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(Altar)making a Sacred Latinx Space

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(Altar)making a Sacred Latinx Space

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Tatiana Pamela Alfaro

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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“I have to have a sacred site, a place where I can go to touch inside of me and connect to the womb of the universe.”

-Shamaan Ochaum in an interview with Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*

Para mi mamá que nunca ha fallado en hacer un hogar.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

5

Women, Religion and Space: The Chicana Altar

13

The Aesthetics of Chicana Femininity

34

Conclusion

48

Images

56

Bibliography

81

Introduction

This past year I have moved four times in the span of eight months. Constantly packing all my belongings took an unprecedented toll on me that lessened after I began to create my own altar. The altar started with a painting of La Virgen de Guadalupe (Fig 1.) that I had bought the previous summer. It caught my attention in a shop in Beacon, New York, where it was displayed alongside a number of other similar-sized, brightly colored paintings. I recall seeing it and immediately being drawn to it. The blue robe of La Virgen, emanating glowing rays of yellow and orange, stood out among the others. Despite finding the painting beautiful, there was no reason why La Virgen de Guadalupe's image should have made such an impact on me. I had been raised Catholic but La Virgen de Guadalupe was never emphasized in my religious upbringing. Nonetheless, the painting emitted such a powerful, feminine energy that I could not help but feel connected to her. I placed the painting in the corner of my room and before I knew it, I began to compile other personal items beneath it. It began with items that had similar or complementary colors, but it soon became the default destination for the few but ever-present spiritual paraphernalia I own. Creating an altar based on a sincere desire to establish my home has been a healing ritual in the wake of my continuous displacements over the past year.

Although I was raised Catholic and have always lived in predominantly Catholic communities, I did not find a place of spiritual connection or comfort within the traditional Catholic Church. However, it has taken me a long time to recognize that being Latina means that being Catholic is a part of my identity, whether I am religious or not. My memories of faith as a child have left a lasting impression on me, and they are tinged with nostalgia. Coming back to

faith now utilizing the altar I have established within my home has allowed me to express my spirituality in a way I haven't previously been able to do.

Ironically, I didn't even realize I had constructed an altar until weeks after I began to research altar-making traditions as a topic for my Senior Project. My research began by reading Kay Turner's book, *Beautiful Necessity*, which provided me with a global, spiritual perspective focusing on domestic, women's altars. Turner, a feminist scholar and artist, has been crucial to my research since she was one of the first to view home altars as an art form. She first defines traditional altar-making as "a special site to serve the human desire for relationship with unseen gods and spirits... a place set apart to house the images of powerful sacred beings, who by their presence can be called upon for help and comfort."¹ What captivated me about Turner's approach was that she did not remain complacent with the traditional definition of the altar but continued to explore what an altar meant by interviewing domestic, female altar-makers from a range of religions and traditions and asking them to define it themselves.² *Beautiful Necessity*'s focus on spirituality has since become a starting point for my own research, as well as a source of inspiration. Reading the various accounts that Turner has collected left me awestruck as I became witness to the women's willingness to welcome Turner not only into their homes but their private altars as well.

The title, "Beautiful Necessity," was influenced by Turner's encounter with a Quiche Maya woman, Virginia, who shared a prayer at her home altar with Turner. The experience left Turner "enraptured" by the altar's beauty—when she asked Virginia why she kept an altar in her

¹ Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity* (Thames & Hudson, 1999), 7.

² Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 27.

home, she responded that it was “a beautiful necessity.”³ The statement's simplicity captures both women's strong faith in their altars and the personal fulfillment they derive from them.

Subsequent descriptions of the women's altars shared in a common characteristic—although there were numerous elements of each individual altar that were imbued with value, all subjects agreed that a connection to the spiritual is essential. One of the first altar-makers that Turner mentions, Shamaan Ochaum, explains that for her “a home is not a home unless you have a sacred site there.” She describes having an altar as a way of survival that brings her an “immediate peace...[and] a certain tranquility.”⁴ She continues to explain that her altar amplifies “a recognition of divinity” that is “already inside of [her].” Shamaan Ochaum’s testimony brings awareness not only to her understanding of the altar, but the purpose it serves in her daily life. Her statement details that her sense of peace is connected to an acknowledgement of and reliance upon the sacred.

As I began to conduct my research, I was taken aback by the number of women who participate in domestic altar-making. Looking at photographs of women with their altars was a profound exercise through which I was able to contextualize the importance of their domestic traditions by capturing the manner in which they approach their altars. The photographs successfully depict the tranquility and reverence they hold in regard to their private spaces of worship. The quantity of photographic evidence confirms that this action is reminiscent of a larger narrative of personal reverence. A photograph of Elena Avila⁵⁶ (Fig. 2) captures her sitting in front of her altar, as the vibrant colors of her shirt mimic objects behind her—such as the blue

³ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 10.

⁴ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 28.

⁶ Halus Siegfried, *Elena Avila in front of healing room shrine, Rio Rancho*, photograph.

vessels, bright sunflowers, and the statue of La Virgen de Guadalupe. Avila appears relaxed beside her intimate backdrop. A photograph of Shamaan Ochaum⁷ (Fig. 3) shows her leaning on her altar. She holds a steady gaze on her compilation of items as though she is in the midst of a deep meditation. The numerous photographs of altar-makers throughout the book capture other women in similar positions, sometimes kneeling beside them, sometimes smiling with pride, and all communicating an intimacy with the divine. The images have made clear that “it is not our sacred objects that reveal our faith; it is our faith in objects that make them sacred.”⁸ Their genuine expressions are nothing more than a testament to the faith they hold in the objects they have amassed: candles, family photographs, religious statues, holy cards, vases of flowers, rosary beads, etc. Viewing these representations of the altar’s creators have helped me understand what altar-making truly is, and how they come to reflect the spirit—and spirituality—of the women that have created them.

Domestic altars are made up of items that offer their creators the most comfort, and thus their physical makeup reflects their identities. The strength of the personal altar resides in the gathering of significant objects, and the act of organizing them enhances their spiritual significance. Since these are personal objects, their strength is derived from personal relationships. Although there is no logical way to arrange your objects of meaning, there is a language that altar-makers engage in when they are picking up, rearranging, and finding a perfect place to display their items. Finding the perfect place within the home can be as simple as finding just the right lighting or rearranging your objects to complement each other based on

⁷ Kay Turner, *Shamaan Ochaum seated before her welcoming altar, which serves as a spiritual greeting place for guests and a focus of family ritual*, Austin, TX, 1998, photograph.

⁸ Laura Cerwinski, *In A Spiritual Style* (Thames & Hudson, 1998), 22.

surrounding household colors. No matter what these small reasonings are, somehow the objects make sense when they are ultimately placed together. Rose Wognum Frances affirms that this arranging “affected the feel in my room—made me feel present and fully there. It made something different happen...”⁹ Through altar-arranging, altar-makers are in a constant dialogue with elements that “provide harmony, vitality, delightful dissonance” by manipulating “color, form, and shapes” within their domestic altars.¹⁰ These are the same elements that make the altars appealing to their creators.

I have become deeply invested in the ways in which women all over the world have focused on maintaining an active spiritual participation, as shown by their devotion to their domestic altars. Altar-making is a tradition that has been consciously preserved, specifically by matriarchal figures who have passed it down from generation to generation.¹¹ Rose Wognum Frances, an artist interviewed by Kay Turner, elaborates upon the intention that goes behind committing to an altar: ‘Altar-making is a choice to keep your spiritual life alive on a daily basis, to surround yourself with it, immerse yourself in the beauty of it, the objects of it, the image of it, the community of it...”¹². Frances’ response reflects the all-encompassing nature of a spiritual life and most importantly the belief in this immersion. Altar-making has survived because women find this immersion to be an essential part of life.

For this project, I’ve chosen to concentrate on Mexico, where the altar has had a long history of survival. Elizabeth Lopez’s essay, *Cultural Syncretism*, traces the importance of altars

⁹ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 61.

¹⁰ Marie Romero Cash, *Living Shrines: Home Altars of New Mexico* (Museum of New Mexico Press, n.d.), 73-76.

¹¹ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 30.

¹² Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 30.

back to Mesoamerica, prior to the Conquest, as a “[site] for making offerings or used as the focal point of ceremonies or rituals.”¹³ She portrays the altars’ evolution as a transformative one, beginning as a place to combine symbol and tradition during the Conquest and gradually becoming a domestic practice in response to the violence of the Conquest that destroyed Mesoamerican art and architecture. The altars’ move into the home “allowed for the survival of many indigenous practices, which then adapted to fit the newly imposed Catholic tradition,” forever mixing these histories as an empowering tactic against erasure.¹⁴ Therefore, domestic altar-making is a subversive act that has contributed to a survivalist aesthetic that Mexican culture has grown from.¹⁵ The domestic altar has given Mexican and Mexican-Americans, specifically Chicana women, a new way to honor their spirituality and to express themselves from the comfort of their own homes.

This project reframes femininity and its representations in the home, in the context of Mexican American and Chicana identities. The tensions between women and the domestic sphere have become more evident as I have undergone the process of studying and writing for this project. For example, the home offers a safe environment for women to express themselves while still upholding outdated gender roles. Turner reassures the reader that relating women to the home and their maternal impulses “is in no means a way to say that her biology is her destiny, but to affirm that her reproductive and regenerative capacities are vitally linked to her sense of being.”¹⁶ Her writing provides comfort in dealing with the fact that connecting women

¹³ Constance Cortez, ed., *Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art* (Tufts University Gallery/Santa Clara University, 1999), 12.

¹⁴ Cortez, *Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art*, 12.

¹⁵ Dana Salvo, *Home Altars of Mexico* (Thames & Hudson, 1997), 43.

¹⁶ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 50.

to the home is not retrogressive, but how we continue to perceive the home is. Women have long been identified as the primary keepers of the domestic sphere, which has contributed to the dismissal of altar-making as merely a feminine custom. However, I propose that we reconsider how femininity expresses itself in the home and influences women's creations. The representation of the domestic environment, as I will investigate, reveals the individualized ways in which women honor their traditions and themselves. Thinking about femininity and domesticity this project has led me to question: If a woman could best communicate her identity within her own domestic space, what is it about the domestic sphere that allows her to do so? In thinking about how I came across altar-making myself, I began to consider how this question unfolded in my life. In other words, what does domesticity provide me, a Latinx woman, that could not be found elsewhere?

The altar's artistic adaptation is unsurprising, given the altar's rich and pliable dialogue, as well as its imaginative components. The altar-form has been utilized by artists to explore not only their "self-expression," but also their "cultural and spiritual [identities]." ¹⁷ However, studying altars from an art historical perspective has proven difficult due to their personal nature. The altar gives us a detailed view of the home, allowing us to see how it uses and creates symbols. As a result, analyzing altars from a formal viewpoint, such as that of a museum, would be inappropriate since they are not produced "to please or provoke others but to facilitate an intimacy with the divine." ¹⁸ In fact, Marie Romero Cash remarks that the altar's history of colonization alone "[resists] the imposition of Anglo tastes." ¹⁹ This point only emphasizes that

¹⁷ Cortez, *Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art*, 14.

¹⁸ Romero Cash, *Living Shrines: Home Altars of New Mexico*, 73.

¹⁹ Romero Cash, *Living Shrines: Home Altars of New Mexico*, 73.

altars are not made to be liked, they are built to survive. Despite its complicated history, the vast photographs depicting Mexican and Chicana women and their altars express how spirituality has remained a central part of women's lives and has paved the way for a feminine aesthetic.

For the purpose of this project, I have focused on the representation of the Chicana identity and what implications it holds in space; first, as a gendered identity and then, from a Latinx perspective. I have divided my research into two different chapters. In Chapter One, “Women, Religion, and Space: The Chicana Altar,” I look at domestic space in conjunction with Chicana femininity. I start by thinking about how gender has played a role in space, such as the social structures that the home entails for women, and how space is gendered into feminine and masculine contexts. I explore these concepts alongside the work of Amalia Mesa-Bains (b. 1943), a first-generation Chicana artist who creates altar-inspired installations. Her work altarizes imagery at the core of Chicana identity and her imposition of domestic space inside typically male-dominated gallery settings challenges the ways in which femininity should be considered.

Furthermore, I examine the aesthetics that have emerged in Chicana domestic space in Chapter Two, “The Aesthetics of Chicana Femininity.” I begin by looking at a variety of altars in Mexico, expanding from colonial churches to home altars. Subsequently, I use the work of Elena Climent (b. 1955), a Mexican painter who illustrates domestic spaces commonly found within the typical Mexican/Mexican American home, to explore the intimacy femininity explores. Climent's paintings usually concentrate on a few things at a time, and the specifics in her paintings are indicative of Chicano aesthetics as well as visual components of femininity and domesticity. By investigating the aesthetics of Chicana femininity, one may begin to understand how masculine and feminine space interact.

Women, Religion and Space: The Chicana Altar

1.1 Theorizing Domestic Space

While relating women to the home may seem retrogressive in modern times, woman's connection to and dominion over the domestic sphere has, it can be argued, established a powerful and vibrant feminine aesthetic. The French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962), recognizes the charm and intimacy a 'woman's touch' contributes to the home in his 1958 book, *The Poetics of Space*. The text explores the psychological impact that domestic spaces have on our dreams and memories. His lyrical approach considers interior spaces within "the intimate harmony of walls and furniture" and claims, "we become conscious of a house that is built by women, since men only know how to build a house from the outside."²⁰ Moreover, Bachelard's work captures the language, or poetics, expressed inside the home through domestic rituals, and so this project is indebted to him as it will explore some of the aesthetics associated with the feminine domestic sphere.

Amalia Mesa-Bains, a first-generation Chicana artist who evokes the domestic sphere in her work by creating installation environments, provides a challenge to some of Bachelard's outmoded thinking. His late 19th-mid 20th century ideas capture the essence of the poetics of space but only briefly mentions gender, which is a highly influential force in the consideration of space. Mesa-Bains expands upon Bachelard's notion by confronting the gendering of space through her installations that display the beauty and intimacy constructed within feminine space.

²⁰ Gaston Bachelard and M. Jolas, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 68.

Her recreation of domestic altars in museums and galleries introduce Chicana femininity to traditionally patriarchal environments. Comparing Bachelard and Mesa-Bains exposes the inherent complexities of space, which must be understood before it can be transformed.

It is appropriate to include Mesa-Bains in conversation with domestic space due to the way in which she approaches the domestic sphere. Her insistence to display her work in male dominated spaces, such as museums, stands as a reclamation of power by addressing the consequences of patriarchy in the most intimate spheres of life. Mesa-Bains' stance, on the other hand, is applicable not only to the white hegemonic patriarchy that comes to mind when confronted with institutional space, but also to the patriarchy that exists within Chicanx culture. Her installations present feminized domestic spaces that adapt to their location and challenge the institutional and cultural constructs of its location. Mesa-Bains' unpacks the feminization of space in her essay, "'Domesticana': The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache," where she recognizes the nuance domestic spheres pose for Chicana women. She refers to domestic space as "both a paradise and prison" because of its role as a signifier of tension and inherent contradiction for women. She claims that because the home and the social construct of women are dependent on each other, domestic space perpetuates engendered ideas all the while attempting to redefine these restrictive roles.²¹ She particularly directs our attention to the social role of women in the relationships they hold in "which patriarchy positions [them] as wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers"²². Her focus on the social capital women hold and its direct

²¹ Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Cercanías Distantes," "'Domesticana': The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache," accessed November 23, 2020, <http://v1.zonezero.com/magazine/essays/distant/zdomes2.html>.

²² Mesa-Bains, "Cercanías Distantes."

correlation to the men in their lives emphasizes the hierarchy femininity faces simply by existing.

It is also important to consider Gloria Anzaldúa who is a Chicana queer/feminist poet, writer and theorist for her work that has been critical in thinking about the formation of the Chicana identity. Her work explores conversations around gender, race and colonialism through her own identity and in turn theorizes many of these experiences. Anzaldúa is best known for her transformative thinking in her text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), in which she theorizes borders, a subject at the core of what it means to be Mexican/Chicano. Anzaldúa's expansion of border theory rethinks what a border is as a psychic, physical and emotional deterrence and its effects, consequently transforming the presumed identities of people affected by borders. Her expansive theoretical work allows us to become comfortable with revolutionary shifts in perspective and opens a dialogue in which she coins the term "*Nepantla*." *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl word that means "in between" and is thus fitting for the sense in which Anzaldúa uses it to theorize the liminality of the dual identity of the Chicano living in the United States. Anzaldúa declares that the state of being in between, such as how the border positions people, can also be a "site of transformation." As a result, *Nepantla* is not a theory but a practice that creates a space amidst liminality for people to "question [their] old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another."²³ *Nepantla* reflects Anzaldúa's creative process, as an active and introspective act in which we come to terms with ourselves.

Anzaldúa becomes a core thinker in reimagining Chicanos and femininity for her non-static and complex take on identity which we can apply to domestic altars. She faces and opposes

²³ Theresa Delgadillo, "A Theory of Spiritual Mestizaje," in *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative* (Duke University Press, 2011), 8.

the same gendered stereotypes that Mesa-Bains did, such as those enforced by the Catholic Church, which depict the ideal woman as submissive. Anzaldúa further elaborates on the human fear of the supernatural (or “the divine and the undivine”) which more often than not aligns femininity with the undivine.²⁴ Furthermore, her rejection of a singular form of femininity and embrace of multiple spiritualities is paired with her theory of “Spiritual Mestizaje” which defines spiritual transformation as a technique to transcend the constructs of identity. Similar to the introspective qualities of *Nepantla*, Spiritual Mestizaje is an introspective process that involves a critical reexamination of one’s personal religious worldview. Because the typical Chicana would have been raised religiously, it has become a part of her. Spiritual Mestizaje calls Chicana women to transcend the monolithic impositions of Colonialism that includes the ways in which Christianity has positioned women and that has further rejected indigenous spirituality. Spiritual Mestizaje accepts that being religious will be restrictive to the Chicana unless she embraces a multitude of spiritualities that affirms her own identity.

While Anzaldúa’s work does not elaborate on aesthetics expressed within the home, she proposes a new way of being that relies on feminine identity acknowledging its spirituality. Spiritual Mestizaje proposes the Chicana to engage and act in the world in a new manner to reach what she calls, ‘a new mestiza consciousness’²⁵. Most importantly, her method does not advocate for any specific tradition but rather engages the Chicana’s chosen spirituality. Therefore, the new mestiza consciousness legitimizes woman’s spiritual traditions and enforces

²⁴ David Carrasco and Roberto Lint Sagarena, “The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldúa,” in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, ed. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. Garcia (Duke University Press, 2008), 230.

²⁵ Delgadillo, “A Theory of Spiritual Mestizaje,” 11.

their domestic and daily practice²⁶. The home altar thus becomes an important manifestation of what the Chicana chooses to enforce her own identity through.

The Chicana's interrogation of her inherited spirituality is then a retheorization and reclamation of the meaning of feminine spirituality. If this is the case, then we must also retheorize the function of the domestic altar as a physical space to reclaim identity. Since spirituality is a daily practice, shifting our understanding of the home allows us to understand its importance in the construction of the self. According to Bachelard, domestic activities allow us to acquire a heightened sensibility. If this is what makes domestic rituals transformative, then I would declare altar-arranging to have the same transformative effect. Altar-makers, through the arrangement of various objects, similarly lend their skills to addressing intimacy within the home's physical landscape. By utilizing aesthetic qualities, altar-makers facilitate an intimacy with the divine.

Although Bachelard acknowledges the impact of domesticity and even states, "what a great life it would be if, every morning, every object in the house could be made anew by our hands," his work does not fully grasp the deep introspective understanding and sophistication that is required to master the domestic sphere.²⁷ Instead, he claims that though satisfying, domestic rituals grant "a feeling of naive simplicity."²⁸ However, his observation is not a modern interpretation of gender roles in space and lacks in critical engagement with issues of identity and spirituality. The Chicana perspectives of Mesa-Bains and Anzaldúa lead to a revolutionary take on identity that incorporates the divine and challenges the same structures they write about.

²⁶ Delgadillo, "A Theory of Spiritual Mestizaje," 14-16.

²⁷ Bachelard and Jolas, *The Poetics of Space*, 69.

²⁸ Bachelard and Jolas, *The Poetics of Space*, 70.

1.2 The Chicana Identity, Representation and Reflection

Understanding Mexican and Chicano identity requires a grasp on The Virgin of Guadalupe's role in their formation. Mesa-Bains builds altars for women who reflect the core of Chicana identity, such as La Virgen de Guadalupe who is often depicted in domestic altars. Guadalupe must be considered not only as a prevalent symbol of Mexican religious iconography but as a matriarchal figure. The usage of feminine symbols in women's domestic altars serves as a self-identifying act for women who see themselves reflected in the Virgen as well as social and cultural commentary of the positionality of Mexican women.²⁹ Socorro Castaneda-Liles, a scholar of Religious Studies, investigates the different interpretations La Virgen de Guadalupe has embodied and concludes her effect is highly dependent on who is viewing her. Although I will not be investigating the contradictory interpretations of Guadalupe, this phenomenon reflects the core of her power in which she remains an icon that strengthens and supports the immediate needs of her Chicana followers in accordance with their lived experiences. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa recalls the multifaceted identities Guadalupe can evoke and chooses to adapt. While Guadalupe does represent a Chicana identity, Anzaldúa reimagines her as a greater symbol for mestizaje that extends beyond ethnicity. She views Guadalupe's mixed racial identity as a potentially transformative intercultural alliance.³⁰ While I will be discussing the Chicana identity

²⁹ Chon A. Noriega, "'Barricades of Ideas': Latino Culture, Site-Specific Installation, and the U.S. Art Museum," in *Performing Hybridity*, by May Joseph and Jennifer Natalya Fink (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 182–96, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttsz3v.17?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=amalia+mesa+bains&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Damalia%2Bmesa%2Bbains&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_SYC-5462%2Ftest&refreqid=fastly-default%3Ab2413fa389f97db4f4bd4439be16e06b&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents, 188.

³⁰ Delgadillo, "A Theory of Spiritual Mestizaje," 12.

and Chicana altar, Anzaldúa's perspective on the universality of a mixed racial identity in unison with Mesa-Bains' altar becomes a testament to women's spirituality in a transnational perspective.

Mesa-Bains' altar piece, *Homage to Tonantzin/Guadalupe* (1992, Fig. 4), depicts the core of femininity and its intrinsic relations to beauty and motherhood according to Chicanas. It recalls the miraculous appearance of the Virgin de Guadalupe as important to Mexican history and as a great source of pride for the things La Virgen has come to stand for. She first appeared at Tepeyac Hill (now located outside of Mexico City) to Juan Diego, an indigenous peasant, on December 12. Her appearance as a woman of indigenous skin tone who did not speak Spanish solidified her as a source of pride for the indigenous people. She has since endured as the most powerful symbol of protection and now a champion of women, women's rights and especially for Mexican women's rights. She is called upon in times of need because she is the merciful holy mother to all Mexicans. By adorning (or altarizing) women that capture the essence of what it means to be Chicana, Mesa-Bains is empowering women through altar-making and is in a way building altars for all Chicanas.

Homage to Tonantzin/Guadalupe (Fig. 4), acknowledges the roots of La Virgen de Guadalupe through her indigenous equivalent, Tonantzin. Mesa-Bains' representation of Guadalupe and Tonantzin aligns with the Chicana feminist interpretation of Guadalupe not as a dual form of Mary, but as the Aztec goddess Tonantzin. The Aztec people worshipped and held sacrifices for Tonantzin, the moon goddess, whose Nahuatl name translates to "Our Mother" or "Wife of the Serpent" at Tepeyac. The overlapping significance of Tepeyac as Guadalupe's place of apparition and Tonantzin's place of worship has brought together Guadalupe and Tonantzin, leading many to believe they are one in the same. This reading of Guadalupe supports the idea

that she is a reflection of a variety of indigenous female deities including: Tonantzin, Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl and Coatloapeuh³¹. The power of representation does not fall short in regard to Tonantzin and Guadalupe who have enabled Mexican people, and other people of color, to find themselves reflected in the divine beings. Guadalupe's background is therefore a symbolic representation of the complications in defining a singular Mexican national identity and its subsequent influence on the development of the Chicana identity. Anzaldúa adapts Guadalupe's position as a mother to further theorize Guadalupe's role in the creation of these identities. Utilizing her as an ally, Anzaldúa names Guadalupe as a "dark-skinned... mother not to a male nation but, instead, to a mixed-blood daughter."³² In doing so, Guadalupe is distanced from patriarchal and colonial influence, thereby confirming her allegiance to and representation of the Chicana that subsequently lives in a state of *Nepantla*. The "mixed-blood daughter" is then the Chicana who finds a home within Guadalupe and her indigenous counterparts.

When Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego, she asked him to demand a temple be built at Tepeyac in her name. While Juan Diego did his best to convince the priest of the Virgin's appearance, his requests were denied twice because of his lowly status. On the third try, he asked Guadalupe for a sign to prove his story true. She told him to pick roses from a hill in the dead of Winter and to bring them to the priest. While he was hesitant, the roses were sure to be found and he collected them in his tilma³³. When he unwrapped his tilma to show the priest, the roses fell out and the image of Guadalupe, found on Mesa-Bains' altar, appeared to have become

³¹ Socorro Castañeda-Liles, Gastón Espinosa, and Mario T. Garcia, "Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Politics of Cultural Interpretation," in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture* (Duke University Press, 2008), 167. And Delgadillo, "A Theory of Spiritual Mestizaje," 24.

³² Delgadillo, "A Theory of Spiritual Mestizaje," 12.

³³ A garment made of cactus fiber that was worn by people of a lower class.

miraculously imprinted on the cloth. The repeated use of the sacred image in Mesa-Bains' altar is presented as if we are witnessing the apparition of La Virgen de Guadalupe just as the priest did, possibly emerging from an abundance of rose petals. Having us relate to Guadalupe through her apparition not only shows her continued presence but this same apparition reflects the Chicana at the core of her mixed identity.

By viewing her sacred image, Chicanas consider Guadalupe through a looking glass of their own inner strengths that is manifested within her image. Consequently, Chicana feminists have reimagined the Virgin of Guadalupe as a figure that reflects the best versions of themselves and they find power and liberation within whatever this may entail³⁴. Through paying homage to both Guadalupe and Tonantzin with their sacred colors, blue and gold, Mesa-Bains' further affirms the syncretism of Catholicism and indigenous culture as a point of mixture as opposed to erasure, further affirming the Chicana identity. The altar works as an active confirmation of syncretism that allows the Chicana woman to begin paving her own way in the rediscovery of herself; a self that will be detached from patriarchal ideals and expectations and instead rooted in the strength of her mixed race. By accepting Guadalupe as a mother and divine representation of the Mexican people, we can accept the divinity of all Chicana women. Therefore, by honoring Guadalupe, Chicanas are allowing themselves to admire and altarize their own beings and femininity.

While Guadalupe is a central figure in the formation of the Chicana identity, this does not mean that all Mexican women have found comfort within Guadalupe in the same way. The connection between a person and an object of divinity is special and the power within that is

³⁴ Castañeda-Liles, Espinosa, and T. Garcia, "Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Politics of Cultural Interpretation," 175.

shown in Casey Covarrubias' story featured in *Beautiful Necessity*. Covarrubias' mother gifted her a statue of the Lady of Guadalupe to create her own home altar but she did not follow her mother's advice in search of a "modern life." Years later, while experiencing a tough time, she began to carry the Guadalupe statue wherever she went. They would walk and sleep together until she announced to her husband that she would like to build her statue of La Virgen de Guadalupe an altar. She calls it, "my therapy."³⁵ Covarrubias' journey illustrates her spiritual expansion which ultimately leads her to undergo a transformative act. The impact of having a physical object to care for and spend time with allowed Covarrubias' to open up her heart and home to similar divine objects. By making the divine more accessible through a tangible source of connection, the element of physical touch becomes pivotal to not only altar-making but domestic ritual as a whole.

While the Virgin of Guadalupe is a core element of Mexican and Chicana identity, Mesa-Bains' has constructed a variety of altars honoring contemporary Mexican and Chicana women. One of Amalia Mesa-Bains' most acclaimed works is an altar for the Mexican actress, Dolores Del Río (Fig. 5). She created the piece for the Mexican Museum in San Francisco to celebrate the actress' legacy as a Hollywood star and Mexican icon.³⁶ Mesa-Bains altarizes the well-known actress whose career spanned the 1920s and 1930s, including the silent film era, during which she appeared in a number of black-and-white American films. Her rapid popularization in the American film industry transposed to the Mexican film scene when she returned to Mexico in 1943.³⁷ *Ofrenda to Dolores del Río* (Fig. 5) is flush with pink accents from the wall to its draping

³⁵ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 119.

³⁶ Carmen del Valle Hermo, "Altar/Installations by Amalia Mesa-Bains in a Feminist Context" (Hunter College, 2019).

³⁷ del Valle Hermo, "Altar/Installations by Amalia Mesa-Bains in a Feminist Context."

curtains. The installation includes three descending layers of textile; the first being the pink, silk curtain that is hung from the center, at the installation's highest point, and drapes on either side of the altar, followed by a sheer layer of clustered pink textile that resembles clouds, and finally a layer of lace cloaks the central photograph of Del Río (Fig. 6), where the actress is pictured wearing a white veil. I later discovered, in an email exchange with Mesa-Bains³⁸, that she likes to reference the three celestial tiers³⁹ in her work by creating canopies out of fabric in her installations, such as she does in *Ofrenda to Dolores del Río*. Her use of textile creates a grand setting for the altar honoring Dolores del Río, which is framed on both sides by movie stills. Mesa-Bains thus pays tribute to Del Río and her career by including domestic elements that, in her words, add to the glamour of the work. Her altar validates a feminine identity and encourages it to take up space.

The pink, beautified altar comments on and challenges beauty while simultaneously attributing beauty as an important aspect of femininity. It coincides with the shift Mesa-Bains constructs between Guadalupe, the traditionally recognized mother, and Dolores del Río and actively compares the figures through a lens of divine femininity. By drawing connections between Guadalupe and Del Río, two beautiful and idealized women, Mesa-Bains affirms the power of their influence and challenges standards of beauty inside the museum, a historically

³⁸ On April 14, 2021, I had the honor of participating in a virtual graduate-level course, "Religious Art & Social Justice," taught by Susan Aberth, my project advisor, which featured Amalia Mesa-Bains as a guest lecturer. Mesa-Bains gave us a retrospective of her career as an artist, as well as personal stories that granted us insight into her diverse body of work. She kindly shared her contact information with us and encouraged us to reach out with any questions. In her lecture she mentioned having a background in textiles and after asking her about that in an email exchange, she revealed to me that textiles have always been an influence in her life beginning with her mother who was a seamstress.

³⁹ This reference is possibly indicative of various symbols relating to the celestial tier such as the three levels of Heaven, which include the celestial, terrestrial and teletial kingdoms, respectively. In addition, this also may be a reference to the Mayan Ceiba tree, or the Tree of Life, which connects the three realms of underworld, earth and heavens.

white space. She introduces similar themes of indigenous roots and beauty between Guadalupe and Del Río through the central photograph of the altar (Fig. 6) from the Mexican Film, *Maria Candelaria* (1944). The film is known for its “nationalist themes and embrace of indigenous beauty”⁴⁰ and its photograph rests next to a statue of La Virgen de Guadalupe. Because of the women's matching veils and averted gazes, the photographs resemble each other. Considering that beauty comes to the forefront of our minds when we think about femininity and it is no secret that Dolores Del Río was well known for her beauty, the altar serves as a confirmation there is beauty and there are role models for women of color outside of whiteness. Mesa-Bains’ altar draws connections between Guadalupe and Del Río as powerful, feminine women that act as positive representations of Chicanas.

By feminizing a space within a museum dedicated to a Mexican cultural icon, Mesa-Bains’ work helps direct a shift in the purpose of altar-making: moving from a domestic ritual practice where we are beautifying space with our collected objects into a space where anyone can utilize this aesthetic palette to empower women. She utilizes the *ofrenda* as a particularly Mexican device of worship to join ideas of beauty and admiration that crosses cultural barriers and stay true to a genuinely Mexican form of expression⁴¹. Furthermore, her inclusion of domestic objects, most of which are of personal significance to her such as family mementos, confirms that domestic objects and what is typically regarded as mundane in actuality is priceless and worthy of veneration. By transporting domestic objects into the museum Mesa-Bains is adding her own valuable objects to the museum’s collection.

⁴⁰ del Valle Hermo, “Altar/Installations by Amalia Mesa-Bains in a Feminist Context.”

⁴¹ Noriega, “‘Barricades of Ideas’: Latino Culture, Site-Specific Installation, and the U.S. Art Museum,” 188.

Not only does Mesa-Bains' altarize icons, but in her exhibition series, *Venus Envy*, she begins to investigate the personal effects Christianity has had in her life. Apart from honoring religious or pop icons like Guadalupe and Del Río, she begins to altarize herself. In *Venus Envy Chapter One (Of the First Holy Communion Moments Before the End)* (1993, Fig. 7), Mesa-Bains displays a white vanity table covered in silk and pearls. A white chair with a bouquet of flowers opens up to the table that has a few open drawers. The centerpiece is the lavish mirror in the middle that will frame and altarize anyone that comes in contact with it. While the mirror is left open for anybody to assert themselves in the space, it is Mesa-Bains' referral to her own holy communion and her spiritual passage as an effect of Christianity. Mesa-Bains' familiarization with her own spirituality in *Venus Envy Chapter One* captures her own Spiritual Mestizaje coming to be through the domestic altar.

1.3 Gendering of Space

Jane Hamlett, a British historian who focuses on the home and family, shows a distinction between masculine and feminized spaces in her article, "'The Dining Room Should Be the Man's Paradise, as the Drawing Room is the Woman's': Gender and Middle-Class Domestic Space in England, 1850-1910." The name of her work stems from a 1902 decorative advice manual which supports the Victorian positionality of women in more "feminine" spaces within the home such as the morning room and drawing room where they could dedicate their time to decorate it with lighter colors and delicate motifs meanwhile social spaces such as the

dining room or library were covered in oak and designated for men⁴². Masculine spaces including billiard rooms, studies, smoking rooms and dens were additionally seen as a place of refuge for men from a feminized domestic influence. Her text delineates the mass propagation of the ideal home which intentionally divided domestic space by gender⁴³. Hamlett's analysis of late 19th and early 20th century around gendered space and its subsequent effect it has placed on women's social power and influence can lead us to question the ongoing remnants of gendered space.

Taking into consideration Hamlett's deconstruction of gender and space, it becomes clear how women are conditioned to believe that they don't belong in certain physical spaces because said places were designed with the intention of ostracizing them. By favoring physical environments to the comfort of men, the spaces we inhabit further forgive men to separate themselves from 'femininity' and domesticity. Although I will not be discussing masculinity at depth, it is important to recognize that while femininity and domesticity are synonymous (for the purpose of this project), they are polar to masculinity. Therefore, women are left to constantly negotiate space for themselves within a world constructed around male needs.

Venus Envy further explores the ways in which “women were able to negotiate space for themselves—and by extension, other women—despite their historical oppression.”⁴⁴ Sor Juana's library, part of *Venus Envy II: The Harem and Other Enclosures* (1994, Fig. 9), is the perfect

⁴² Jane Hamlett, “‘The Dining Room Should Be the Man's Paradise, as the Drawing Room Is the Woman's’: Gender and Middle-Class Domestic Space in England, 1850–1910,” *Gender & History* 21, no. 3 (2009): 576–91, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2009.01561.x>.

⁴³ Hamlett, “‘The Dining Room Should Be the Man's Paradise, as the Drawing Room Is the Woman's.’”

⁴⁴ Maximiliano Durón, “How to Altar the World: Amalia Mesa-Bains's Art Shifts the Way We See Art History,” *ARTnews.Com* (blog), March 27, 2018, <https://www.artnews.com/artnews/news/icons-amalia-mesa-bains-9988/>.

example of women having to continue to negotiate space for themselves. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was a nun as well as self-taught scholar, scientist, composer, poet and who Mesa-Bains credits a true feminist and Chicana⁴⁵. Miguel Cabrera's 1750 painting (Fig. 8) captures Sor Juana where she would most likely be found, in her library. The installation, displayed at Williams College Museum of Art in 1994, explores the domestic space of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) through an intricate look at her library. It is further worth noting that at this time, it was scandalous for a woman to own a library, much less a world class one. Replicating her library as a form of commemoration is thus a truly radical act because it acknowledges her as a true intellectual.

The photographs captured of the exhibit display objects we can presume she used often or at least saw on a daily basis. While this is not a traditional altar, the reproduction of Sor Juana's domestic domain interacts in the same way as traditional altars and serves to commemorate her. The replica of her domestic space serves as evidence that we are shaped and reflected by our environment. So much so that her presence is felt within the installation. The chair is tilted out, as if Sor Juana had recently gotten up from her desk. Her items are scattered across the table including a microscope, a skull, photographs, globes, scattered notes, specimens, scientific instruments, books and candles. Figure 10 provides a much closer look at the objects carefully placed on Sor Juana's desk. While the arrangement of objects does not appear to be messy, the space looks lived in. It seems as though Sor Juana's home has been brought to us and we are compelled to enter it. The portrayal of her intellect through a recreation of her most intimate

⁴⁵ Durón, "How to Altar the World."

space offers a well-rounded understanding of who Sor Juana was and I would argue, a more accurate portrayal of her character than a portrait could ever be.

It is worth mentioning that Sor Juana's domestic space, that was so highly reflected in her intellectual interests, resided within a convent making it automatically challenging to patriarchal space. Convents, which date back to the Middle Ages, were important in Colonialism because they served as a living and teaching atmosphere for nuns, reinforcing colonial ideas. Therefore, there were domestic spaces in the convents, where Sor Juana would have lived. Within Sor Juana's domestic environment, the imposition of colonial space and ideas serves to enforce colonial assumptions of gender and masculinity. Details in the physical makeup of Sor Juana's library resonate with Jane Hamlett's ideas and reminds us we are in a male dominated space. As previously mentioned, dark accents, such as oak furniture were a token of not only male but also colonial space. The "sober oak furniture" suggested that it was a space designated for "serious study" and "to be kept quiet and undisturbed."⁴⁶ Mesa-Bains' use of wood floors and dark furniture in Sor Juana's library blends feminine and masculine space by portraying the assimilation of Sor Juana's livelihood into a traditionally masculine setting.

Hamlett further uses text to indicate the reservations held against femininity by decorative advice writers in which "silly knick knacks" are seen as just taking up or 'crowding' space on furniture.⁴⁷ While these objects are hinted of being unimportant and illogical, Sor Juana's table (Fig. 10) denounces the idea of a cluttered aesthetic as a negative act. Instead, Sor Juana's environment is overflowing with her intellect, evident in her collection of scientific and mathematical objects. Mesa-Bains shows Sor Juana's domestic space is one of intellectual space.

⁴⁶ Hamlett, "'The Dining Room Should Be the Man's Paradise, as the Drawing Room Is the Woman's.'"

⁴⁷ Hamlett, "'The Dining Room Should Be the Man's Paradise, as the Drawing Room Is the Woman's.'"

In this manner, *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz*, expands the idea of what women are capable of. This piece does not claim that all women's objects must be intellectual to be valuable, but it does demonstrate the diverse ways in which female identity can be expressed by contrasting this environment with that of *Ofrenda to Dolores del Río* (for example). Sor Juana's intellectuality facilitates versatility within femininity because it does not restrict femininity to the confines of being a purely decorative and performative act.

The installation also provides a challenge to the library, a typically male oriented space, in which Sor Juana challenged authority by using her knowledge to implore for the advancement of other women. At the time women were not credited for their intellect and her knowledge was deemed so threatening that her glasses were destroyed as a punishment to never read again. Sor Juana is adapted by Mesa-Bains not only because she is a Mexican woman, but also because she is Chicana, implying that her gender is inextricably linked to a powerful political stance, feminism. Staying true to Sor Juana's feminist agenda, Mesa-Bains incorporates images on Sor Juana's desk of "concurrent protests staged at Williams College calling for a Latina professor to be hired."⁴⁸ This small detail challenges the limits of space by demonstrating the continuous difficulty in occupying space as a woman.

The installation is a good example of Mesa-Bains' strategic considerations of a site-specific piece that simultaneously engages two narratives for how space is understood. The first being, part of Sor Juana's domestic sphere that is constructed within a male space and then transferring this already convoluted idea into a new sphere- the gallery which has its own considerations of how space is utilized. Contextualizing two different renditions of space and their institutional constructs is what allows Mesa-Bains' installations to be incredibly multivalent

⁴⁸ del Valle Hermo, "Altar/Installations by Amalia Mesa-Bains in a Feminist Context," 72.

depending on its placement. The installations of Mesa-Bains consequently go beyond beautiful, feminized rooms and provide an in-depth look and critique of the domestic spaces women construct and inhabit.

The social roles and practices the domestic sphere has instigated for women is then rightfully called into question by Amalia Mesa-Bains when she claims the domestic sphere will “culturally [remain] fixed in patriarchy unless representation of that world calls into question such practices and thereby contributes to its change.”⁴⁹ While domestic space is a space for turmoil and tension by more classic narratives, it is also not static and bound to these roles.

1.4 Moving the Domestic Sphere

While artists like Mesa-Bains have challenged institutional space through installation art, the intricate forces involved when translating the domestic into the institutional sphere have made this process difficult. In 1975, the De Young Museum in San Francisco invited altar-maker Yolanda Garfias Woo⁵⁰ to display her Day of the Dead Collection and create a traditional Oaxacan altar. Despite their extended invitation, Garfias Woo was met with resistance from the museum staff: “I heard many people say... this is very cute and everything, but it doesn’t belong in a Fine Arts Museum.”⁵¹ By using language to question its legitimacy and belonging, these

⁴⁹ Mesa-Bains, “Cercanías Distantes.”

⁵⁰ Yolanda Garfias Woo was instrumental in educating on altar-making tradition through *Día de Los Muertos* and was a mentor to Amalia Mesa-Bains.

⁵¹ Cary Cordova, “The Politics of Día de Los Muertos: Mourning, Art, and Activism,” in *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 207–33, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4b3m.12?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=amalia+mesa+bains+altars&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Damalia%2Bmesa%2Bbains%2Baltars&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_SYC-5462%2Ftest&refreqid=fastlydefault%3Ae14c147efc68d0190f78076669c215b9&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents, 218.

reactions actively further distance unrepresented traditions and perpetuate a standard for what belongs in a museum and what doesn't. However it was not just an initial resistance that Garfias Woo was met with which was diminishing and patronizing. In spite of Garfias Woo's plans to prepare the altar herself, the museum staff attempted to assemble it. Garfias Woo recollects the museum staff's version of her altar "was very symmetrical, very western, very European." She states that as she rearranged the altar "they all stood and they were watching [her] and they said 'oh, oh!' because it was so totally different from anything that they had ever done." This interaction between members of the museum and the artist depict a fundamental misunderstanding of what an altar is and what Garfias Woo was doing.

This misunderstanding is further accentuated by the disparate reaction between the audience and the institution. Shortly after the show's opening, three different media sources arrived at the De Young, specifically to cover Garfias Woo's altar. Not only was this surprising because the museum had been trying to get media coverage for their previous show openings, but when the press came, the staff had no idea how to talk about Garfias Woo's altar and had to call her for reinforcements.⁵² In this instance, their misunderstanding of the altar was exacerbated by the audience's willingness to participate in the exhibition of the Garfias Woo's altar and their genuine excitement to do so. Applying this story to my research has been pivotal to understanding where the gaps lie in introducing the altar to the museum. By acknowledging that this story is not simply one mere example of the institution's failure we are able to understand how an event like this illustrates the overall skepticism and devaluing of feminine traditions.

⁵² Cordova, "The Politics of Día de Los Muertos: Mourning, Art, and Activism," 218.

Perhaps this instance depicts a genuine misunderstanding in how the spiritual interacts with space. By thinking about women in a multi-institutional context, we need to consider how the identities, which have flourished in the domestic space through forms such as the altar can translate into an institutional space. By using Yolanda Garfias Woo's story as a prime example, Woo's traditional Day of the Dead altar is introduced into the De Young, a traditionally conservative museum. Moreover, the institution's instinct to reject the traditional practice, is symbolic of a much larger narrative. Reconciling the altar's spirituality alongside the museum's insistence to remain a secular space is difficult because of their inherently different dialogues. This story shows the difficulties that Mesa-Bains' work and Anzaldúa's theory must navigate in order to redefine the domestic space, and the portrayal of the domestic space for women.

Despite its difficulties, moving the domestic into the institutional sphere is vital to the development of a new feminist approach to space. The affirmation of identity and comfort that the domestic space has provided women, especially to migrant and diasporic communities within the United States, has led women to prioritize their altars wherever they go. Women from all over the world including "Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, Ecuador, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Thailand, Vietnam, India, China, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Hungary, Greece [and] Russia" have migrated, "leaving other precious things behind, they nonetheless brought their statues of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Durga, Kuan Yin, and Yemaya, their photos of family and friends, their curative potions and amulets."⁵³ The immediacy of having a space where their religious practice can unfold has led them to carry symbols of domesticity with them wherever they go. In this way, women of completely different origins have become dominators of the interior space by

⁵³ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 43.

prioritizing makeups of the home such as the domestic altar in order to continue their practice in the United States and there, rebuild their ideal domestic space.

The Aesthetics of Chicana Femininity

2.1 A Domestic Mexican Aesthetic

I have found the interior decor of the home difficult to describe. While rooms and the objects within them have physical attributes I can relay, the style in which an individual expresses their home is deeply personal. Throughout my research I have found many remarkable quotes that attempt to express what it is that domestic altars capture in Mexican and Mexican American homes, one of my favorite responses being: “the shape of the soul”⁵⁴. The renowned book, *Mexican Churches*, is the result of a project where photographers, Eliot Porter and Ellen Auerbach, documented hundreds of churches and chapels on a 1956 trip to Mexico (Fig. 11-13). While every photographer must have a different approach to their work, I found the preface of *Mexican Churches* to be particularly interesting in its indication that they found it essential to capture the “atmosphere and essence of what [they] saw” no matter how difficult some locations were to photograph for their dim lighting.⁵⁵ Their unwillingness to compromise the essence of the space for their own aesthetic goals allows them to properly capture what makes these churches special. Porter and Auerbach let the space speak for itself; according to Auerbach, “The candles or colored glass were imperative in creating the atmosphere we wanted to retain. To have shed light on it would have been like photographing the dawn with flashbulbs.” This statement

⁵⁴ Cerwinski, *In A Spiritual Style*, 6.

⁵⁵ Eliot Porter and Ellen Auerbach, *Mexican Churches* (University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 7.

holds true for all work capturing spiritual space because artificial lighting would have removed the darkness and shadows provided by natural lighting, candles, and glass, all of which contribute to the development of a spiritual atmosphere. There's something so raw about a spiritual environment with so many carefully considered elements that documenting the candles and natural lighting is nothing short of essential.

Denis Defibaugh, a Fulbright scholar who specializes in capturing world cultures, published his first book, *Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos*, in 2007, which recorded altars for the Day of the Dead tradition.⁵⁶ Figures 14 and 15 are good examples of two vastly different home altars he has photographed. Figure 14 depicts an altar in front of an unevenly painted wall with one of two candles burning. The altar radiates the great care put into it; shown by its real and artificial flowers, some kind of indigenous offering (possibly nuts or seed pods) and a matchbox ready for use. Figure 15 is warmly lit with pink and red hues and picture Antonio Gonzales Vásquez at the forefront of the photograph. Vásquez, very likely the elder of the house, is shot in front of the altar that is placed on a tiled podium and has religious imagery including that of Guadalupe and the crucifixion. Its scale and elaborate decoration of tinsel, bells, garlands and an abundant offering of *pan de muertos*⁵⁷ confirms that this is a Day of the Dead altar which had to have been a collaborative piece from all members of the household. The absence of

⁵⁶ A Mexican tradition that commemorates the dead from November 1st through the 2nd. During these two days, the deceased travel back into the world of the living to visit their families and partake in a celebration of life. To help their ancestors through this journey, families engage in a symbolic language through their altars where they undergo traditional acts such as burn copal and lay down marigold petals to feed the spirits of the dead and lead them to the family altar for their yearly reunion. When the spirits of the dead locate their families, they are greeted by an abundance of their favorite things placed on their families' altars which includes but is not limited to toys, food and alcohol. The importance of family life and veneration is important to the spiritual and visual makeup of the Mexican people and has allowed them to continue to exercise their beliefs while remaining more or less under the confines of the Catholic Church.

⁵⁷ Also called Bread of the Dead, it is a special type of *pan dulce* that is made for *Día de los Muertos*.

women from the photograph further implies they may be away working, which would mean the photograph is fulfilling traditional gender roles. There is little artistic manipulation in both photographs, allowing us to focus on the distinct styles of the altars and their ability to evoke the spiritual. Although Defibaugh does not maintain a style within his work that requires filters or documenting individuals with their respective altars, he does build a sense of continuity within his work through smaller details (such as photographing from askew angles, as seen in Figures 14 and 15). His photography does not force a certain aesthetic and therefore demonstrates the raw beauty found at home, allowing the natural elements of the world to speak for themselves.

It is also worth noting that the distinct styles that have developed in interior settings have a quality of attraction. The collection of photographs discussed so far must be understood as only a small portion of Mexican altars that I have chosen to show for the purposes of this project and of that, even a smaller percentage of altars that have been documented. The images I have shown have no deeper reasoning than my liking of them. Similarly, Auerbach recalls the appeal of certain altars and those being the ones they chose to document.⁵⁸ There is then a selective documentation based on our visual appeal when thinking about the larger collection of images. Our individual appeal to certain visual and aesthetic factors affects what is documented and from this documentation, communicates what photographers such as Porter and Auerbach have come to understand what altars and churches in Mexico mean and look like. This selective documentation has also managed to gather how spirituality has manifested in different contexts and most importantly, the relation between them. While photographs such as Figures 14 and 15 may be extremely distinct, their appeal to Defibaugh and myself has shaped the larger discourse

⁵⁸ Porter and Auerbach, *Mexican Churches*, 7.

on what spirituality means in a world where spirituality takes incredibly different forms. While we could ruminate on all of the work that has not been documented, the plentitude of images that we do have readily available show, in a myriad of ways, a specific aesthetic ingrained within Mexican and Mexican American homes.

While I am investigating the visual expression of spirituality in the domestic sphere, it is important to recognize that within the context of Mexico, the home altar delineates a spiritual space but does not necessarily imply religious belief. In Mexican homes, altars are not born of devout Catholicism but instead stand as symbols of national pride. Spirituality is so ingrained in Mexican identity that even the conception of Mexico City (then Tenochtitlan) begins with a sacred vision.⁵⁹ The understanding of spirituality is thus not bound to a traditionally Catholic upbringing and this further explains the altar's fusion of indigenous practices such as offerings (as seen by the seed pods in Figure 14). Mexico's colonial and indigenous histories have added depth to the country's religion and spirituality, but its people maintain a strong "spiritual sensibility," marked by spiritual expression in the home through the manipulation of objects.⁶⁰

Interestingly enough, in *Beautiful Necessity* Kay Turner points out: "Altar-making has grown dramatically, has even erupted, at a time when established religions are no longer central in the lives of many women."⁶¹ While this seems to counteract the very basis of my thesis, I believe Turner is talking about the shift from traditional beliefs into more modern takes on spirituality. I would then claim that a modern attitude towards spirituality would include

⁵⁹ Tenoch, an Aztec priest, had a vision in which Huitzilopchtli (the sun god and god of war), instructed the Aztec people they would know when they have reached their sacred land upon encountering an eagle with a snake in its beak, perched on top of a cactus. This land became Tenochtitlan and Mexico City was later built on top of it.

⁶⁰ Cerwinski, *In A Spiritual Style*, 8.

⁶¹ Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, 22.

connections to identity and personal liking, as previously discussed. Its influence can be seen in Frida Kahlo's home, *La Casa Azul*. Figure 16 is a photograph of Kahlo in her home posing beside a shelf full of indigenous folk art. She and her husband Diego Rivera, a renowned Mexican muralist, were dedicated supporters of the exploration and reclamation of Mexican identity, through movements such as *Mexicanidad*.⁶² The photograph pictures Kahlo standing proudly next to shelves replete with religious art including a Judas figure (the large papier mache figure), a colonial portrait of a crowned nun and even an ex-voto.⁶³ Despite Kahlo and Rivera's extensive collection of religious folk art, neither of them had a strong religious background and were in fact well known Marxists. Nevertheless, their persistence in placing value on these objects as an essential part of their collection reflects the inherent spirituality with which many people have come to express within their domestic space, regardless of one's faith.

2.2 Elena Climent and the Aesthetics of Rasquachismo

Elena Climent is an appropriate artist with which to explore Mexican domestic space due to her paintings of small intimate altars within Mexican homes. Her paintings are simple and touch on themes around women's beliefs, values and creativity. Climent is known for depicting nooks and crannies within the home such as she does in *Altar with Blue Tiles* (Fig. 17). Here we are confronted with a compact space that has been transformed into an altar. The central image appears to be a rendition of Mary with a pair of angels and there is a lit candle in front of it. The

⁶² A movement that reclaimed indigenous culture as a core aspect of Mexican identity.

⁶³ A votive offering to a deity for fulfilling a vow. Ex-votos are made up of an image that details the miraculous event, the deity that they prayed to and an explanation of the event in writing. The offering stands to give eternal thanks in your absence.

altar is symmetrical, with roses in vases made out of soda bottles wrapped in rose-patterned wrapping paper on either side. This small detail portrays the intimacy and sentimental value within the home that Climent is willing to engage in. Her painting fondly commemorates a modest scene that is clearly cared for, from its fresh flowers to its one of a kind vases. Climent's work is often this straightforward, inviting us into a home and providing a close-up view of the few and significant items that make a domestic altar. Most importantly, Climent's deliverance is not by "[glorifying] or [dignifying]" the objects within her paintings.⁶⁴ Instead, she depicts life as it is in an intimate encounter with the home.

Moreover, Climent investigates her Spanish and Jewish roots through the altar form. She was born in Mexico City on March 6, 1955, where she and her sisters were raised by their parents, a Spanish father and Jewish mother. Although she was born and raised in Mexico, Climent did not grow up with a typical Mexican domestic influence in her home. In fact, Climent's father forbade any expression of religion in her childhood home. Having experienced extreme ideologies during the era of the Spanish Civil War and being of a multiethnic family living in Mexico, where they were constantly regarded as foreigners, her father preferred his children to not be identified as Jewish, Catholic or Spanish.⁶⁵ Since the domestic Mexican sensibility we have discussed is inherently religious, regardless of religious stance, she didn't grow up surrounded by the scenes she portrays in her paintings. She instead began to investigate these forms on her own in the later part of her 20s.

⁶⁴ *Elena Climent: In Search of the Present/En Busca Del Presente* (Mary Anne Martin/Fine Art in association with the Galeria de Arte Mexicano, 1992), 3.

⁶⁵ Shlomit Dror, "Re-Encountering Jewish Identity in Latin America: The Art of Jose Gurvich, Moico Yaker, and Elena Climent" (Bard College, 2006), 56.

Her work such as *Altar of the Dead With Menorah* (Fig. 18) illustrates the coming together of her multiple identities and their influences and in a way comes to terms with them. *Altar of the Dead With Menorah* alludes to the Mexican Day of the Dead (or Dia de Los Muertos) tradition and explicitly incorporates Jewish traditions, such as Hanukkah. It's interesting that Climent uses Day of the Dead to join her dual identities because Day of the Dead is a syncretic holiday itself that is not a part of Catholic tradition. Day of the Dead is unique to Mexico and its indigenous culture, which puts a high emphasis on honoring ancestors and practices such as staying overnight at the cemetery to spend time with them, which is not practiced in the United States. There are however other elements of Day of the Dead, such as providing offerings to your ancestors, that uphold indigenous traditions and are accomplished with more ease. Climent extends the already syncretic nature of Day of the Dead, between Catholicism and indigenous culture, and adds her Jewish background to fully engage with the culture mixing the tradition allows. Figure 18 highlights an arc of roses and marigolds that frames the altar. Within it we can find traditional Mexican influence through the use of religious imagery, a sugar skull and candles however, she chooses to incorporate her own roots by incorporating her family photographs of Jewish relatives and even includes a menorah. Her use of the altar is then not a rebellion against her father's wishes but a celebration of her mixed identity.

The altar form is not reliant on a specific or even a singular tradition, therefore Climent uses the domestic altar in the way it was intended. The elements in Climent's altars are not contradictory but show us how the domestic space can serve as a place where we can honor ourselves. Her work serves as a visual demonstration of her piecing together her own identity and affirms we are not required to follow a singular tradition. Her own incorporation of identity

into her work facilitates intimacy in her environments and truly captures what altar making is about.

Climent's aesthetic influence shows a deep understanding of Mexican style and culture. The sincerity of her paintings captures the poetic essence of being in and living in a domestic Mexican home. Her style provides a large contrast to the strict aesthetic values her father imposed on her. Climent's father was also an artist and enforced a rigid viewpoint that prioritized classic values such as symmetry and harmony which were not echoed in Mexican art and culture (that Climent most admired and identified with).⁶⁶ Instead, Climent claims to have developed a sensitivity to "to the way things look and interact with each other- reflections, distortions, etc." This and her concern for placement of objects that analyzes "the back of [how] a surface interacts with the front and the visual effects they produce" shows her concern for meticulous details and is reflected in her paintings of small domestic settings.⁶⁷

Climent's style further captures the inherent artistic aptitude subconsciously expressed in Mexican homes that is reflected in *Rasquachismo*. *Rasquachismo* is both a philosophy and dialogue present in Mexican homes that is defined by Tomas Ybarro-Frausto, an important scholar of Chicano studies, as "an attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability, yet mindful of stance and style," that is particularly important for working class Chicanos.⁶⁸ Before *rasquachismo* can be understood as an aesthetic, it must be grounded in its socioeconomic stance. *Rasquachismo* is a make-do attitude that takes everyday objects and repurposes them in

⁶⁶ Dror, "Re-Encountering Jewish Identity in Latin America: The Art of Jose Gurvich, Moico Yaker, and Elena Climent," 56-59.

⁶⁷ Elena Climent: *In Search of the Present/En Busca Del Presente*, 9.

⁶⁸ Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, eds., *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (Wight Art Gallery/University of California, Los Angeles, 1991), 156.

simplest terms, to make ends meet. It is this survivalist aesthetic that has “the capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado is at the heart of *rasquachismo*.”⁶⁹ In *Red Devil with Broken Angel* (Fig. 19), Climent documents the *rasquache*. Her painting focuses on an angel statue with a broken head. Right behind it, there is a bottle of glue ready to repair the statue. Climent captures the care that is kept for the angel statue and its surrounding objects by illustrating the intention to repair it instead of replacing it. The easy fix reflects a *rasquache* attitude.

In an exhibition catalogue, Climent delineates the “difference between being poor in Mexico and being poor in New York.” While she refers to being poor in the United States as “shameful” she argues that in Mexico, people take poverty as a result of bad luck and refuse to compromise their pride on their economic status. While this distinction may not appear to be revolutionary, the attitude in which the harsh realities of life are taken provide a huge contribution to the aesthetic sense of Mexican people. However, the *rasquache* approach is grounded in a dignified attitude that resists “the imposition of Anglo tastes.”⁷⁰ Despite its charming quality, the *rasquache* can carry a negative connotation and is paralleled to vulgarity, bad taste and is even considered “tacky” from those outside the tradition, whether that be culturally or members of the upper-class.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the *rasquache* is a critical sensibility that gains its power through subversion and makes the best it can with the materials at hand. *Altar With Blue Tiles* (Fig. 17) demonstrates a good example of this with the soda bottle turned

⁶⁹ Mesa-Bains, “Cercanías Distantes.”

⁷⁰ Romero Cash, *Living Shrines: Home Altars of New Mexico*, 73.

⁷¹ Griswold del Castillo, McKenna, and Yarbrow-Bejarano, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*, 156.

vases that have been covered in patterned gift wrap. It reflects a crafty quality that people familiar with *rasquachismo* carry wherever they go and is especially useful to the migrant community that must make do wherever they are. Climent states: “In Mexico poor people must fight to not let themselves become overwhelmed and swallowed up. This comes out in the fact that anything becomes an excuse for beauty.”⁷² Therefore, the sincerity and intimacy within her work allows us to see the *rasquache* details of daily life.

2.3 Feminizing Masculine Space

Though we have established there is a difference between feminine and masculine space, the way in which they are represented through different mediums gives opportunity to move between them and explore the impositions they place upon each other. By first grounding ourselves in feminine space we can then move to masculine space to understand the visual effects they entail. Elena Climent’s paintings focus on femininity and *Red Table With Objects* (Fig. 20) is a perfect example of the niche details of feminine space Climent notices. While it is not an altar we have necessarily become familiarized with, it is nonetheless an altar depicting feminine ritual. The painting introduces us to a compact space that has regular use where we can imagine a woman getting ready for her day while constantly using, viewing and moving these objects. There is a half-used bottle of Revlon body lotion, a razor, curlers, and a heart shaped box that we can imagine might be filled with chocolate or beauty products. We can infer that the box may have been a gift from her someone special, whether that be a lover or family member. This

⁷² Elena Climent: *In Search of the Present/En Busca Del Presente*, 8.

further confirms that this space at her bedside table is a sentimental and not just functional space. These products all seem to be placed in front of a few frames ranging in size and style, and all appear to be layered on top of each other. They are religious images and a family photograph with a seashell frame. The photograph pictures a little girl and directly behind the frame, there is an image of an angel, placed behind her as if in protection of her. The rose⁷³ curtains and reflective pink table compliment the scene by adding a pink glow. From the divine beings to beauty products, the space exudes femininity by showing the viewers a few important objects that frame feminine ritual. Her work shows the manifestation of femininity within the home and helps us begin to consider how the feminine looks when it is imposed upon masculine space.

The image of Guadalupe appears on a storefront mural at a tire shop in New Mexico (Fig. 21). The mural not only warmly welcomes Guadalupe, a feminine power, into masculine space, but it uses her image as a source of protection. Since it is not rare to have an image of Guadalupe on a storefront, we can see the respect that is upheld for Guadalupe in which she is used as a point of power. Her image, at the heart of Chicano femininity, shows the deep comfort and reverence a feminized space contributes to masculine space such as a tire shop which would otherwise be void of domesticity. Her image is used as a badge of honor and a ribbon over Guadalupe's head reads: "Only the best are crowned." Guadalupe looks over the store and watches over the tires. Without her, the store would not be protected, and her image may also establish a point of trust because the mural communicates that the shop is a Mexican American establishment and therefore, we can trust them. Additionally, The Virgin of Guadalupe is a patron saint of travel and ensures the safety of driving a car, making her appearance on the mural

⁷³ Roses are a common symbol for the Virgin of Guadalupe.

evermore relevant and comforting. The mural allows us to begin understanding how and why feminine and masculine space overlap.

Elena Climent's painting, *Altar in a Car Repair Shop* (Fig. 22), sets up a similar instance of the masculine and feminine mixing together. Her painting does not show the looming presence of masculine space but includes visual cues that let us know the altar's location without having to read the title. We are given an intimate view in which we become immersed in the items the altar-maker has collected which include a calendar, a clock, a few small shelves, tools, a figurine, flowers, electric wire candles, different renditions of Jesus, and framed money. The incorporation of the tools in the altar indicate that this altar is located in a space where mechanical tools are necessary based on their careful placement right beneath a rendition of Jesus (as opposed to being randomly scattered). While it could be argued there is a hierarchy of items, with Jesus repeatedly located at the top, the tools still exist among other level items, such as the flowers, calendar and clock that are just as important to the owners of the shop. The calendar and clock, we can assume are used and looked at daily, provide harmony between these items and transform the space into a functional setting. *Altar in a Car Repair Shop* (Fig. 22) shows the intimacy that can be created indoors, without necessarily being inside a home. Within the scene she does not reveal the whole car repair shop but chooses to show us the everyday objects that make this specific car repair shop a comforting place to be. It is further safe to assume that this space has been created by a woman, such as the shopkeeper's wife, who would be credited for introducing a designated area for femininity within the repair shop.

Altar in a Car Repair Shop (Fig. 22) further resembles Don Filogonio Perez's altar (Fig. 23). Although the latter is a photograph, the painting provides a similar perspective in that it encompasses all of the objects without hinting at a centerpiece. Both figures provide a peek at

the abundance of personal items the altar makers' have collected while occluding other items that only partially appear at the borders of the painting, including the askew frame Climent paints at the top right. The abundance of items present in these two mediums is key to a true representation of the feminine sphere and aesthetics found within domesticity. Climent's scene is reminiscent of Perez's altar for its abundant nature. The altar makers have compiled so many items that their sacred spaces appear to be overflowing with items layered on top of each other. Climent's altar shows a clock over a calendar, multiple tools stored together and the wire from the electric candles is weaved across the painting. Layering is heavily present in Perez's altar as well, beginning with the wallpaper that appears to be made out of newspaper and posters and is further covered by family photographs. The shelf at the center is covered with a flower cloth and has multiple coffee jars filled with flowers filling out the space. The television located in the lower left corner has multiple toys, religious imagery and statues on top of it. Through both representations, the accumulation of objects has developed into a layered aesthetic allowing the altar maker to display their items in a pleasant and functional manner.

Layering is also seen at Our Lady of San Juan de Los Lagos, the second most popular pilgrimage site in Mexico (after the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe). The church was built to commemorate the statue of The Virgin of San Juan de Los Lagos who miraculously revived a seven-year-old girl in 1623. The news of the event traveled far and wide, establishing it as a popular site for miracles.⁷⁴ Accordingly, the site has received so many items given in thanks from its visitors that there is a room to the left of the altar dedicated to ex-votos (Fig. 24). The image of the room shows traditional ex-votos, the Mexican flag and personal items such as dolls,

⁷⁴ Tony, "San Juan de Los Lagos: The Virgin, Her Basilica, Her Pilgrims, and Their Exvotos," *MexConnect* (blog), June 17, 2020, <https://www.mexconnect.com/articles/3061-san-juan-de-los-lagos-the-virgin-her-basilica-her-pilgrims-and-their-exvotos/>.

sports jerseys, photographs of loved ones, crutches and wedding dresses hung and laid on top of each other. Two men are assigned to look after the room and gradually transfer ex-votos up depending on the amount of time they have been there, and finally into storage, since the group altar is overflowing with an abundance of objects.⁷⁵ The location has become a monument to all of the miracles that have happened, as well as a personal memorial to anyone who has passed through. The accumulation of objects, which we've identified as a feminine characteristic, takes on new meaning as a collective altar, in which the various objects work together to honor the Virgin of San Juan de Los Lagos. The addition of a communal altar has allowed the visitors to the Basilica to bring a piece of their private space into the public eye, where their offerings will continue to give thanks for their miracle.

⁷⁵ Tony, "San Juan de Los Lagos."

Conclusion

Domestic altars, according to Kay Turner, are a place where a person's desires, beliefs, and needs come together. Every example of a domestic setting that I have come across in my studies confirms Turner's statement. The images I've shown are representative of Chicana femininity, and in certain ways, they all convey key aspects of Chicana identity, such as desire, need, and want. They point towards different aspects of the Chicana identity through references to family, beauty, and popular icons. The domestic altar creates room where women are free to express their identities, but it does not free them from the constraints of space. Despite this, it does not hold women back from indulging in her domestic environment, as seen in her carefully adorned altars. While trying to comprehend why, Amalia Mesa-Bains pointed out that at the end of the day, it is "our faith, beliefs and practices [that] are there when everything else fails us." The domestic altar only helps to facilitate a woman's faith in herself, enabling her to draw strength from the things she has gathered.

My research into altars has prompted me to see how we all have a close relationship to artifacts. In fact, objects have gained so much meaning in our lives that they have become physical embodiments of the comfort and protection of home. Statues of saints have even become personified and are often dressed up, punished and talked to.⁷⁶ Relationship-building is at the heart of altar-building, and women, above all, are the ones who construct these relationships.

⁷⁶ Romero Cash, *Living Shrines: Home Altars of New Mexico*, 66.

Folk artist and author of *Living Shrines: Home Altars of New Mexico*, Marie Romero Cash, poses a few reasons why it is women who keep altars: “perhaps because the home is still the traditional female stronghold and the saints offer company during the day (or a life) when husband and children are absent. Perhaps it is because women are the creative arbiters of the indoors; or perhaps because without social equality, and with the high incidence of domestic violence and child abandonment common across cultures in this society, women need more help in dealing with their hard lives.”⁷⁷ I believe all of her reasonings are legitimate issues and concerns of womanhood that have come to be creatively engaged with at home. The relationships women affirm at their altars allows them to build strength and heal through their spirituality. Opening up the domestic sphere to form relationships allow women to connect to their faith and with themselves.

The common objects and imagery which appear on altars that I have discussed is further reminiscent of Latinx tradition and culture and demonstrates a powerful connection to objects. As I’ve presented, the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe is highly influential in Mexican and Mexican American culture and having a physical statue of the Virgin allows women to see themselves represented in the Virgin, provides them with company, and allows them to be comfortable in a Latinx environment that is similar to the spaces in which they grew up. Growing up in Christianity, such as my own Catholic upbringing, is a typical Latinx experience, regardless of religious affiliation. However, it is not only that religious imagery and altar spaces evoke nostalgic memories, but also that the spaces in which these items are housed are welcoming to Latinx people. Given the importance of immigration in Latin America, icons of

⁷⁷ Romero Cash, *Living Shrines: Home Altars of New Mexico*, 46-47.

home, such as a saint's statue, can serve as a reminder of your family and homeland. The warmth of a Latinx atmosphere and remnants of home are essential to people from an immigrant background, such as myself, and can help you cope with grief and life's other challenges. Physical objects can act as a bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds, which is especially important for Latinx people who tend to be raised in spiritual environments.⁷⁸ Dolores Olmedo (1908-2002), a Mexican businesswoman and founder of the Museo Dolores Olmedo in Mexico City, organizes yearly *ofrendas* for Día De Los Muertos (Fig. 25).

Despite her vivid and grandiose public altars, she talks about growing up with altars at home in a very different way:

Para mi las ofrendas han sido una tradición de toda la vida, recuerdo que mi mamá ponía un pequeño altar en nuestra casa en donde siempre se incluían alimentos y adornos mexicanos. Años después ya casada solía colocar, en mi casa, una mesa pequeña y sobre esta la ofrenda; no era muy grande porque no contaba con mucho tiempo, pues tenía que trabajar para mis cuatro hijos, que son mi mayor orgullo.

For me, ofrendas have been a lifelong tradition, I remember my mom put a small altar in our home where there was always food and Mexican ornaments. Years later, when I was married, I used to place a small table in my house and on top of it the offering; I was not very big because I did not have much time, because I had to work for my four children, who are my greatest pride.⁷⁹

The continuity of altars in Olmedo's life, I believe, is crucial. Though she didn't have time to keep an elaborate altar up to date, she continued to devote a space in her home to remember the rituals of her childhood home, which she grew to include her own family. Even more, she shared

⁷⁸ Christina Holmes, "Allegory, Materiality, and Agency in Amalia Mesa-Bains's Altar Environments," in *Ecological Borderlands: Body, Nature, and Spirit in Chicana Feminism* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 75–96, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1hfr027.9?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=amalia+mesa+bains&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Damalia%2Bmesa%2Bbains&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_SYC-5462%2Ftest&refreqid=fastly-default%3Ab2413fa389f97db4f4bd4439be16e06b&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents, 77.

⁷⁹ Dolores Olmedo: *40 Años de Ofrendas* (Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño, 1996).

this piece of comfort with her community, successfully showing the ever presence of religion in Mexican life.

By offering symbols of ease, the domestic spaces I've proposed affirm Latinx identities. The work I've been analyzing has allowed me to question how elements of the domestic sphere can inhabit other spaces, such as *Altar in a Car Repair Shop* (Fig. 22), which demonstrates the influence of the feminine aesthetic onto a traditionally male-centered space. This work demonstrates that masculinity and femininity do not have to be mutually exclusive in terms of space because they can be used to enrich a space while also challenging traditional gender roles. However, exploring the connections between femininity and the sacred has come with its own set of frustrations. In my research, I've discovered that the altar, as well as other similar feminine work, is frequently dismissed as being too personal. Work associated with more feminine traditions has been deemed too nuanced to be universal. This common perception contributes to a dismissal that denies the realities of the people that find comfort within these spaces. Although domestic altars are not made to please others or be in the canon, ignorance of them perpetually leaves them as hidden traditions. Perhaps this reason is why I was surprised by the quantity of women that maintain altars in their homes. If the spaces I have proposed allow room for underrepresented people to take up space, why would we not indulge in them?

The artists I've selected effectively illustrate the home's discourse and how the perception of domesticity is shifting. Mesa-Bains' work grounds itself in Chicana identity and pushes the constraints of femininity, specifically through *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz* (Fig. 9-10). The installation of her domestic environment is not grandiose and flush in pink like *Ofrenda to Dolores Del Rio* (Fig. 5-6). Instead, Sor Juana's femininity is grounded in her knowledge and is reflected by her intellectual environment that empowers her as a feminist, Chicana icon.

Climent, who captures the small but powerful influence of feminized domesticity, completed a mural for New York University's Language and Literature building in 2008. The mural titled, *At Home With Their Books* (Fig. 26), depicts six panels of writer's rooms that at one point or another worked in New York.⁸⁰ From left to right the mural shows the domestic spaces of Washington Irving, Edith Wharton, Zora Neale Hurston, Frank O'Hara, Jane Jacobs, and Pedro Pietri. Each panel potentially illustrates the home's environment at the top, a portrait of the writer's desk in the center, and their bookshelves at the bottom. As is true for the altar, we do not need the presence of the writers in the mural because their environment alone is telling of their interests and values. *At Home With Their Books* allows an intimate view of the writer's lives where we can immerse ourselves in the spaces that inspired them. Interestingly enough, NYU originally wanted to commission a mural "depicting the rear views of New York theaters" but Climent proposed the writer's room concept.⁸¹ I believe Climent's focus on the domestic setting influenced their decision because her mural promotes the idea that the spaces we occupy form who we are and what we create, which I believe is critical for an educational institution to acknowledge. In addition, half of the writers are women, which I believe demonstrates women's equality in the home and in academia. Though it is not a Latinx space, with the exception of Pietri, *At Home With Their Books* demonstrates a start in the acknowledgment of domestic influence. Mesa-Bains who began to create altar installations in 1975 and is well versed in the representation of Latinx space, confirmed upon asking that while there has been some progress

⁸⁰ Eric Konigsberg, "Famous Writers and Their Work Spaces Come Together in a Mural," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2008, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/01/nyregion/01mural.html>.

⁸¹ Konigsberg, "Famous Writers and Their Work Spaces Come Together in a Mural."

in domestic discourse, there has been “no large scale understanding of the domestic in Latinx work outside our own ethnic museums.”

Mesa-Bains and Climent's work opens up possibilities for discussing domestic environments and influence, but their work is centered on femininity. While that has been the grounding topic for this project, that is not the only conception of space that exists for Latinx people. Their work opens up valuable discussion and should be continued through the exhibition of other Latinx artists that explore space. For example, another underrepresented variable to Latinx space is the exploration of masculine space. Masculinity in Latin America is a topic riddled with complexities, such as the issue of *machismo*, or excessive masculine pride. Pepón Osorio, a Nuyorican artist, creates large-scale multimedia installations that address political and social issues, particularly in the Latinx community, such as gender roles. One of Osorio's most well-known pieces is his 1994 installation at the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, *En la barbería no se llora/No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop* (Fig. 27). In his installation, Osorio explores the barbershop as a rite of passage for young men of color and highlights the masculinity integrated into the space through “masculine symbols” such as “barber chairs, car seats, sports paraphernalia, depictions of sperm and a boy's circumcision, phallic symbols, and male action figurines.”⁸² There are framed portraits of men in the barbershop, the biggest being Osorio's father. Surrounding the perimeters of the space, there are monitors that show videos of men in various emotional states including videos of men crying. The space Osorio creates draws contrast between the masculine bravery men are expected to display in places like barbershops and the courage it takes for men to keep their emotional selves hidden. In addition to his installation,

⁸² “Osorio, En La Barbería No Se Lloro (No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop) (Article),” Khan Academy, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/global-contemporary-apah/20th-century-apah/a/osorio-en-la-barberia-no-se-llora>.

Osorio had the same men from the videos “[participate] in workshops, in which they discussed how notions of masculinity had shaped their personal relationships as brothers, husbands, and fathers.” Interestingly enough, despite Osorio’s intention to work with the male community, it was mainly women that visited the installation.⁸³ It is very possible that the audience turnout is reflective of how deeply rooted *machismo* is in Latinx culture. While Osorio's techniques in using multimedia work and workshops show the potential for exploring Latinx space and the cultural impacts of growing up in a Latinx culture, he is just one example of another creative way in which to approach Latinx space.

Beyond the gendering of space associated with Latinx culture, there are many social and cultural connotations associated with Latinx space. Latinx space is complex and exploring its construction is an essential yet frequently ignored aspect of understanding the Latinx experience in the United States. The bodega comes to mind while thinking of Latinx cultural hubs throughout the United States. Bodegas are small convenience stores that are a staple of New York City culture. Bodegas are modest and lively small businesses that reside in the hustle and bustle of New York City. The bodega is full of Latinx and other ethnic goods and is a common place of convening. Amaris Castillo, the Brooklyn-raised daughter of a pair of Florida bodega owners, remembers her childhood growing up in a bodega: “Many of the customers who stepped into the Flatbush bodega my father worked in would, after buying their usual, stay longer to exchange animated banter with him. I recall hearing what felt like an endless stream of stories of struggle and hope. I learned very early on in life that a bodega is much more than a store, but a

⁸³ “Osorio, En La Barberia No Se Lloro (No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop) (Article).”

space where community happens.”⁸⁴ In a country where non-white dominated spaces are few to none, Latinx spaces such as bodegas provide comfort, community and a reminder of home.

Working on this project has made me realize how pervasive the problem of representation is for the Latinx community, particularly in the United States. Latinx representation entails not only getting role models in the media, but also a thorough understanding of how Latinx people live and inhabit space. Spirituality is a persistent part of Latinx life and identity that cannot even begin to be understood unless there is a grasp on what makes Latinx space different, as I have discussed. From there, we can start rethinking sacred spaces in the context of modern life. For now, I believe that seeing more artwork, whether it be installations, drawings, or other mediums, will help to increase the number of existing Latinx spaces.

⁸⁴ “A Case for Real Bodegas,” *Latino USA* (blog), September 19, 2017, <https://www.latinousa.org/2017/09/19/case-real-bodegas/>.



Figure 1: Suzanne Kraus Mancuso, *Guadalupe*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 8 by 10 inches.



Figure 2: Halus Siegfried, *Elena Avila in front of healing room shrine, Rio Rancho, photograph.*



Figure 3: Kay Turner, Shamaan Ochaum seated before her welcoming altar, which serves as a spiritual greeting place for guests and a focus of family ritual, Austin, TX, 1998, photograph.



Figure 4: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Homage to Tonantzin/Guadalupe*, 1992.



Figure 5: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Ofrenda to Dolores del Rio*, 1990.

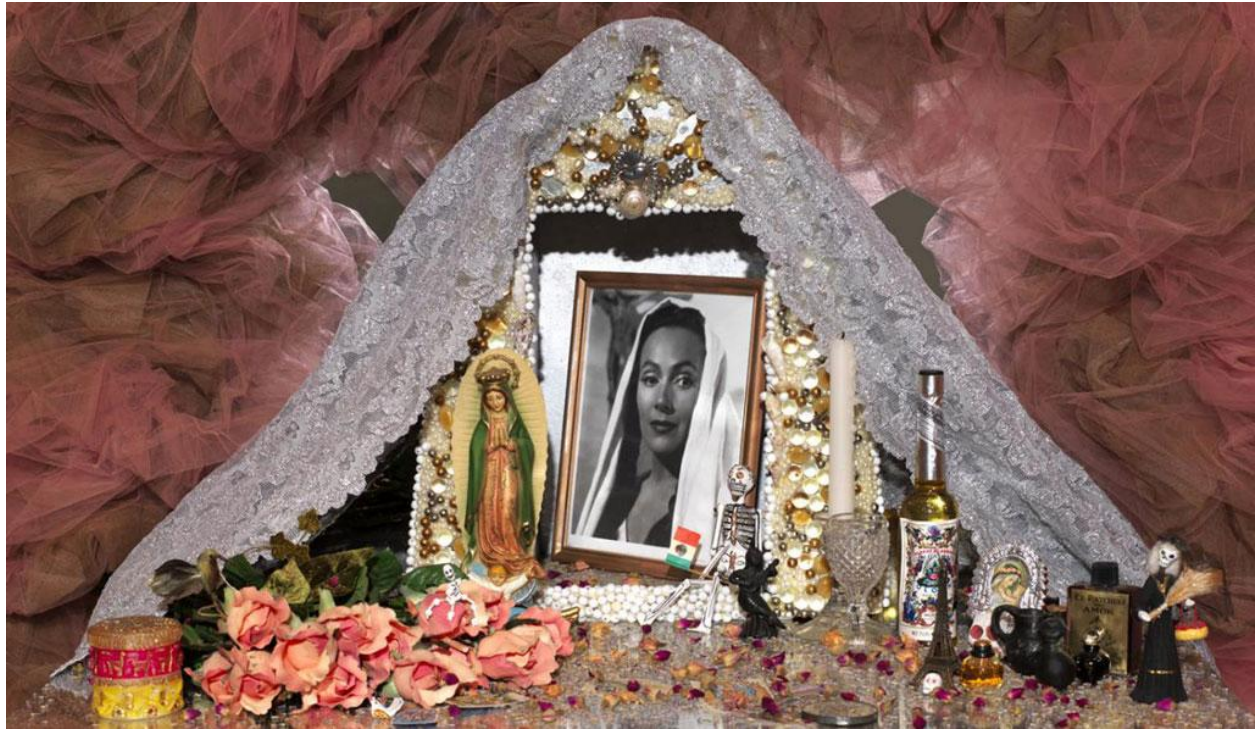


Figure 6: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Ofrenda to Dolores del Rio*, detail.



Figure 7: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Venus Envy Chapter One (of the First Holy Communion Moments Before the End)*, 1993.



Figure 8: Miguel Cabrera, *Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz/Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz*, 1750, oil on canvas.



Figure 9: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz*, from the installation *Venus Chapter II: The Harem and Other Enclosures*, 1944, Williams College Museum of Art.



Figure 10: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *The Library of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz (detail)*, from the installation *Venus Envy Chapter II: The Harem and Other Enclosures*, 1994.

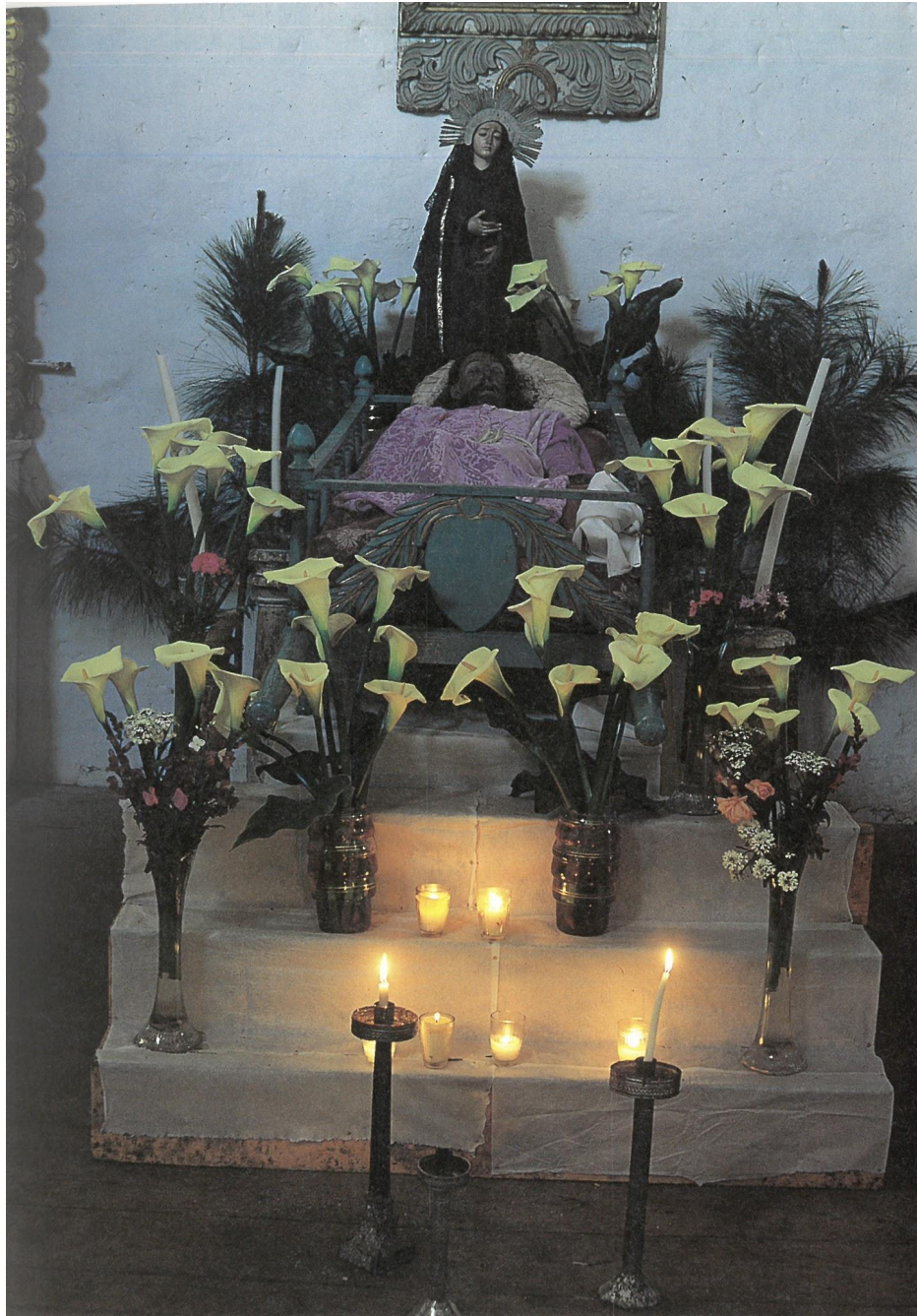


Figure 11: *Christ in the Sepulcher, Virgin of Sorrows, and lilies during Lent, in church of Teopisca, Chiapas.*



Figure 12: Main altar with image of Virgin of Guadalupe, plaster angels, and candlesticks, in parish church of El Pichón, near Tepic, Nayarit.



Figure 13: Altar with the *Virgin of Solitude* in the church of La Soledad, Oaxaca, Oaxaca.



Figure 14: Home Altar, Santa Catalina Mines.



Figure 15: Altar, Home of Antonio Gonzales Vásquez, Teotitlán del Valle.



Figure 16: Bernard Silberstein, *Kahlo in her living room*, circa 1940, photograph.



Figure 17: Elena Climent, *Altar with Blue Tiles/Altar con azulejos*, 1992, oil painting.



Figure 18: Elena Climent, *Altar of the Dead with Menorah/Altar de Muertos con Menorah*, 1992, oil painting.



Figure 19: Elena Climent, Red Devil with Broken Angel/Diablo Rojo y Ángel Roto, 1994, oil painting.



Figure 20: Elena Climent, Red Table with Objects, Mesa Rosa con Objetos, 1990, oil paintings.



Figure 21: Charles Mann, A tire shop reminds with mural that "Only the best are crowned," before 1997, photograph.



Figure 22: Elena Climent, *Altar in a Car Repair Shop/ Altar en un Taller*, 1988, oil on canvas, 60.9 x 76.2 cm (23.98 x 30 inches).



Figure 23: Dana Salvo, *A shelf and wall lined with assorted images, including a painted self-portrait, family snapshot, and a photograph of the Pope, 1987-1992, photograph.*



Figure 24: Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos, Colegiata Cathedral, Sanctuary of San Juan de los Lagos, room of ex-votos, 1999, photograph.

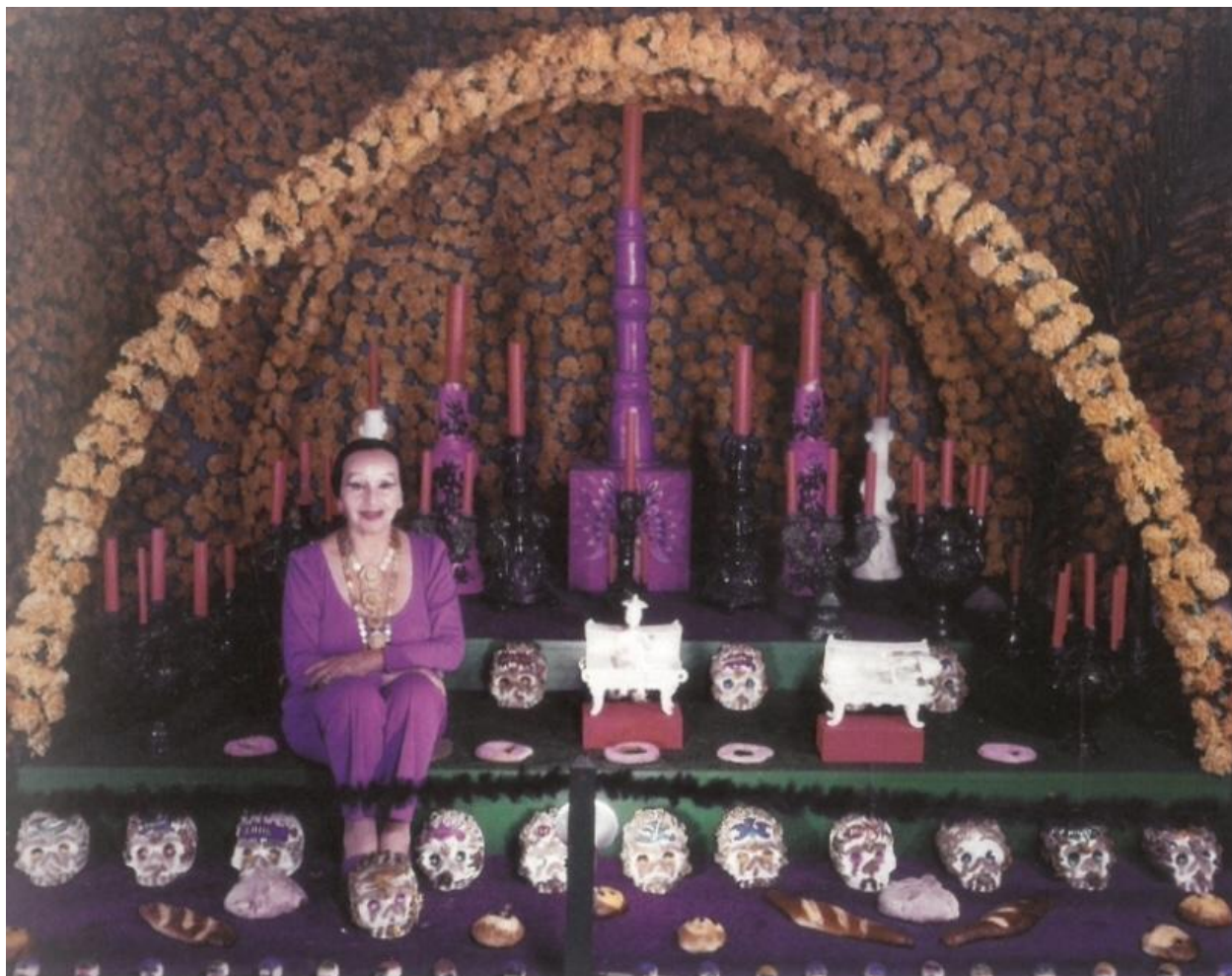


Figure 25: *Dolores Olmedo y la ofrenda de 1981/Dolores Olmedo and the ofrenda from 1981*, photograph.



Figure 26: Elena Climent, *At Home With Their Books*, 2008, 10x30 ft, mural.



Figure 27: Pepón Osorio, *En la barbería no se llora/No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop*, 1994.

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