

Introductions:

Hello everyone, welcome to my thesis defense. It's taken a lot to get to this place, but I am proud to be standing in front of you today. My name is Elena Olmos Guerrero, my main focus during my time at PNCA has been illustration. Throughout the journey of discovering my voice as an artist, I found an affinity for many different mediums. Coming into school, the majority of the work I had been producing was digital, despite my background in analog artwork, I became curious to find a way to marry the two. So, when I was introduced to Risography in Ryan Bubnis's class, it was an absolute game changer for me. Riso was the perfect balance of digital and analog, and I was filled with a passion to continue to use this medium. I was in the RISO lab on campus so often, I was given the honorary term "RISO Power User".

Jumping off of that, I want to introduce what I have been cooking up for the past 5 months. In front of you today is a 20-page fully illustrated, printed, and assembled booklet that shares the story of my mother's early life living in Mexico and her journey crossing the U.S.-Mexico border as a 7 year old girl. The story starts with her early life in Mexico, recalling the family and life she left behind when joining her father in the United States.

Context:

The title of my project is *I Carry You In My Chest*. I was very drawn to the idea of using a heart as a main motif when coming up with the title of my booklet. I believe the heart is a symbol of emotion. For example, when you're in love you say that "your heart is going to explode" or when you're anxious you say you feel a tightness in your chest or when you are scared you say that "your heart dropped." With this motif in mind, I began to explore how I could come up with a title that represents my mother's story through my artistic lens. I landed on *I Carry You In My Chest* as it alludes to where the heart is and where love is stored.

Since this project literally became a labor of love. I wanted to choose a medium that I had a passion for, so it was only obvious that I would choose to create the entire booklet using risography. I knew that using riso would be a challenge compared to the alternative of digitally printing my booklet which would have saved me *weeks* of time. However, I have the chronic illness of “doing too much” so going the timely route wasn’t in the stars for me.

As stated in my proposal, I conducted a series of interviews with my mother about her childhood experience. I went in chronological order, starting with her earliest memories and continued into her young adulthood. These interviews were recorded so I could reference them for inspiration of what to illustrate for my thesis. Originally, I had planned to cover a bit of everything from the interviews, but quickly realized that I wanted a slower pacing for the story. I chose to highlight a specific moment of her life so I could focus on the emotional tension through my sequential illustration. This is where I made the decision to illustrate my mother’s earliest memories living in Mexico as a young child and her experience crossing the border alone.

The interview was the first step to my project and I felt that it was difficult to get started. I was on break, home for 3 weeks and everyday went by where I would think to start the interview, but never execute it. Time was flying by and I was putting it off, my dad was starting to nudge me more to do it. To be transparent, I had always found it hard to have a long conversation with her, I always felt a bit intimidated since growing up we never saw eye to eye. But from adolescence to young adulthood, becoming an adult meant that we were on more of an even playing field, that I had matured and didn’t have the same teenage angst and anger that I once had. But, being in your childhood home almost reverts you into feeling like you’re 16 again, sleeping in the same bedroom you grew up in. So it’s safe to say that I was nervous to conduct the interview. I had one more day before I flew back to Portland to start the interview, this is when I finally, (with the encouragement of father) sat down and talked to her. It’s funny because sometimes when you’re nervous to start something, you realize it was never that serious and it is

actually easier than you thought. While my dad was cooking up dinner, my mom and I sat down at a table, across from each other, I placed my phone in the middle of us, and hit record. From there it officially started, I asked her some questions and she would dive into them. I sat there and listened to her recall memories I have never heard before since I had never asked to hear them in the past.

Learning about her past applied this context I had never originally had for my mother. I knew she had a rough upbringing, and before she was my mother, she was just a brown girl tackling a world that was never set up for her success. Teenage me never understood why my mom wanted me to be a certain way, tough and resilient, and we often fought because I was sensitive and soft (her words not mine). Tough skin and resilience is all she knew, that's how she survived, that's how she saw life. I see her perspective now. Being 2nd gen, I didn't need to be tough and resilient, she did the hard work for me, and I understand that now. But, I am who I am, I am soft, and I am allowed to be sensitive, doesn't mean I can't be tough, and doesn't mean I'm not resilient, those are just things I picked from her.

With all of these feelings fresh in my mind, the fire in me grew to share her story. I was also angry looking out at the world; seeing how my community is constantly attacked by the government. Waking up every morning and opening up my phone, blasted by story upon story of families being torn up by ICE; families attacked, violence for violence sake. I needed to use my creativity as my voice and create a conduit for my anger, for my passion, and for love. I needed to create for my mother and for my community; to create for what I hold in my chest and to reflect that immigration isn't something that is evil but something that is in human nature.

I want to pause, and show you all something that makes me upset. Here we have an anti-ice poster that I screen printed earlier this semester. Unfortunately, it had been tagged with such a hateful message. As simple as it may seem, it means so much more. Seeing my piece be tagged here on campus feels like the call is coming from

inside the house. This school is supposed to be a safe place and I am disappointed to see a display of hate on my own artwork.

We can't let this bear weight and this incident just proves why sharing stories of migration and holding space to be empathic for why people migrate is so important. Immigration is a civil liberty, I mean white people do it all the time but I guess it's not illegal when they do it right? There is such a deep connection between Chicano printmaking and protest, an entire legacy of protest artwork that reflects each generation's struggle with being brown in the United States. I strive to add onto my heritage, and continue to speak up against our oppressors in the best way that I can, through my illustration

Moving on, let's talk about process and how I put this project together

Process:

Every artwork has to start somewhere, I was adamant about how I wanted this project to be interacted with. My vision for the booklet was that each page can be seen as a stand alone image, and you would be able to flip through the narrative much like a comic. However, I also wanted the booklet to be unfurled and be seen as one single continuous spread, The next hence the accordion format. With this in mind, I wrote a script of what would happen on each page based on the section of interview with my mom that I'd chosen. I used the text to provide context to the illustrations and propel the story onward.

After scriptwriting, I thumbnailed each spread side-by-side on one art board with descriptions of what was taking place in the thumbnail. I would then show the thumbnails to my mentor so I could get feedback on how the composition was reading. Molly asked me questions about the visual language; specifically what motifs would I want to convey in the narrative. We were stuck on one quote I took from the interview, my mother was commenting that she was the first grandchild on her maternal side,

saying “I remember being the apple of my grandfather's eye.” We mulled over using an apple motif since if anyone knows me the apple motif is like kinda my thing. However, I decided to include a memory she shared of eating tomatoes that her father (who was a share cropper) had picked in the fields. I also wanted to juxtapose that memory with another memory of her trying ketchup in the United States for the first time, and how yucky she thought it was. We scraped the apple motif and decided on tomatoes all the way. We started with unripe tomatoes, representing the start of life. In this spread, my mom was born and this is the beginning of her journey. I bring the tomato motif in again at the end, to represent a new journey of her life in the United States, which is emphasized by the inclusion of tomato flowers.

Another motif came up, and that was the inclusion of dark, heavy panel gutters that interrupted the flow of the story, interrupting the flow I started with. Now I know that I said that I wanted there to be flow, but this was the moment where I needed to demonstrate tension in the story and in my illustrations I wanted to convey feeling trapped inside a vehicle that isn't familiar and entering the unknown with a stranger. I used this blocking to convey the passage of time inside the vehicle and shift to abstract subjects like the tomato vines constricting a heart to emphasize the fear of unfamiliarity.

With all of my thumbnails approved I moved onto a tight sketch phase. All the sketches were digital and separated on 11 x 8.5 individual art boards. When sketching out all of the figures, I realized that I needed references for all of the family members my mom described. So I texted my mom asking her for some photos, now there were very few photographs of the family. There were plenty of photos of my mother after she had moved to the United States, but as for the family she had in Mexico, there was little to no record of how they looked when they were younger. So I had photos of her grandparents in their 90's and I had to become the fountain of youth to make them look young again. I drew my great grandmother based on a photo of her in her old age and sent it to my mom for a reference check. She was really surprised with me, and told me that I was actually quite accurate, then provided more descriptions of how she remembered her and what she would often wear. My mom described her as frail and

thin, wearing dark conservative clothing, often covering her hair with a rebozo, a large scarf like shawl. She also told me that she had so many pregnancies at a young age that she started greying early. I loved to hear all of these details, since being raised in the U.S I never really knew most of the family in Mexico.

I worked with the descriptions my mom gave me, and finished my sketches. It was time to start the linework. I envisioned the linework being done with traditional materials and one of the reasons I chose Molly to be my mentor was because of how much of her work is a mixture of hand inked and digitally colored illustrations. They gave me a demo of how they inked and a list of materials and tools they used to achieve their style. Using that I went out and collected what I needed to ink my spreads. However, I had a predicament, all of my sketches were digital, I needed to make these physical. I really didn't want to trace these on a light box. So with a tip from my friend Casper, who had gotten this tip from Molly (we have the same mentor), I would solve my problem by printing out.

THIS WAS NOT EASY! Oh my god, this was actually a nightmare. The only size paper at Blick was 9 x 12, my spreads were 8.5 x 11. I tried printing my spreads on said 9 x 12 paper, the printer hated it. It was the big printer in the 406 print lab. I placed them in the custom paper tray, and jammed the printer 3 times in one day. I had to ask 3 different white men in the tech assistance room for help. So yeah, the printer ate the majority of my nice watercolor paper. So I decided to cut the paper down (individually) to a size the printer likes, 8.5 x 11. It finally worked, my sketches were printed, later on I found an easier way to print them out with a technique learned in my textile printing class to print out digital films for screen printing.

Took me one week to ink eight out the ten spreads, inking two pages a day. The midterm review was right around the corner and I needed to get these inked pages back into the digital realm. Now, these pages were intentionally printed in blue, so that when scanned and taken into photoshop I could remove the blue sketch and only have the black ink linework remain.

RISO prints are made from a Risograph printer which looks similar to a photocopier but it works more like screen printing. One color is printed at a time. For my project I planned on using three colors, yellow, fluorescent orange, and blue. I used these colors as if I was using CMYK, since Riso ink isn't very opaque, I am able to layer these colors to create a wide range of different hues.

Now I'm a bit of a control freak. When it comes to my process of color for Riso it is a priority that I'm able to see how it will look when printed at every step of the way. There are programs where it will separate the layers for you. But I am insane and composed each element to be printed on its own separate layer. I do this so I can apply color with different opacities so when I layer those colors on top of each other it gives me control over the saturation and value of the final piece. Coloring takes a while and midterm review was only a week away, I knew I had to have at least half of the pages colored for my panelists to see. I crunched that so hard, Molly didn't even see the colors until my midterm review.

Midterm review:

I got phenomenal feedback from the panelists, they were impressed with the work so far which made my efforts feel extremely validated. There were some key points that were taken away from the review. I needed to establish a rule with the rearview mirrors, they were confusing and needed more of an indication of what I was trying to communicate narratively, which was that the person seen in the mirror is my mom and her expressions; not the stranger in the car. Next, I needed to rework a scene in the car, to pull the figures back and create space for the next composition. Next, the hand written text was a good direction, but I needed to trace on Gotham or Roberto type to achieve the correct kerning. The last note was to add more tomatoes at the end.

Production:

With all of this feedback I applied and pushed on, finishing coloring all the pages before spring break. Now, how do I get all of this ready to be printed? Once I am done coloring I have to get these layers into a printable format, since the RISO printers only accept grayscale pdfs, when everything is ready, I apply a black clipping mask to the colored layer and it makes the entire layer grayscale. BOOM done easy. All ready.

I am in the RISO print lab for basically the entirety of spring break. I print for hours, since it is one layer at a time. This project consisted of using 40 masters, 10 masters of each spread in yellow, flo orange, and blue. Then 10 masters for the back design using the color mint. I printed out 200 pages, aka 20 copies of the booklet. I get to the end, I think to myself, perfect, I'm done with printing, I can move onto cutting everything out and assembling. I want to make this easy on myself, so I decided I will cut this with the guillotine, so I can cut a group of papers at a time...WRONG the angle is off and it's not precise enough. I go to this paper cutter death trap in the print studio...WRONG way too scary. So, I am only left with the Rototrim, but downside, I can only cut 2 pages at a time. I CUT 190 PAGES OUT...before I realize... that nothing lines up. I am now instilled with a silent type of panic. I immediately text Molly, Molly is like okay let's pivot, the pages will be smaller but we are going to add bleeds so that nothing is cut off by the printer's automatic scaling and bleeds. So guess who has to reprint their entire thesis all over again...me. Okay, so now I need to figure out how to format these, I need help since Molly is kinda confused too. That's fine, I know someone who can help, this panelist sitting in front of me, Sal, my Center of Design professor and graphic design wizard. I met with him and asked him for help, he's like we have to do this in Indesign, I explained that I am very poor at using Indesign, he looked at me baffled, and said didn't you learn this in foundations, and I was like well no. He shrugs that off and shows me what I need to do. The pages are formatted with bleeds and cut lines, which is perfect because I urgently booked an appointment to reprint all the pages later that afternoon. He then tells me that if I want the most accurate cut for these pages I need to use an xacto knife and a metal ruler. Then he jests, yeah I remember doing that in school, so many fingers nicked and sliced, bandages on everyone's hands the morning an assignment is due. (Foreshadowing) I get into the print lab, print everything out, I am

there after hours. It is now time to cut everything out, I'm going into what the kids call a flow state. Then, I watch it happen in slow motion, the blade slices right through my finger. Amazing. Well, at least I got everything cut out and ready to be assembled...the following week, I am assembling. I need to use the xacto knife again...it happens again. Assembling this booklet took hours, I used paper cement that not only smells awful but also dries quickly. My hands were shaking so bad too, I could not risk messing up. Blood, sweat and tears went into this, literally. But after all of those pitfalls, roadblocks, crash outs, and losses, I created 3 copies that I absolutely adore.

Influences:

(Pause then click)

There are several notable artists that have really shaped my creative voice and process.

Rosemary V-O. is an absolute inspiration to me. Her art focuses mostly on the female form and carries sapphic themes throughout the body of her work. Her art style is complex, heavily detailed with organic lines and shapes which makes her work feel surreal and dreamy. I find myself incorporating this influence into my illustrations.

Natalie Andrewson, Stalking her Instagram account, I found that she uses primarily three layers of ink, yellow, blue, and fluorescent pink. Only using these three colors, she made yellow-greens, orange, reds, and so many other hues. I was taken aback and had to apply this to my printing process. Learning this elevated my RISO illustrations.

Juliet Cousin, From creating traditionally inked work, to digital illustrations, to tattoos, there are quite a few different hats she wears, however her style remains consistent throughout the entire body of her work. How she wields ink is extremely impressive, the control she has is truly inspiring.

Shifts from the Proposal:

There were some pretty big changes I made when it comes to comparing what I initially proposed versus what I have completed. In my proposal, I wanted to create a booklet accompanied by 3 large spread illustrations that highlight my mother's coming of age story as an undocumented woman in the United States. Meaning I wanted to illustrate her childhood to adolescence to early adulthood. But, I figured out that it would be

difficult to fit that all into 20 pages. I wanted my pace to be slower, more like a children's book, with text to accompany the images in visual nests. I also decided to cut the 3 large spread illustrations early on for the sake of time. I felt like they no longer fit into the story I was trying to tell. I created an example of what that would look like for a final project last semester. These illustrations were meant to explore my relationship with my mother. The booklet would be an explanation of my mother, a story of how she became the woman she is now. The project as a whole would reflect our relationship. But, I decided...well I can break that down in therapy and just focus on her. I wanted the biggest take away from my project to be that people immigrate to find security and safety, that people take big risks to move their families to better places, that it should never be seen as a threat to national security. I wanted to illustrate that, how immigrating despite how dangerous it can be gives people a chance to live better lives. My mom grew from extreme poverty, experienced extreme adversity, broke out of misogyny, put herself through college despite all the disapproval, my mom is the strongest person I know. It has been an honor being her daughter and telling her story with my hands.

So here in front of you this morning is my mother, reading out her memories that I have visualized into a beautiful form.