

Hello, my name is Xochitl Santana Nuño and I am a 22 year old Mexican-American artist raised here in Portland. Coming into PNCA I was hesitant to break away from my background in realism drawing and painting as I found myself attaching much of my worth as an artist to my technical abilities. I've always had the impulse to detail away, to fixate on and pull out the finer detailing in the subjects I'm depicting. As an artist who favors more maximalist aesthetics and repetitive processes, I struggle to abstract forms by reducing information. I've always used art to engage with people and mull on ideas in a way that is transcendent of language. As an autistic child who was non-verbal until age four, art was crucial in giving me the agency to communicate. And as a Latina who doesn't speak Spanish, it has been so healing to be able to reach Spanish speaking people through my art when I otherwise would struggle to hold a conversation. I've consistently struggled with imposter syndrome over the years, as many non-spanish speaking Mexicans do, and art has empowered me to confront these feelings through the act of making. When I started taking sewing classes in my sophomore year I found it such a relief to be able to create art in a way that felt inherently abstract to my process. As much as I enjoy painting, there is something especially indulgent in the process of making clothes. I love going into the fabric store not knowing what material I'll be working in, letting aesthetic impulse pull me towards my materials. Patterning a piece off of my measurements, giving permanence to my form. Most, if not all of the garments I made throughout my sewing classes were aesthetically unified by my consistent use of jewel-toned fabrics, velvets, satins, and gold hardware. My first venture into beading was in making my corset-style bodice *Wound*, and I found the process to be so powerful in engaging me physically and mentally. As generative AI has dramatically increased in presence the past few years, I have felt the need to make more tactile art that thrives when activated in the physical world. I certainly don't think the existence

of AI generated images devalues 2D art or illustration, but as a maker who spends so much of my life looking at a screen, I felt I needed to breathe life into art works that remind me more of my humanness. My desire to work in a more sensorally engaging process coincided with my urge to make maximalist garments that felt personally fulfilling and almost indulgent to make. I knew this was the direction I wanted to take my thesis into, not painting or drawing as I had envisioned coming into PNCA.

I've always had a huge appreciation for Gothic and Gothic-Revival fashion, but Gothic art is largely static in its cultural references. The florals you see within gothic art are most often informed by Biblical or European or associations. Thistles to represent penance. Lilies to represent resurrection. Poppies to represent sleep and death. Animal symbolism within the Gothic canon is similarly rigid and fixed to European understandings of animals, with crows representing misfortune, doves signifying baptismal purity, and ravens representing prophetic insight. This brings me to the question I wish to address within my thesis: How can Gothic fashion engage with Mexican motifs, cosmology, myth, and folklore to expand upon the Gothic canons traditionally Eurocentric foundations?

Before we dive into Mexican Gothic specifically, I want to lay the groundwork and give some historic context for earlier applications of the term gothic. The Gothic has its roots in medieval Europe, initially used to categorize art and buildings, later evolving into a literary genre characterized by mystery, horror, and the supernatural. But even in its beginnings, Gothic was not just about these stylistic elements; it was a reflection of cultural anxieties about the past and present. The Goths, Germanic tribes active from the 3rd to 5th centuries CE, became associated with destruction and the collapse of classical civilization through events such as the Sack of Rome. The name Goth, derived from the Greek Gothoi and Latin Gothi, later evolved into the

term Gothic, which Renaissance scholars used to describe medieval art and architecture that they considered crude and disorderly compared to classical ideals.

In a sophomore year art history class I was assigned to read *Ornament and Crime*, a 1913 essay by Austrian Modernist theorist Adolf Loos who argues ornamentation is primitive. Loos suggests that the Indigenous Papuan people of New Guinea are “childlike” for tattooing their skin and ornamenting their boats as children might cover objects in drawings. Loos argues aggressively against ornamentation, framing decoration as a marker of cultural inferiority. His stance is overtly racist, suggesting that cultures with rich traditions of ornament, pattern, and embellishment are somehow more "primitive." Loos upholds functional design and strict practicality over decoration, which he viewed as a sign of moral and cultural regression. Loos's argument against ornamentation, and his claim that decoration signaled cultural inferiority, stands in sharp contrast to the traditions I draw from. Where he saw excess, I see meaning, history, and identity. My work embraces embellishment and fine craft in a capitalist world that often pressures artists and designers toward minimalism for ease of mass production, stripping away the very details that anchor cultural memory. *Ornament and Crime* exists as an almost anti-manifesto for me as my art practice sharply contrasts Loos theories around ornamentation.

Wound

To pattern this corset-style bodice I wrapped my body in cling-wrap and duct tape, freehand drafting the shape. I cut myself out of the cast, cut the panels and cups out, and added seam allowance to all sides. I duplicated all my pattern pieces so my bodice would have a facing, and added grommets for the lacing. I beaded an appliqué anatomical heart as I wanted to make a piece responding to how Indigenous-American groups, particularly Southwestern peoples such

as the Nahua and Maya, have often been mischaracterized as barbaric or savage. The title *Wound* contradicts this aggressor narrative, framing the wearer as a bearer of pain.

Coatlicue

Coatlicue, meaning “She of the Serpent Skirt”, is a goddess belonging to Mexica myth believed to have birthed the Sun, Moon, and Stars. Historians suggest Coatlicue may be one of the multiple deities to have inspired the creation of the Virgin de Guadalupe, the uniquely Mexican interpretation of the Virgin Mary with iconography that bridges Mexican and Spanish culture. Coatlicue too experienced a miraculous, almost supernatural pregnancy. Her lore differs regionally across Mexico, some artifacts suggesting her pregnancy was triggered by swallowing an emerald, and others suggesting it was brought on by Coatlicue tucking a ball of feathers into her bosom. Her daughter Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess, was greatly disturbed by this news, and organized an attack against Coatlicue at Coatepec, or the Serpent Mountain. Coyolxauhqui rallied her 400 celestial brothers, the Centzonhuitznahua, against their Mother. It was at this moment when Coatlicue birthed Huitzilopochtli, who instantaneously appeared fully grown and defended his mother, defeating his siblings. In scattering the remains of his siblings across the land, Huitzilopochtli activated the cosmic potential of his siblings and they took their place in the sky. After the rediscovery, the statue was displayed at a Catholic university and drew large Indigenous crowds but alarmed church authorities, who saw it as a threat to Catholic conversion and eventually concealed it to suppress “pagan” practices. Catholic and Spanish viewers were deeply unsettled by her anthropomorphic figure featuring serpent heads, fangs, talons, and a necklace made of human remains. The church's decision to hide the statue again reveals the tension between Indigenous identity and colonial suppression. I decided to make a beaded mohair purse using the imagery of Coatlicue’s necklace of human remains. This purse was the

bulk of my thesis, as I expect I spent anywhere from 60-80 hours beading alone. The purse has a core of foam-stabilizer, and has been lined with a teal polyester-satin. I attached the purse to a golden-brass frame, added a chain strap, and added other hardware.

Tochtli

I made these gloves out of an upcycled black velvet shirt and seam ripped an old pair of gloves to trace the pattern. These gloves were entirely stitched by hand, as I worried I wouldn't be able to sew close enough to the small seam allowance using a sewing machine. The tops of the gloves are lined with rabbit fur, sourced from a yard sale. I've loosely taken inspiration from the golden embroidery of episcopal or pontifical gloves, a Catholic vestment, though I did not follow the appropriate design conventions (such as avoiding black fabric) as these do not function as religious vestments. The gold embroidered rabbit and moon imagery speaks to the myth of the rabbit (tochtli in Nahuatl), associated with abundance, fertility, tonalli (life energy), and the maguey plant. I felt that thematically rabbits seemed an appropriate motif to include in my thesis as excess and rebirth are major themes in gothic art. As Mexica myth claims, a hungry Quetzalcoatl was walking the earth in human form when he was approached by a rabbit who offered himself up to be eaten. Quetzalcoatl honored this selfless gesture by forever imprinting the shape of a rabbit on the moon.

Chinampas

This rosary-style necklace celebrates the chinampas or "floating gardens" of Mexico, man-made, highly fertile artificial islands primarily constructed in the shallow waters of Lake Xochimilco. Chinampas are constructed by weaving reed walls between long wooden stakes, filling the beds with soil and vegetation to create raised platforms for harvesting. During the height of the Aztec

Triple Alliance, the people of Tenochtitlan largely relied on the chinampas to not only feed their population, but to reduce flooding, transport goods through the canal networks, and manage waste through soil fertilization. Using a brass powder clay, I kiln fired brass beads depicting tomato, chiles, onion, and cilantro, a few of the various foods commonly grown on chinampas. In place of a crucifix I've instead used an ear of corn as the necklace drop piece, as the domestication of corn was not only critical to the survival of many groups, but is also tied to the creation stories of various North and South American Indigenous communities. For the centerpiece I've chosen the Axolotl, a critically endangered salamander that is unique for its neoteny, developing to sexual maturity without undergoing metamorphosis, remaining in its larval stage unlike other salamanders. The axolotl can regrow many body parts including limbs, parts of its brain, eyes, spinal cords, lungs, liver, ovaries, skeleton, and heart. Axolotls are of major importance to medical researchers for this reason, as they may reveal developments in generating complex tissues within humans. Unfortunately, Axolotl populations have declined significantly due to water pollution and an overpopulation of invasive fish such as carp and tilapia.

In my thesis proposal I had set out on making the Coatlicue purse, as well as a chatelaine gate top purse with dangling hojaltas, or tin engravings. Shortly after presenting, I realized this purse would likely require more involvement and revision than I had intended, so I decided I may come back to this purse after my thesis. In the feedback from my panel I was advised that in presenting 2 pieces, audiences can be tempted to compare and contrast the two as if functioning as a didactic work, which wasn't what I had intended. I decided to include *Wound* into my thesis work as there was both an aesthetic and conceptual throughline with my proposed works. I then began the ideation and construction of *Tochtli* and *Chinampas*.

After graduation, I plan to seek out a tattoo apprenticeship, which I've imagined for myself since I was 11. I used to imagine a more straightforward career for myself, having blinders on career wise, though I've recently found my mind wandering to thoughts of working in various other creative fields. I could see myself designing miniatures for stop motion films. I could see myself designing a fashion capsule collection. I can see myself delving more into jewelry making. I could see myself making more socially engaged work. The gallery world still seems largely elusive to me, but with every show I begin to understand the art world a little better. While my artistic career might be limited, so far I have found one of the most rewarding aspects of my practice is in the reception from other Latinos who wish to see our community more represented in the arts.