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The Art of Heritage and Mortality

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The Art of Heritage and Mortality

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

by

Barbara Johanna Mileto

B.F.A. University of Morón, 2010

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Abstract

Through my art I explore the formation of cultural and personal identity addressing the importance of heritage, ancestors, and religion in Latin-American culture, while I develop my unique deities and spiritual space, creating my own iconography. The pieces are strongly autobiographical, using my family members, and frequently lived experience as a subject. Furthermore, I am drawn to the circle of life and productive failures - beginnings, deaths, and transitions. - My work integrates two-dimensional and three-dimensional mediums, ranging from photography and printmaking to assemblage and textiles, video and digital.

Keywords: Heritage in art, cultural identity, personal identity, death, transformation, Latin American culture, assemblage, religion in contemporary art, iconography - South American rituals, ofrendas.

Chapter I

Introduction

My work is based on the exploration and formation, transitions, creation, and acquisition of new elements and experiences. I am drawn to the redefinition and active creation of identity in various stages of life and situations that, sometimes, we cannot control.

My migration to the United States, the feelings of loss, rootlessness, distance, and new traditions makes me wonder where I belong. Therefore, my art revolves around my family, my religion, the traditions of my heritage, the techniques I learned in my homeland; everything mixed with my new life in another country and culture.

My bachelor's degree in Fashion and Textile Design provided me an intimate knowledge of materials such as textile, yarn, threads, and other embellishments used in these industries, and different techniques like sewing, embroidery, crochet and pattern making. Furthermore, I specialized in printmaking, where I was able to physically bring patterns to life through screen-printing on textiles and paper. Textiles have been used worldwide as an element to express identity. They can show culture, ideologies, and the social context of the person wearing it through patterns, prints, and craftsmanship. For example, we can think about Romans wearing togas, Samurais wearing do-maru, South Asian women wearing a sari, and Mardi Gras Indians wearing beaded suits.

The inspiration for my pieces comes from lived experience, from lonely walks around unfamiliar places, architecture, cemeteries, religion, ancestors, and spirituality.

Chapter II

Creation, Death, and Transformation

Creation

In my pieces, creation is represented by different elements, flowers, tactile textures, and crochet techniques, among others. For me, all these elements are linked to creation one way or the other. For example, flowers are essential for the reproduction of flowering plants; therefore, they are the main symbol for the creation of a new life. My tactile textures come from a single and flat material manipulated in a way that creates something entirely new. The meaning of the other techniques is more personal. When I was a child and my mom was pregnant, she used to hand weave cloth and different items for my sisters, so for me crochet and knitting are linked to creation and the connection of family members.

In my “*Family*” (2018) series I use flowers and colorful textures made with paper to represent my new life in New Orleans, while I use pictures of my family in black and white to represent my past and my old life, the life I had in South America growing up. “*Esperanza*” (2018) shows the black and white picture of two girls – my paternal grandmother and my great-aunt – seated on a field. Behind them I opened the background and created a flower texture full of color and volume. The treatment of the background has the same significance than in “*Beach Day*” (2018). The way I created the flower texture is one of the techniques I use to create textile designs and patterns.



Figure 1 - Barbara Mileto, *Beach Day*, 2018. Digital print on paper, acrylic paint, paper. From the series *Family*. 12 x 8 in.



Figure 2 - Barbara Mileto, *Esperanza*, 2018. Digital print on paper, silk flowers, plastic, wood. From the series *Family*. 33 x 26 in.

Death and Loss

When I talk about death, I am not talking merely about the end of life, I am also referring to the end, loss or failure of any circumstance or possibility. It is through endings that we can create new things and possibilities; I call them productive failures. Every new beginning is linked to the previous end of something else. This end is going to form part of a lived experience, not necessarily defining someone, but is more likely to transform and be the catalyst for something new.

Besides the intention and the layout of the composition, in my work endings are usually represented by skeleton parts, skulls, femurs or any kind of bones or body parts. My “*Memento Mori*” (2019-ongoing) series consists of six life size skull sculptures embellished with lace, stones, an array of fabric, feathers, and crochet. They are linked to the Vanitas genre, while the embellishments are symbols of wealth the skulls clearly represent the fleetingness of human life, the certainty of death.

I use very dark colors or achromatic palettes in combination with the imagery of bones and body parts to emphasize the concept of death and endings. Bones are a universal symbol of death, using bones in art might be a cliché, but for me they are also part of my upbringing. My dad is a doctor, and I was raised around medical books and skeletons, which fascinated me from the very beginning. Furthermore, I was a very fragile child going in and out of the hospital very often, x-rays, medical tests, and blood samples were part of my everyday life.



Figure 3 - Barbara Mileto, *Memento Mori I*, 2019. Plaster, plaster bandages, lace, acrylic paint, thread. From the series *Memento Mori*. 14 x 14 x 7.5 in.

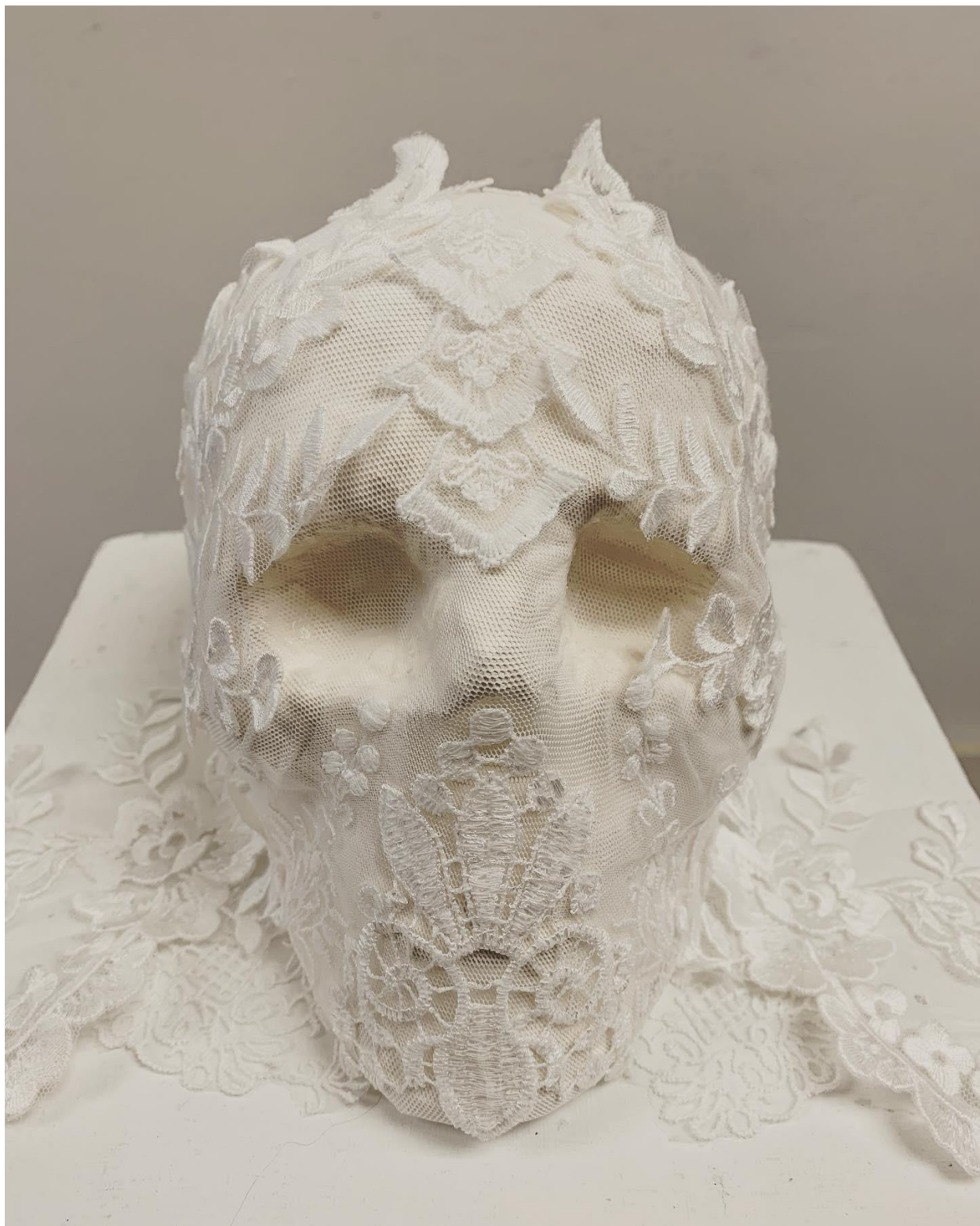


Figure 4 - Barbara Mileto, *Memento Mori II*, 2019. Plaster, plaster bandages, lace, mesh. From the series *Memento Mori*. 16 x 6.5 x 7.5 in



Figure 5 - Barbara Mileto, *Memento Mori III*, 2019. Papier-mâché, crochet in cotton thread, stones, feathers, acrylic paint. From the series *Memento Mori*. 14 x 14 x 7.5 in

An artist that explores the complex relationship between life, death and art through sculpture, painting, and drawing is contemporary British artist Damien Hirst (b. 1965). For his piece “*For the Love of God*” (2007) he used 8,601 diamonds to embellish a human skull to state that our existence on earth is transient. He explains of death “...*You don’t like it, so you disguise it, or you decorate it to make it look like something bearable – to such an extent that it becomes something else...*”¹ This piece is the counterpart of “*Fear of Death*” (2007) which is a skull entirely made of death flies. He says about them “...*It’s death over victory and victory over death (...) you’ve gotta take the rough with the smooth. What goes up must come down. So, there’s a yin and yang to the fellas, to the diamond and the fly...*”²

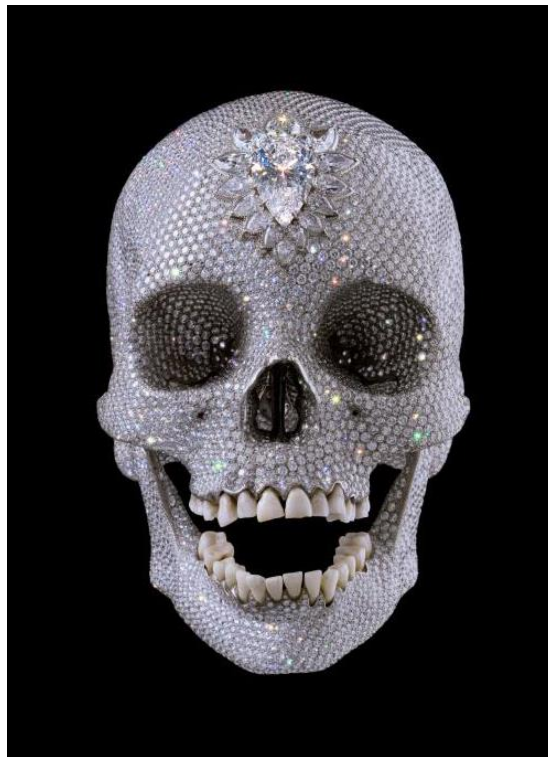


Figure 6 - Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007. Platinum, diamonds, and human teeth. 6.7 x 5 x 7.5 in.

¹ Damien Hirst, “*For the Love of God, Context*”, Accessed March 18, 2021, <http://damienhirst.com/for-the-love-of-god>

² Damien Hirst, “*Fear of Death, Context*”, Accessed March 18, 2021, <http://damienhirst.com/fear-of-death-full-skull>



Figure 7 - Damien Hirst, *Fear to Death*, 2007. Flies, resin, glass, and aluminum. 16.3 x 13.8 x 13.8 in.

Transformation

After endings, loss, death, the transformation begins. Nothing is exactly what it was before, what is left transforms what it was into something new. In my art, transformation is represented through cyanotypes, the deconstruction of elements, photographs, and other elements from my culture. The cyanotype is the first technique I learned in the United States, so for me is linked to evolution or the transformation of myself as an artist. In the cyanotype *“What It Is”* (2019) life is represented by crochet, thread, and lace, whilst death is represented by bones, they are interacting with each other, almost dancing in a sea of transformation.



Figure 8 - Barbara Mileto, *What It Is*, 2019. Toned cyanotype on cardboard, silkscreen printing, beads, lace, crochet, greenery, bones, jewelry, stitches in cotton thread. 60 x 43.5 in.

An artist whose work resonates with mine is Dario Robleto (b. 1972) a contemporary North American artist that connects past and present with his magical installations and objects. He uses materials from the past such as mourning clothes, bone dust, bullet leads, and soldier letters during time of war, among others. According to Xandra Eden³ “...Issues of loss are crucial to Robleto’s recent work, which explores the roles that grief, mourning and longing, at the hands of war, have played in forming our country...”⁴. Robleto says about his work “...The potential to lose someone

³ Xandra Eden, Exhibition’s curator at Weatherspoon Art Museum’s at The University of North Carolina.

⁴ Tom Patterson, “*What’s Left: Bullets, bandages transformed*”, Winston-Salem Journal, October 6th (2006).

is one of the unspoken propellants of culture (...) There's an overwhelming need to create using materials of destruction in a time of destruction..."



Figure 9 - Dario Robleto, *Defiant Gardens*, 2010. Cut paper, homemade paper (pulp made from soldiers' letters sent home and wife/sweetheart letters sent to soldiers from various wars) cotton thread and fabric from soldiers' uniforms of various wars, carrier pigeon skeletons, WWII-era pigeon message capsules, dried flowers from various battlefields, hair flowers braided by war widows, mourning dress fabric, excavated shrapnel and bullet lead from various battlefields, various seeds, various seashells, cartes de visite, gold leaf, silk, ribbon, wood, glass, foam core, glue. 79.5 x 61 x 4.5 in.

"Mama" (2018) and *"Abuela"* (2018) are two pictures of my mother and my grandmother that I deconstructed, by cutting and creating volume without adding any further elements. In these pieces I transformed the pictures the way I transformed the life of my family when I decided to move to a new country, cutting myself out of the daily interactions, of the special occasions, of the family life we used to have.



Figure 10 - Barbara Mileto, *Mama*, 2018. Digital print on paper and cut paper. From the series *Family*. 10 x 16 in.



Figure 11 - Barbara Mileto, *Abuela*, 2018. Digital print on paper. From the series *Family*. 11 x 16 in.

Chapter III

Heritage as a subject in my artwork

Culture outside the home country

One of the subjects I use for my artwork is my cultural heritage, rituals, and religion. I was born and raised in Argentina. Argentina is a country with an extended mix of native American people and European immigrants. In my case, part of my family migrated from Italy and Spain three generations ago. Even when I was raised in Argentinian culture, I was always surrounded by European culture and customs too.

As my ancestors did decades ago, I decided to leave my home country. My migration to the United States had a significant impact in my work. The feelings of loss, rootlessness, distance, and new traditions makes me wonder where I belong. Therefore, it is especially important for me to bring my cultural background to my new home country. In a way it makes me feel closer to home; and at the same time, presents my culture to a different community. Using parts of my culture as an inspiration helps me to show my culture to the world, creating knowledge and understanding through it. Therefore, several of my pieces find inspiration in Argentinian traditions.

“Vanitas: Safe Keeping” (2020) is an assemblage composed by three different boxes, inspired by tradition and it is a very ritualistic piece. Just like in other Latin American countries, families in Argentina safe keep their children’s hair locks and teeth as a memento and for good

luck. In this piece, I show this tradition with one of the boxes containing varied sizes of teeth, another one containing locks of hair that belong to both of my sisters, mom, and me. The third box is an added iconography, and it is full of fingernails, which represents change and wisdom.



Figure 12 - Barbara Mileto, *Vanitas: Safe Keeping*, 2020. Found boxes, mother's hair, sister's hair, artist's hair, lace, resin, acrylic, rhinestone, alcohol ink. 16 x 11 x 5 in (size varies)

An artist that similarly brings her cultural heritage to her artwork is Edra Soto (b. 1971), is a contemporary Puerto Rican artist living in Chicago, Illinois. For her work “*GRAFT*” she used the patterns of Boricua fences to create her art pieces in wood. In Puerto Rico, these fences work as a security method for the houses. With her work she creates a dialogue between her culture and the culture where she is living. The screens she creates veils and reveals spaces and they make a social and political statement at the same time, where she wonders if it is helpful for Puerto Rico to be part of the United States.

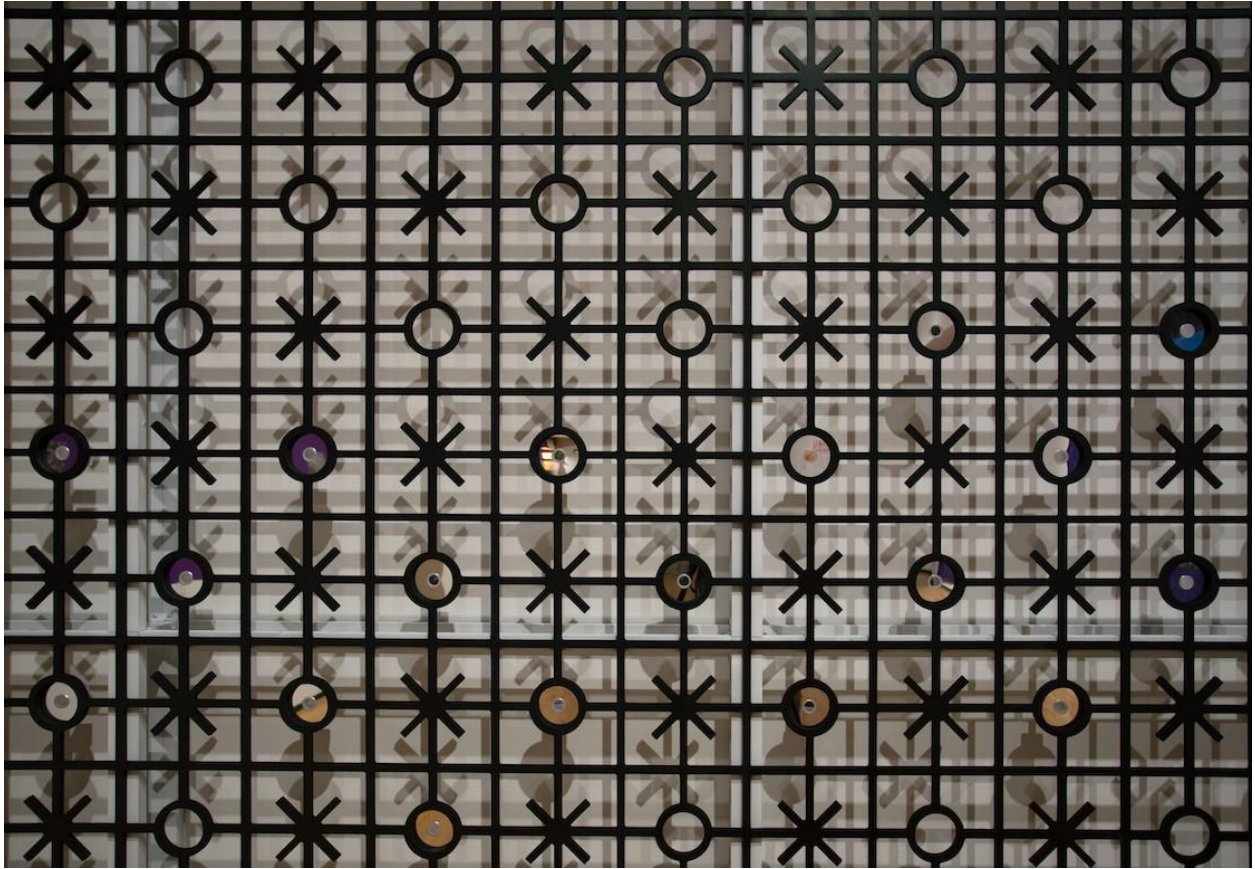


Figure 13 - Edra Soto, *GRAFT*, 2021. Aluminum tube, foamed PVC, mirrored acrylic, plastic, inkjet prints. From the series *GRAFT*. Size varies.

For Latin Americans, family and ancestors are one of the most important things in our everyday life. It is something that we are proud of. Therefore, one of the approaches to cultural identity in my artwork is through my family.

Part of my family tree can be seen in “*Antepasados*” (2018) where I use digital prints of my family members and I connect them through chains of crochet. These chains represent my need to feel connected to them in the distance and at the same time the connection between members, while the color of each chain signifies the kind of relationship between them. The embroidered flowers represent the life and growth of the family through generations. Nevertheless, the thin and ethereal fabric embodies the fragility of this life.



Figure 14 - Barbara Mileto, *Antepasados*, 2018. Lace, embroidery, crochet chains, digital print on paper, fabric. 39 x 59 in

Religion, Saints, and Ancestors

As most Argentinians, I was raised Catholic. Catholics believe in one God, pray to the Virgin Mary, and ask for the help of different saints. There are a lot of things that I am not in agreement about the religion, and other ones that I think are very interesting. I know there is a lot to talk about religion, but I would like to point out the things that are more important to me and to my work.

As I mentioned, devotion for saints is one of the characteristics of the religion. Saints were extraordinary women and men that loved God and his people in a remarkable way. The saints changed the world in which they lived, lifted the spirit of people, and lived heroic lives. Usually, they were particularly helpful in certain work, activity, and or need, therefore each saint is renowned as the patron of one or several of these. Father Diarmuid Clifford says in his book *Patron Saints*, "...They serve as a model for us because they were weak, and sinners like us. They have shown us what ordinary human beings like us can achieve when we make God an important part of our lives (...) Each saint is unique. No two saints are exactly alike. This reminds us that we too are unique and that in trying to be holy we should be ourselves..."⁵

I was named after Saint Barbara –she is invoked against storms, venerated against sudden death, and is the patron of artillerymen and miners- and Saint Joan of Arc –patron of soldiers, rape victims, and France- this is one of the reasons why I am attracted to saints as a subject in my art. In the photography series “*Sagrada Femeinidad*” (2020- ongoing) I address feminine icons of the

⁵ Clifford Diarmuid, *Patron Saints, a complete reference guide*, (New York: Regina Press, 2002), 6.

Catholic religion through photographs of saint's statues I took in cemeteries, churches, houses, community gardens, and squares.



Figure 15 - Barbara Mileto, *At My Fingertips*, 2020. Digital photograph. From the series *Sagrada Femeinidad*. Size varies.



Figure 16 - Barbara Mileto, *Warrior's Shelter*, 2020. Digital photograph. From the series *Sagrada Femeinidad*. Size varies.

My latest piece, which I think summarize my entire work as an artist is “*Santa Rosa Regina*” (2020) which is an assemblage covered in spirituality, full of holy components and is an ode to one of my ancestors. Through it I try to reach out to my most elemental self. Using features of spirituality and religious traditions, like lace, which is used in religious rituals during weddings, communions, and funerals; feathers which relate to angel’s wings, gold that is used in churches, chalices, crosses to represents divine qualities. I merge these with lived experiences and my ancestor. *Santa Rosa Regina* is an invitation to explore my own deities and saints; she is inspired by my maternal grandmother. Rosa is the patron of the hearing-impaired and health -my grandmother, my mother, my sister, and I are hard of hearing-. Thus, she does not have ears. She communicates trough her vision gloves, which are printed with letters from the Latin alphabet, and numbers from the decimal system. Furthermore, there is a box for *ofrendas* and intentions.

This piece is very intricate and each part of it has a specific meaning. The saint carries a Sacred Heart which in Catholicism represents Jesus Christ’s heart as a symbol of his love for humanity; her head is crowned by a halo -the same way artists in the Middle Ages and Renaissance period used them in their pieces-, which represents the divine light. Her entire head and body are wrapped in an intricated lace fabric. Her right hand is in a Benediction hand gesture, which is used in traditional Christian iconography to represent the Holy Trinity –the father, the son, and the holy spirit. Rosa is a health warrior saint. She is wearing bejeweled epaulettes symbolizing her fight, in this case against cancer. In an even more personal note, her face cannot be seen. This is because I did not have the chance to meet her, so she is still a little bit of a mystery to me.



Figure 17 - Barbara Mileto, *Santa Rosa Regina*, 2020. Lace, metal chains, resin, synthetic fabric, wood, plaster, plaster bandages, feathers, plastic, found box, found jewelry, velvet, trim, wasp nest, cicadas, sequins, paper, metal wire, cotton thread. 25 x 30 x 22 in.



Figure 18 - Barbara Mileto, *Santa Rosa Regina*, 2020. Lace, metal chains, resin, synthetic fabric, wood, plaster, plaster bandages, feathers, plastic, found box, found jewelry, velvet, trim, wasp nest, cicadas, sequins, paper, metal wire, cotton thread. 25 x 30 x 22 in.

Ofrendas, are set up by Latin Americans to honor and remember ancestors. On my mom's side of the family, we talk to our family members that are no longer in the realm of the living. The *ofrendas* are for the deceased to come back and enjoy worldly pleasures. These offerings are a collection of objects and can be anything that our ancestors loved during life, like bourbon, a favorite flower, a specific meal, or even a toy. In this case, instead of using *ofrendas*, I used Intentions which are items that I use in my sculptures to enhance the symbolism of the piece. Just like in prayers, we pray to God and Saints with an intention, in my pieces instead of praying they are physical items. In *Santa Rosa Regina*, the intentions are placed inside a box, which has a

reliquary resemblance. There are three items –three again as a representation of the Holy Trinity- a wasp nest, a cicada, and a human jawbone. The human jawbone represents the unspoken things and repressed emotions, the cicada symbolizes transformation, and the wasp nest represents empowerment, progress, growth, and a warrior spirit. The combination of the three objects marks the intention of change, transformation, and the willingness to do this.

Conclusion

My artwork revolves around two main subjects, the active creation of identity and cultural heritage, in this case Latin American. In my art both are closely related, the circle of life, creation, death, and transformation, contributes to the active creation of identity. In my case, when I moved to the United States, the need of reaching out to my South American roots was imperative, this need was the catalyst to a new approach, a new subject in my pieces, my heritage and my ancestors. The creation of a dialogue between my heritage, the culture where I am currently living, and the techniques I have learned these past years enriches my work. Therefore, the end of my everyday life in Argentina transformed my art in what it is today and pushes it even further.

My assemblage work, in which I create my own deities focusing on my ancestors and culture will keep growing. Furthermore, I believe my development as an artist is taking me to explore the empowerment of women through my series "*Sagrada Femeidad*."

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Vita

Argentinian, New Orleans-based artist Barbara Johanna Mileto, integrates two-dimensional and three-dimensional mediums, ranging from photography and printmaking to assemblage and textiles, video, and digital. She explores the formation of cultural and personal identity addressing the importance of heritage, ancestors, and religion in South American culture, while she develops her own deities and spiritual space, creating her own iconography. Her work is strongly autobiographical, using her family members, and frequently her lived experience as a subject. Mileto is the recipient of numerous awards, including a 2020 Art Award for her Cyanotype work from the Homer L. Hitt Society and numerous Graduate Assistantship Awards from University of New Orleans. In 2010 Mileto founded *Estampería de Autor* in Argentina, a graphic design and printmaking company that helped entrepreneurs and small companies in the design world to scale their business, working as a CEO at this enterprise for ten years. Over the past thirteen years, she has also taught in academia in both, Argentina and the United States. She earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, in Textile and Fashion Design from Universidad de Morón; in 2017 she moved to Louisiana and is currently completing her MFA at the University of New Orleans.