

THE VISUAL POETICS OF THE BORDER

A CONVERSATION WITH SALVADOR DE LA TORRE

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Salvador earned an MFA from California State University, Fullerton, and a BA from Texas A&M International University.

Verónica García Moreno: I would like to begin this interview by emphasizing the coherence and internal harmony in your artistic trajectory. There is an almost poetic characteristic in your work, in the sense of the ability to integrate audacity, strangeness, and delicacy. Can you explain to us in broad strokes your artistic evolution, your starting point, and your influences?

Salvador de La Torre: By colonial standards one would not consider my parents, and the household I grew up in, as intellectuals or educated people. My parents only completed up to 9th grade of school and they worked as bus driver, caretakers, dish washer, farmworkers, cashiers, stockers, janitors, etc. However, my mother is a huge influence in my art practice as she is rich in ancestral knowledge and culture and knows all about plants and agriculture. I've derived a lot of my work from her history and stories because she is such a rich storyteller, and in many ways an artist herself. A lot of my influences also come from the art of the catholic church. The drama and the intensity of the religious paintings and sculpture is something I was always exposed to and had a deep impact on my perspectives on life.

My traditional training as an artist didn't start until I took my first art class in 7th grade. Since then, I've been extremely serious in pursuing artistic knowledge. I applied and was accepted into an art magnet program at a high school and took every possible art class in my time. I got a bachelor's degree in Art and a Master's degree in Fine Art and have continued to make and exhibit art since then. I've developed many bodies of work around queerness,

Salvador de la Torre is a Mexican-born Texas-raised artist, educator, and storyteller based in Southern California.

Their drawing and performance work invokes the power of personal experience and family history to create artworks that exist at the intersection of activism, art production, and praxes of self-acceptance. Their work engages the politics of migration, memory, queerness, and gender in ways that remind us of the power and solidarity that can exist in quotidian gestures. De la Torre's production opens channels for theorizing vulnerability, intimacy, and proximity as radical undertakings in the space of the borderlands and beyond. In doing so, their work forges complex narratives of joy, struggle, adaptability, exhaustion, and tenderness, as counternarratives that assert the wholeness, nuance, and humanity of immigrant communities, and queer subjectivities.

self acceptance, the borderlands and beyond. I work in a vast variety of media and modalities from performance art, drawing, tattooing, bookmaking, and photography.

VGM: Salvador, you have defined yourself as a “fronterizo.” Apart from the obvious elements of being latinx, member of the LGBT community and bilingual, what are your personal borders, how do you define them and how does *la frontera* enrich you artistically?

SdLT: I identify myself as such because I also grew up on a literal *frontera*, in Laredo, Texas, and lived there for nearly two decades. And, yes, I also face the physiological borders of being queer and transgender and because of generational trauma and existing under capitalism, I also struggle with debilitating anxiety and depression. I feel that all of those borders are my art because I don't believe art and life are separate, my art is my life, and my life is my art. Also, the process of creating art helps me process my trauma and gives me a reason to live.

VGM: The concept of liquid borders has been explored in sociology and anthropology in recent years, opening the field to a new nomenclature that implies the creation of interior homelands, and the concept of “transterrado” versus exile or emigrant. The acquisition and appropriation of one identity over another takes on a new dimension in these recent years of technology and multiverse. How has this fluidity and permeability influenced your conception of the material and artistic production, the time of production of the work, its diffusion, or the space where it is exhibited?

SdLT: My work is based on my life and my familial history, and nothing about that is fixed especially as I have been coming to terms with my fluid gender identity. I've worked with a variety of art modalities and mediums throughout my career, and I'm always existed to try new mediums and experiences. I usually pick a medium or modality that is best going to work to help me produce the concept I am after. I love giving artist talks. That's been consistently my favorite way to “exhibit” my work because I love storytelling and it truly allows me to embody my mother's energy and spirit.

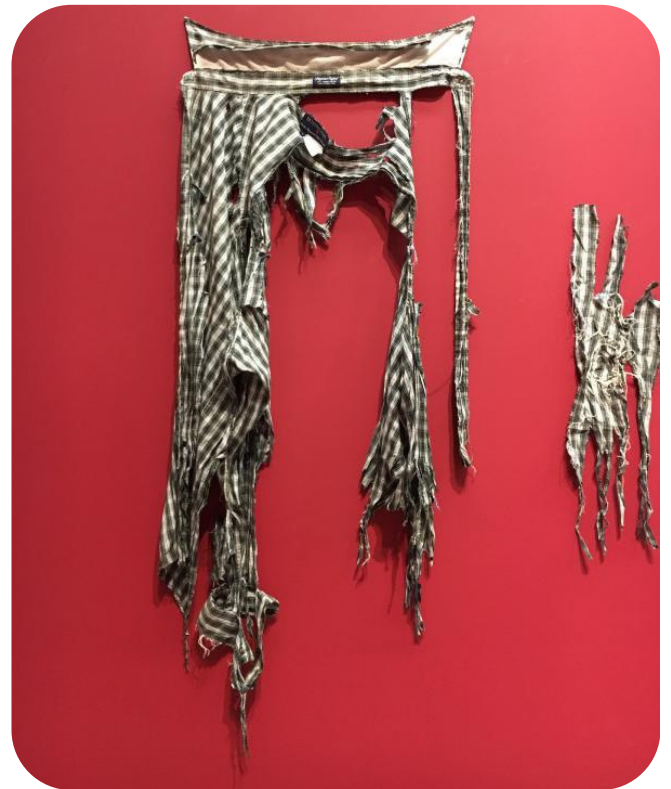
VGM: The pandemic has pushed artistic spaces beyond the museum space. What do you think can be saved from this experience? Do you think that the museum as a space of encounter with art is part of the past?

SdLT: I love this question. Museums and my relationship with them is complex and contradict itself. On one hand, I love museums and dream of being part of my exhibitions while I'm alive. And on the other hand, I believe museums are exclusionary and problematic places. I'm thankful for the time I had during COVID shutdown because it gave me the time to learn how to tattoo and since then I've tattooed hundreds of people with my original drawings. This journey has allowed me to present my artwork on people's bodies forever and not just in private collections, galleries, and museums.

VGM: One of your most celebrated and impactful works is “365 Days in an Immigrant's Shirt” in the exhibition *Universal History of Infamy*, by Latinxs artists at LACMA. *La frontera* as a space of separation and encounter has such a powerful narrative that it runs the risk of being trivialized as an artistic excuse, but your piece is heartbreakingly intense, and never makes us forget the human drama it hides. Tell us the story of this piece.

SdLT: I truly understand that the *frontera* has a powerful narrative and that artists and individuals have trivialized it. But it's not something trivial to me, the borderlands are my home, and I deeply resonate with the liminality of the space. I could write an entire book on my “365 Days in an Immigrant's Shirt” piece. It was an entire year of my life, and I still constantly reflect on that time and how it changed me. The performance piece started off as a political action to protest unjust and inhumane border policies. (Mind you I did this project in 2014–2015 before the Trump era and his xenophobia rhetoric that fueled all closeted racism across the nation and world.) I had the intention of sharing with people that witnessed my performance that there was a human behind the shirt I wore and that humans including unaccompanied minors risk their lives every day in the desert to migrate to the United States. This was a fact that made people really upset or uncomfortable around me because of how conserva-

tive Orange County is. I chose to start the performance on November 20th, because that is the day of La Revolución in Mexico and it was the day President Obama signed DAPA, or Deferred Action for Parents of Americans, as an executive action. That was my only intention at the beginning of the project, but it ended up being a much richer and layered piece. I never really know how long I would wear it and I certainly didn't ever intend to wear it for an entire year. I started with 30 days, 6 months, 280 days or a Mayan year, then I decided I would do the entire solar year because of how inspired I was by performance artist, Tehching Hsieh. The shirt lived on my body and there was no way I could separate the performance from my everyday life, as much as I fought against that in the beginning. My life was messy, I was young and naive and even though my parents and most of my family members had crossed the border "illegally" it is an experience I would never truly understand because I came into this country as a resident. At some point, I realized that everything was my piece, the desert, the human that originally owned the shirt, his journey at the border, water stations, activism, protest, my dignified rage, my parent's immigration story, my positionality as a now "citizen", the loss of the male gaze in the deterioration of the shirt and of my own body, me coming out of the closet as queer for the first time in my 25 years of life, me teaching, me traveling, me sleeping, and me dealing with one of the worst mental illness patches of my life. All of it was the art of the piece.



VGM: An important part of your life is teaching young people. What does your daily work as a teacher for students from 12 to 18 years old contribute to your art? What do you find inspiring in this facet?

SdLT: Teaching young folks is a huge part of my life. I've devoted the last 10 years to it. I love this generation's energy and how so many of my students are unapologetically queer, something I never was in my youth. I've designed many of my assignments based on my own art practices I've had students do 30 days performances inspired by my yearlong performance, and I've had students embroider words that are hard to process like in my "Hilando Relaciones" project.

VGM: What have been your latest projects and what are you working on now?

SdLT: I've been working on a lot of different things lately but mostly been focusing on drawing flash cards for my tattoo work, and a lot of ceramics as well. Ceramics are new for me and I am in love. I really want to learn as much as I can and hopefully one day have a full body of work in ceramic sculpture. I've also been taking a lot of self-portraits in film and want to make a zine soon with the images of my body in my medical transition.

