

Loose Threads: Weaving Latinx Narratives of Hybridity and Multiplicity

BY CHARLIE TATUM

Charlie Tatum examines the work of Melissa Leandro and Victoria Martinez, who dissect and piece together material culture and imagery from their respective Latinx cultures to commemorate the histories and cultures that inform their identity.

I learned to knit in college, and I was amazed by the number of tiny movements that systematically produced a piece of cloth, a garment. My hands had to run over every millimeter of fiber. Wool gets sweaty; keeping bodies warm is the point, I guess. I found it romantic—the idea that someone else would be wearing a scarf soaked in the sweat produced by the rhythmic motion of my fingers. In my mind, that easy-to-overlook labor—those hours spent—wouldn't be forgotten.



Victoria Martinez

Chicago-based artist Melissa Leandro uses weaving and non-traditional textile production to actively translate her own memories and relationships into physical form. Years ago, Leandro's mother, who lives in Miami, began sending her care packages of assorted objects, collections of knick-knacks and seemingly useless items. These objects became souvenirs, not of personal experiences, but of a relationship—artifacts marked and made special by the process of gifting. Leandro, like most of us who live in cities where residences have limited space, didn't know what to do with these things, not willing to discard them but also not sure how to handle their accumulation.

She began creating cyanotype photograms as an archival process and then translated those prints

into jacquard weavings. These tapestries—sometimes stretched, sometimes hanging loosely on the wall—translated from boxes of objects, became a way to preserve and acknowledge the labor and time spent to maintain a relationship.

In a recent iteration of this process of simultaneous preservation and dissociation, Leandro has used sketches and drawings from a recent trip to Eastern Europe with her family as source materials for new jacquard weavings. In *En el camino_Prague* (2016) on view in *¿Qué Pasa, USA?*, a blue and white mountainscape bleeds into spiraled and zigzagged scribbles, suggesting both the fallibility of memory and the ways in which context informs experience—in this case, the ways in which Leandro's process of recording the world affects her remembrance of a place and time.

Leandro understands that our experiences and remembrances of the world are malleable and, in many of these works, she returns to the often monochrome jacquard weavings with colorful swirls of hand-stitched and embroidered threads. These stitched doodles—and the additive nature of Leandro's process at large—mirror the ways in which we carry our histories and identities with us in a stream of continually changing forms. Her forms don't prescribe a specific interpretation but, instead, set off an individualized chain of associations for each viewer.

And while this sense of amorphous accumulation can seem natural, Leandro also emphasizes the difficulties of embracing a hybridized and complex subjectivity. Her heat-fused fabrics—like the colorful checkerboard of *Kitchen table_crossword*, (2016)—are the products of smashing together disparate materials (Ric-Rac fabric trim, electrical tape, doilies) until they melt into one final piece. Leandro's incorporation of vivid plastic tablecloths printed with

fruits and tropical flowers also points to an imagined aesthetic across Latin American and Caribbean cultures. Leandro, who grew up in Miami in a Costa Rican family, recalled her recent travels in a phone conversation we had. She remembered a moment where she found herself in a Colombian marketplace humorously filled with rolls of these plastic fabrics—printed produce sitting in lieu of their edible counterparts. In splicing and repurposing these tablecloths, Leandro suggests the impossibility of a singular Latinx identity, while also embracing the nostalgia and joy of *tropicália*.

Similarly, artist and educator Victoria Martinez stitches together various media to celebrate the aesthetic and cultural production of Latin America. For her work in *¿Qué Pasa, USA?*, Martinez combined an assortment of items—including wash rags from Brazil, a potato sack from Peru, and advertisements from a market in Pilsen, the predominantly Mexican neighborhood in Chicago where Martinez grew up and still lives—into a four-by-eleven-foot banner. In the context of the drudgery of this year's election cycle (still undecided at the time of writing) and Republican candidate Donald Trump's xenophobic threats to build a wall along the United States' southern border, Martinez's work stands as a marker of visual resistance to continued white hegemony.

Martinez sees her practice as a space to confront, escape, and laugh at our terrifying political realities, and these gestures are both contextual and formal. Her hanging textile sculptures are often dedicated to the specific sites where they are installed. She draws inspiration from architecture and public space and incorporates materials found nearby, using scraps of balloons, grocery bags, plastic flowers, and bubble wrap as fibers and fabrics.

Martinez looks to the geometry of the built environment, the forms and shapes of graffiti, and disposable party-store decorations to record her own experiences of the world around her. At first glance, Martinez's pieces appear to be a series of symbols or characters with an unknown meaning. But the ambiguity of these signifiers is what allows

her works to serve as both personal records and public monuments.

For her 2012 exhibition *Other Side Breathing* at Cobalt Studio in Chicago, Martinez created a series of works responding to various sites around Pilsen: a flower shop, the building of a former taco shack, an alleyway, an abandoned mini-mall, and several convenience stores. Through the artworks, Martinez abstracted the cityscape, and, one year later, she returned to these locations to place the works in situ, leaving them subject to the whims of their surroundings—to be celebrated, taken down, weathered away.

This circular movement from the street to the studio and back is a reminder of how we constantly revisit and revise our memories from our changing perspectives. Martinez embraces media that might seem like trash in order to recontextualize the celebration of everyday life within the monumentalizing impulse of the gallery space. She creates markers to remind us of the individual and temporary stories that are often left out of dominant histories.

Like Leandro, Martinez suggests through her work that hybridity can—and must—exist, using textiles to mimic the ways our identities hold a multiplicity of selves and can create space for our own individualized histories. Together, their collaged works ask that we continue to redefine, reposition, and redocument ourselves and the world around us. This continual process of rearrangement is internal, yes, but Martinez and Leandro push this work outward by expanding traditional ideas of craft, asking us what a textile is, what it should do, and what it can be. They both champion the power of small stitches and their accumulation into something larger, waiting to define itself.