

Alma Lopez

Interview:

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Alma Lopez is an artist, activist and visual storyteller working in painting, photo based digital prints, and video. She is internationally recognized for her innovative digital images, which re-contextualize cultural icons bringing issues of race, gender and sexuality into relationship with transnationalist myths. She holds a BA from UC, Santa Barbara and an MFA from UC, Irvine. Lopez exhibits her work extensively and has received many awards for her work. Her work has been featured in numerous publications including *Art in America*, *Flash Art International*, and *Ms. Magazine*.



OSA: Tell us a little bit about yourself.

ALMA: My name is Alma Lopez and I am a visual storyteller. I describe myself that way because I feel that much of my work, although it ranges in different mediums or media, is essentially about telling stories. I consider myself an activist. I was born in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, Mexico and raised in Los Angeles. I completed my undergraduate degree at UC Santa Barbara and my MFA at UC Irvine. In both instances I focused primarily on drawing, printmaking, and painting. It wasn't until after graduating with my MFA that I actually delved into digital media, primarily photo-based digital images and I'm currently working in digital video.

OSA: Do you identify as Chicana?

ALMA: I do identify as Chicana. I think that for most Chicanas coming into this identity is a process. The identity itself is really about coming into a political, social, and historical consciousness. I think that I came into this Chicana consciousness differently and in certain ways similarly to other Chicanas. I was born in Mexico. We moved to Los Angeles when I was four years old. We would return to Mexico to visit family usually on school vacations. I feel that on those visits as a kid, I realized that my worldview, my perspective, was very different from my cousins. I don't think I really,

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consciously verbalized it at that time. Later, upon reflecting, I realized it was that, you know, they were growing up in Mexico, with a certain kind of cultural self-awareness, a certain kind of entitlement, that kind of thing, about being Mexicanos. And me, being an immigrant growing up here in the US, I realized what an impact this had. I think the impact was primarily concerning issues of race and class. Racism creates wounds and scars. I knew early on that I wasn't Mexicana, but I didn't know what I was. And it wasn't until, like most of us when we go to the University, we come into contact with the word or term of Chicano and then there is a whole process to accepting it and dealing with that.

OSA: In terms of being a Chicana spectator, what influences you?

ALMA: Well, I guess for me, a lot of what influences me, in a way, that idea of a spectator are my very first experiences as a spectator. When we moved here to the U.S., one of the very first things that I saw on television was either the U.S. astronauts landing on the moon or maybe it was the anniversary or something like that. Either way, I remember seeing this man on the moon and the flag, you know, not defined by gravity. I remember thinking that it was not real, especially since the man was kind of jumping around dressed up in an oversized white uniform and helmet. So I always felt like what I saw on TV wasn't real, and that continued, watching shows like *The Brady Bunch*. I grew up in neighborhoods such as Compton, downtown Convention Center area, and El Sereno where my neighbors were people of color, and primarily African American and different Latinos. And so my whole world was primarily of color, and I didn't really see people who were white; I only saw them on TV. And so I thought 'Oh this is a whole other different thing, it's not even real. They're sort of

like dolls or toys, especially when I would see *The Brady Bunch* and the youngest daughter with the blonde curly hair that didn't look real.'

So, I didn't see television, magazines or movies portray a world like mine. Therefore, for me they weren't real. What was really real to me was what I would describe as my own kind of museum or my visual world, which was composed of the Mexican calendars, the canned foods, the printed stuff that you would see around the house, Spanish television, *La Opinion*, stuff like that. Even now much of what's mainstream media such as movies, there is still that distinction of my reality. It's like these stories that are being told are not necessarily from my perspective, but primarily from the perspective of, at least the way I see it, of white men. And I think an example of that is that movie *Spanglish*. It starts in the narration voice of a young Latina applying for college who is the daughter of a maid. You think, 'Oh wow this is a story being told from the perspective of this daughter, which many of us have been those daughters.' And yet, it turns immediately. You realize this is not about that. This is about the man who employs the mother and it's really about his perspective, from the white male perspective. So, it's not so different from most movies at all.

OSA: How did you get into digital media?

ALMA: I was a California Arts Council artist in residence at SPARC (the Social and Public Art Resource Center) and the research assistant to UCLA/Cesar Chavez Center's mural course professor Judith Baca. In this course, she wanted to explore the possibility of digital murals. At that time, neither she nor I knew Photoshop or anything like that, so as the assistant it was my responsibility to learn. By reading the manual while trying

to do some basic image manipulation, I taught myself what I needed to know in Photoshop in order to teach it to her students. This was in late 1996. Since then, I have taught myself web design as well as video editing. I'm basically self-taught in regards to digital media.

OSA: It seem that you don't fear technology like some people may.

ALMA: No I don't.

OSA: Tell me a little about your first video project and what you are working on next.

ALMA: My first video is titled *Boi Hair*. It was shot on Mini DV with my neighbor and friend Alice Hom's camera. Alice is one of the stars in *Boi Hair*. She's Chinese-American and an activist. I edited *Boi Hair* on my Mac Laptop with a basic program called iMovie. The way that project came about was that Alice, a few other friends and I went to the first annual Fusion Film Festival, which is the people of color film festival component of Outfest in Los Angeles. It was in Little Tokyo. The first one was in February of 2004. After watching several movies by queer people of color, I thought to myself, 'I could probably do this.' I had wanted to make a video because when I was creating my two dimensional imagery, I would play, how you might play with paper dolls but I would play in Photoshop, moving the images around the screen. For example, I would have the Lupe and the Sirena meeting and flying around together. It was really at that point in 1999, when I was working on those images, that I had this idea of doing some sort of animation because in the process, when I was creating the images, it would be very animated for me, and it would be animated on the screen, and once I printed it out it was flat. So I had wanted to do something for years, and it wasn't

until after the film festival and a few of us were having dinner in Little Tokyo, and we talked about the possibility of working on our own video. And we started dreaming, how would our video be and how would we do it.

Alice mentioned having a camera, and I had my laptop. And so, I thought, 'Yeah! We can do it.' And the only thing was the topic. I remember I had been around quite a few butch women of color, including my girlfriend at the time, Lizette Sanchez, who constantly talked about issues with their hair. It's a whole thing, like where to go to even get a haircut where the stylists will understand what it is they want. Or what kinds of hair products work best for which hair. There's really this thing about hair, which is more than just aesthetics. I've learned that hair is a very important component of butch identity. And so, initially I thought, 'oh that would be such a really good topic.' And I thought, 'this isn't something necessarily that you get in other conversations unless you're around butch women. So it was about a month or three weeks after that first Fusion that we had a roundtable discussion here in the kitchen. And for me, I wanted to be very sensitive to them. Because I'm an other. And because I'm aware that I am directing the project as well as editing. Therefore there will be lots of me there in terms of my interests in short hair. But throughout the entire making process I wanted to make sure it was their voices and concerns, which came across. So, I asked the first questions, then invited them to ask each other questions, to return anytime they wanted to add something new, and as I was editing, I invited their comments.

OSA: So they were involved throughout the whole process?

ALMA: I wanted them to be involved in how they were being portrayed. I also wanted it to be very, I don't know how

to say this, but I wanted the audience to know, like in the way that it was shot and the way that it was edited, that we weren't just looking in at these women, but that these women were very highly aware about what they were sharing with the audience. So even at the end when Alice says 'Do you have enough for this video?' and, 'What are you going to call it?', I specifically wanted to put that in because I wanted... it shows that they know that it's taped this whole time, they know what they've said and they've been the ones that have been... and even though at times you tend to get lost because of what's being said or done or whatever. And at that point, I was very conscious that the audiences know that the women were very aware that the audience was there watching them, and that what they shared, that's what they wanted to share with that audience. And, that the spectator is aware that they are the spectator because the people in the video themselves are making them aware that they are being recorded.

OSA: That was a very sweet and powerful project because you brought in the families, the cultures, the different queer and gender identities as well as race. Plus you added the Lupe and Sirena animation. Could you tell me a little bit of the history and the situation of the controversy? Which in a way was around negative spectatorship, although I know you also received lots of positive feedback internationally as well.

ALMA: That was...the controversy was over an image titled "Our Lady" and it was a digital image that I did in 1999. The idea was... at the time I was in discussion with a few friends about the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe which is this pretty heavy-loaded and, at times, controversial female religious cultural figure that...many of us grow up and have a really conflicting relationship to that image because of

expectations of how we're socialized and acculturated, especially I think as women, in what our roles are and so just being very aware of that kind of dilemmas in a way. I wanted to do this image that references that in terms of the title "Our Lady," but also in terms of the way the image is composed and certain parts of the image like the halo, robe, all that kind of stuff, but have it in a way that is contemporary and modern. And where I have a friend, specifically, who was in that position, but who was a very contemporary, real Chicana. But at the same time, shift it so that it's not her. It is not re-creating Virgin of Guadalupe and the way that she is, because, you know, I'm not interested in prophesizing or preaching or anything like that. I was interested in working with that image in terms of a whole history of other Chicana feminists who have visions of Virgin of Guadalupe since the 70s, like Yolanda Lopez, and Esther Hernandez; I was very aware of their work. I didn't think I was doing anything new. It felt like I was working in a tradition of Chicana Feminists having visions of Virgin of Guadalupe. Not just visually, I mean I was thinking visually, but also in writing. I was reading Sandra Cisneros' "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" and other writers who had written on Virgin of Guadalupe and what that sometimes-difficult relationship is to that image. And so years later, 2001, I was invited to participate in an exhibition for women – Latinas, Chicanas primarily – and curated by a Chicana scholar in Santa Fe.

OSA: Who was the curator?

ALMA: The curator was Tey Mariana Nunn, a PhD and curator of the Museum of International Folk Art. Her activist work is in making sure that Nuevo Mexicano artists of the WPA are recognized as important contributors to the art created during the WPA. Her vision for this exhibition was to create a bridge between

generations as well as those familiar with either cultural iconography and/or new technologies. Basically this educational exhibition would introduce new technology to people who were familiar with the cultural imagery and then it would introduce cultural imagery to people who were already familiar with technology. So it was really this generational, educational exhibition that I thought was really genius in how she had thought about it. Being a Chicana activist herself, she thought of four women having done that. Three of them were *Mexicanas* and I was the only outsider from California. So, it was a great exhibition. And I think, for the most part, the people who actually saw it really liked it, but it was, but the people who were really the most hurt were the people who were loud, the people who protested the image. I think it was primarily people who didn't really understand this tradition that I was working with, this Chicana, feminist, revisionist view of the Virgin of Guadalupe that I was working in. I kind of felt that sometimes, had they not heard of Chicanas? Had they not heard of the feminist movement? Had they not seen these Virgin of Guadalupe images before then? It was a really complicated...

OSA: Were the protestors some clergy or church affiliated?

ALMA: It was church organized and supported by the arch-dieesis of Santa Fe. The archbishop had sent out official memos and statements basically saying that this image that showed the Virgin Mary as a tart or a street woman, which, to me, I was really offended at the time. You know, it's so retro. I think in a way... I live in a community that is much more open-minded than that. The community that I hope that I live in doesn't look at the body of a woman with only the legs and belly exposed and automatically think Sex.

OSA: And that was in the L.A. Times, right?

ALMA: Yeah, the L.A. Time, the BBC website, the New York Times. The controversy over this image had wide media coverage. I believe, primarily because of the kind of organizing that the people did who were opposing it. This was a real eye-opening experience for me because I learned just how organized religious institutions are even on the web in terms of their sites. Duh, that's why it's "organized" religion. I was very naïve.

OSA: Why don't you give us some sites that we can check out?

ALMA: I had constructed a site specifically for "Our Lady" because it was so much that I was getting. My sister Leti helped me gather web-based news articles/essays. And I collected the nearly thousand emails, which I'm still receiving, on this topic. As I was reading I thought, 'wow, there's such an interesting conversation on this – a conversation that crosses all different kinds of different discussions that have to do with cultural iconography, who is entitled to work with those images, Chicana feminist, queer, religion.' It crossed quite a few topics of discussion.

OSA: What is that site?

ALMA: Right now I have it under <http://www.almalopez.net>. I still get emails here and there.

OSA: How about internationally? Like, say the women in Mexico... you just returned from a three week cultural exchange?

ALMA: I was in the D.F. for three weeks, doing an exchange with an organization called Les Voz. They planned it to celebrate the eleventh year anniversary of their organization while I was there.

They have a magazine and website and organization. Their website is <http://www.lesvoz.org.mx>. I went there, as well as a few Tongues board members, a nonprofit queer women of color organization to which I belong to. Our website is <http://www.tonguesLA.org>.

They used the *Lupe and Sirena* as part of their promotion, and they also used this other image the *Ixta*. In some places they could show more of *Lupe and Sirena* and in some places more the *Ixta*; they were able to show some depending on if it was queer friendly or not. Also the space that they were able to get for the exhibition and the whole week of the presentation was a *Capilla Britanica*, which is like a chapel. In Mexico, there are all these spaces that used to be churches or chapels but are now more like cultural spaces or libraries. They were turned into cultural public spaces because the government at one point demanded the church to pay taxes. And it was right in the center of the town. So they blew up the image really large – it was probably about 7 by 5 feet – it was pretty large.

OSA: So what was the reaction to that?

ALMA: In Mexico, it was actually very positive. I think they understood it; they didn't look at it like we think sometimes. We think they're so close to the Virgin of Guadalupe and to the religion that they might get offended with the image, but the people who I interacted with didn't get offended at all. They totally saw it my way. They were like yeah, we get it, we grow up with this image especially being in Mexico, but we have a different relationship to her than what is thought of to be traditional way, which is more this religious, holy mother figure. Which is interesting because I got a little more of that kind of reaction here, especially with queer men who were perhaps raised in the church. But they still would say, 'why are

you doing that?' Looking at it differently or in a different way than a way I was trying to show. I think that much of my work, at least I think of it this way, is layered. Of course it's what you're obviously seeing, which is the Virgin of Guadalupe groping the mermaid, the Sirena, so there's that sexual thing to it. But where the story telling part of me comes into it is that there's that at the surface level, but you need to know the legend of her apparition and what she meant to the indigenous people. According to the legend, what she really meant to them was a symbol of absolute love and acceptance, because she was just like them, she looked just like them. At such a difficult time, when they were being colonized, she appeared eleven years after the Spanish landed in Mexico. To me, when I think about that time, it must have been a nightmare. It must have been horrific. It must have been a time when you needed to move beyond yourself to even survive. So when I think of her, I think of her in that way she appeared. I think appeared and I think apparitions, and I think there are different ways that we can think of apparitions. I think apparitions could be created, not necessarily divined. She appeared at a time when it was really necessary for people's survival. And so when I think of how she appeared, I think it must have been activists and community who made her appear, who created her in order to save themselves and save their people from absolute genocide. When I created this image of *Lupe and Sirena*, it was much more about saying that. Saying that me, as a queer Chicana, the only way that I could possibly accept the Virgin of Guadalupe, is that she has to accept me. Therefore, she has to be like me. So, *Lupe and Sirena* is about absolute love and acceptance. It's also about love. Here you have a water creature and then you have this heavenly sky creature. And Sometimes you meet and you fall in love it seems almost impossible, it's almost like a miracle that two people can come

together being that we're in such different spaces sometimes.

OSA: That overlapping, that is also an overlaying that Lupe is also Tonantzin. Tell me a little about where you will be teaching and projects that you will be working on.

ALMA: I am like most artists I know, working in different ways on different things at the same time. Right now I am preparing a course to teach at UCLA in the LGBT Studies Department this Fall 2005. The course is titled "Queer Art." The course focuses on me as an artist looking and sharing different queer artists in the US and Mexico, with a focus on queer people of color, as well as looking at different issues like censorship, AIDS and activist works. I'm looking primarily at visual work, because that is my training and that is what I'm comfortable with, but also I'm looking at performance and video.

As a project, I'm working on a short digital video titled *LA Loves DF*. It's looking at the relationship between these two friends of mine, one is from here and lived in Mexico for the past year and fell in love with someone from Mexico. I'm using their relationship to talk about Chicanos and more specifically Los Angeles and the nostalgia towards things that are Mexican. At least it's been my experience that East LA, what you see, in terms of

the murals, the bakeries, and restaurants. I'm interested in how *Mexicanismo* and *Latinidad* are materialized in the spaces we live, work, and play. I'm looking at how Mexico is in L.A. and how it's part of that nostalgia and love that we have for where we come from.

OSA: What genre is it? Drama? Documentary? Both?

ALMA: I'm always fascinated by all kinds of storytelling, but I think for me I have a certain attraction in my video work to documentary work, at least for now.

OSA: What fantasy or idea do you see way in the future being able to do?

ALMA: That's an interesting question for me because I feel that I live in the moment. I really like what I am doing. If anything, what I think about way in the future is that I hope that I am still able to do whatever it is that I'm currently doing. Which means having access to whatever equipment is necessary to create that work. And when I look back to my life, I would like to have been able to create a body of work that demonstrates different ideas and perspectives showing where I am at and where I have been and that would include painting, printmaking, photo based digital images, digital video, and basically work which shows that I have been active and involved.