

## **Interview: Nayda Cuevas (with Milan Golding)**

November 2015

### **Where were you born? When?**

I was born in Caguas, Puerto Rico. I am a US citizen as PR has been a commonwealth (Colony) of the United States since 1908.

### **Where do you live now?**

I live in Arlington MA where I am a private art teacher, stay at home mother, wife and artist.

### **Where did you go to school?**

I received my BFA in Fine Arts from Stetson University in DeLand FL and my MFA in Visual Arts from Lesley University College of Art and Design in Cambridge, MA.

### **Growing up what were some of your most memorable moments?**

I spent the first 10 years of my life in Puerto Rico where my most memorable memories were spent at the Beach in Dorado where my grandparents had a beach property. My parents then migrated to (please notice difference not immigrated) to Deltona Florida where I did middle school, high school and college.

My Father is first generation born and raised in Bridgeport, Connecticut but when he was 17, my grandfather was ill and wanted to die back in the island and so he returned with my father and aunts. There he eventually met my mother who was born and raised in Caguas PR. My grandparents on my father's side were part of the second batch of Puerto Ricans who came up north to work in factories during the 40s, looking for a better place to live and work. My parents moved because Puerto Rico has always had a poor economy. Right now it is three times as poorer than the poorest state in the US.

### **Where did you grow up? What was it like where you grew up?**

In my immediate family there are 4. I have one younger sister, but we have a large family and we are very close and stay connected. I travel to PR every year to visit family and friends.

### **How do you self-define? What does that mean to you?**

I am Puerto Rican and that already means I am also American. I dislike the social constructs of identity in having to choose the term Latina or Hispanic. But it empowers my work.

### **How did you get started with art?**

From the age of ten, I recalled trying to understand why I was different because I spoke another language other than English. I started making art in order to deal with a sense of alienation and the absence of familiar people and places in my life.

### **What impact has your life had on your art?**

At the age of ten, my parents made the decision to move our family from Puerto Rico to Florida. Being relocated at a young age evoked a new sense of self-exploration and need to establish connections with people. Painting the figure became a means to understand people and create connections in my community, while exploring a visual language to better articulate my observations and interpretations of my Latino identity. It is this identity that guides my work to cultivate awareness of “otherness” in American culture, while raising questions about belonging and feelings of displacement.

In my work, I reference both traditional painted portraits and the selfie trend in order to engage and connect with my viewer. By engaging in traditional forms of portrait painting—namely, naturalistic representations of people rendered in oil on canvas—I seek to challenge how we currently consume images at an alarming rate and volume, without devoting substantial time or energy to sufficiently digest, contemplate, and understand what we see. This condition is created because we now experience the world through digital devices such as cell phones, which provide easy and instant access to imagery from a wide range of sources. Consequently, my explorations led me to appropriate images online and represent found selfies. By painting from images that are inherently informal and impermanent, I seek to draw attention to how we interpret our engagement with one another as a series of fleeting yet meaningful encounters, thereby pointing a lens to our culture of instant gratification metaphorically pressing pause. I slow down the viewer's engagement by painting the portraits the size of a cell phone. This slows down the viewer's gaze. The “gaze” has been theorized as a means of exerting power through the act of looking; by encouraging a slower gaze in my repainted selfies. I encourage the viewer to consider the lives of others. In this regard, my paintings serve to celebrate the diversity within the Latino community in the United States and to explore the complex ways in which people negotiate issues of ethnic identity using social media as a means of social activism.

Exploring the selfie, and its increasing prevalence in our culture, led me to realize that there are subthemes within how people examine or present identity such as ethnic, gender, or religious identity. Selfies are an expression of one's identity, however contrived or imagined it may be. For this reason my artwork calls attention to the ways in which new technologies allow individuals to actively voice their opinions through self-portraiture. As a result, exploring the selfie led to three series that I have begun simultaneously. The first is *#WhatLatinosLookLike*, a group of painted self-portraits on those selfies posted on Twitter by individuals who demonstrate diversity within Latinos. The second series, *#MurrietaProtest*, addresses a shameful display of anti-immigrant sentiment in this country—specifically an event that took place in California in July of 2014. The third series, entitled *#Inbetween2worlds* will be composed of a collection of my own selfies taken of

me in Arlington, Massachusetts, and in Puerto Rico. Through this latter series, I will explore my own relationship to the selfie trend as an expression of my own identity. By representing the quickly created, ever changing, and widely circulated selfie with a more traditional, time sensitive painting approach and hanging it on an art gallery wall, I want viewers to also slow down and more deeply engage the politics of identity negotiated in a portrait, from ethnic identity to social activism. Furthermore, by converting the self-portrait into a portrait represented by another creator, I intend to explore my own identity.

Link to website

<http://www.naydacuevasart.com/>

Link to blogs

<http://naydaaurora.blogspot.com/>

<http://missartzy.blogspot.com/>