oil on metal, 14 x 10 inches, Brigham Young University Museum of Art

My German works dealt with the complicated position of having to represent oneself as an American in Europe during a time of inflammatory U.S. global policy because of the polarizing leadership of Donald Trump. Having to confront my position as an American abroad, I was reminded of the words of James Baldwin in the collection of essays *Nobody Knows My Name* where he speaks on his 10 year stay in Europe. He says, “It turned out that the question of who I was was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me --anyway, these forces had become interior, and I had dragged them across the ocean with me. The question of who I was at last became a personal question and the answer was to be found in me.” (Baldwin, 1961) Living in Germany reinforced the importance of pushing forward my complicated and nuanced identity as a first-generation American and child

of immigrants. As an American I want my work to embody and represent these complex intersections of identity.

In the work *Father and Child* (Refugio de Pecadores) I represent a version of the art historical familial archetype set in an American landscape. The original reference for composition comes from a popular Catholic painting *Nuestra Señora de Refugio de Pecadores* (Refuge for Sinners) of mother with child. This father painted in clown makeup holds a gun in one hand with his son in the other inside an inflamed rural landscape. The piece is at once satirizing an image of the rural American family and a religious and art historical scene.



Edward Salas, *Border Crosser*, 50 x 40 cm, Acrylic on linen, 2019.



Left: Susan Zepeda, an agent in the Border Patrol's El Centro Sector in California, New York Times article '*People Actively Hate Us*': *Inside the Border Patrol's Moral Crisis* 2019.

Right : Rene Magritte, *Young Girl Eating a Bird*, oil on canvas, 74 x 97 cm, 1927.

4. Dots

Similar to the approach taken in *Father and Son (Refugio de Pecadores)* in my painting *Border Crosser* I remix art historical and current events. This reference to collage techniques allowed me to further experiment with color and application to emphasize a constructed quality. *Border Crosser* fuses the image of an American border patrol officer from the New York Times and Rene Magritte's painting *Young Girl Eating Bird*. From this, I realized that more than any formalist approach, the selection of content in my paintings was foundational. My main objective was to then remix the source through material, optical, and symbolic altering. I wanted my images to be subversive in content and construction. It was important that my works were not idealized icons in content nor in form. Through my paintings formal handling, I counter the one-read agenda present in references such as traditional icon paintings or Americana tropes.



Edward Salas, *Dark Rider*, Acrylic on linen, 21 x 27 in, 2019.

My use of color relates to the theories initiated by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the book *Theory of Colours*. Goethe is the innovator of the idea of “after image” also known as successive contrast. In his writing he expands on this idea stating, “when the eye sees color it is immediately excited, and it is its nature, spontaneously and of necessity, at once to produce another, with which the original color understands the whole chromatic scale. A single color excites, by specific sensation, the tendency to universality. To experience this completeness, to satisfy itself, the eye seeks for a colorless space, next to every hue in order to produce the complimentary hue upon it.” My dot paintings relate to Goethe’s understanding of “after-image” because they are constructed through complementary relationships that help the eye move around the picture. In the painting *Dark Rider*, I depict a cowboy and skeleton horse on a hillside with a sun in the background. The picture’s legibility is defined by the union of a foreground of dots and a background of washy color. Employing the technique of repetitive dots combined

with color theories similar to successive contrast allows me to achieve a result that is abstract on a micro level and graphic on a macro level.

5. Bastardeo



Edward Salas, *Bound (USA)*, rope and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 in, 2020.

Pseudo-Tejidos translates to “fake-tapestry” in Spanish. I chose this title for the series as a way to think about both Latin American tapestries and paintings as cultural objects. This relationship is important when thinking about the cultural value in art object versus craft object. Many times craft objects such as tapestries have a lower market value than fine art objects, yet they serve similar functions. With this work I fused notions of art and craft into a hybrid object that could equally function as both at once.

Bound (USA) is an image of a martyr rendered using factory-colored and white polyester rope from hardware stores on canvas. The rope is spray dyed in lines to achieve an overall atmospheric color similar to the color in Andean tapestries. The work reads simultaneously like a tapestry and painting without using the traditional production techniques or materials of either. Further blurring the distinctions between fine art and craft.

Questioning the material history of objects and “bootlegging” them is a vehicle to critique hierarchies of taste in contemporary art. Why is a tapestry different from a painting? Why is rope different from paint if they both render images and hang on a wall? My *Psuedo-Tejidos* series questions the material and cultural value placed on painting.

Continuing to center material in order to question its value through ‘bootlegging’ I created the series of ceramic works *Post-American-Idols*, a play on Pre-Columbian Idols, a problematic anthropological category demarcating a time period, people and their objects in relation to colonization. In this series I use ceramic mold-making and casting techniques to make replicas of figurines of Americana purchased from thrift stores. After casting the figurines in a liquid terracotta clay slip, I fling multiple replicas onto others while still malleable and soft creating an accumulated form. These replicas are made from kitschy Americana porcelain figurines like baby raccoons, bears, and newspaper boys. I “bootleg” the figurines to alter the object’s form and materiality. Through accumulation and scale in the conglomerations, you can see many angles of the figure at once. The original innocent handheld figurine is then transformed into a deconstructed conglomerate confronting the viewer at eye level.



Edward Salas, *Paper Boy*, Terracotta Clay, 12 x 12 in, 2020.

Glampscape Tiles is the final body of work dealing with the idea of the “bootleg.” This work is composed of 24 red clay tiles in landscape orientation. The tiles are inscribed with hunter camouflage patterns and an image of a snake writhing from the first to last tile in an act of eating itself. The camouflage pattern is carved into the clay tiles by a mechanical XY plotter imposing an artificial image of nature onto actual earth. The snake, in nods to the ouroboros⁷ and “Don’t Tread on Me” Gadsden flag,⁸ results in a satire and commentary on the violence of American history related to colonization and land rights. Again, the final form is a consumerist object, tiles usually meant for kitchen walls and bathroom decoration.

⁷ Ouroboros is a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/ouroboros>

⁸ Gadsden flag is a historical American flag with a yellow field depicting a timber rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike. Beneath the rattlesnake resting on grass are the words: “Dont Tread On Me” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gadsden_flag

This work is my alternative interpretation and representation of an American landscape, a central theme in the work of artist Teresita Fernandez. In the interview “Finding Yourself in the Landscape” for *Cultured* magazine, she states that landscape “is not passive at all. It’s very deliberate and strategized. Even our ideas about what places are—place names, borders and what’s visible—they’re such powerful tools to control how we think of ourselves in relation to land and to place.”⁹ Similarly, my series *Glampscape Tiles* uses materiality and symbols to reveal hidden agendas of landscape painting and offer an alternative view.



Edward Salas, *Glampscape Tiles*, Terracotta Clay, 3 x 8 feet, 2020.

6. Provecho

My practice responds to a need to make objects encapsulating the various cultures that inform my experience. The works outlined here challenge popular notions of American art, Colombian-American art, and Latinx art. Employing the process of “bootlegging,” a vehicle for art-making, I manifest the complexities of identity surrounding my personal experience as a first generation American.

⁹ “Finding Yourself in the Landscape: Teresita Fernández in Conversation.” *Cultured Magazine*, October 12, 2019. <https://www.culturedmag.com/teresita-fernandez-in-conversation/>.

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