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BULL SPIT

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BULL SPIT

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BULL SPIT

By

SIRENA NIEVES, Bachelors of Fine Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Stephen F. Austin State University
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements
For the Degree of
MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2024

BULL SPIT

By

SIRENA NIEVES, Bachelors of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

BULL SPIT, formally known as “*It’s Bullshit!!*”, is an exhibition consisting of seven sculptures, four installations, and one performance. The sculptures are informed by my research on low-income, working-class communities of color, analogous to the one I grew up in. The materials for my work include domestic objects such as bedsheets, hardware, uniforms, and miscellaneous items that reflect the contemporary dysfunctional dynamics between families and communities of low-income backgrounds. Cardboard, plastic bags, Styrofoam, and paper are disposable materials manipulated into abject forms to integrate the survival practice developed from the poverty culture of “making the most out of nothing.” The exhibition is a dichotomy of a child’s dream-like memory of growing up in poverty in contrast to the generational adult perspective of trying to climb to a higher socio-economic class. While the forms and imagery are intended to be grotesque and uncomfortable for the viewer, nothing is more disturbing than the adversity and class disparities low-income civilians face daily.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Eden Collins. She recognized that I was lost and had no qualms about extending a helping hand and providing guidance. She has been an invaluable resource during my time at SFASU, and I am proud to call her my mentor. Thanks to her, I found my artistic identity. I want to extend my gratitude to the rest of my committee members: Neal Cox, David Lewis, and Dianne Dentice. Thank you, Neal & Dr. Lewis, for pushing me in the areas I lacked the most; I will miss the critical feedback you both have offered. Thank you, Dr. Dentice, for stepping up as my outside committee member when I had difficulties finding a replacement. Despite being in the process of retirement, you accepted my proposal with nothing but grace and support.

A tremendous thanks to my partner and his mother, James & Deneen Upton, for being my rock through six years of pursuing my educational career. A special thanks to Chloe & Erik, Homero & Sean, and Kaile & Aldo. I arrived here with nothing, yet you all took me in and provided me with the essentials to thrive without expecting anything in return. I would not be here without any of you. Finally, I dedicate this show to my family. Thank you for raising me with integrity and supporting me through this journey. We may have a lot of work to do, but I hope we grow as a unit and develop healthy dynamics. I love you all.

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INTRODUCTION

"It's Bullshit!" is an exhibition composed of mixed-media sculptures that reflect the research I've been conducting contingent on the negative impact of class disparities and daily adversities faced by low-income and blue-collar communities. The propulsion to create this body of work stemmed from an interview with a Third Ward resident, while performing a separate body of work regarding the homeless epidemic in Houston. In Third Ward, a Harris County subdivision, 37.3% of the residents live below the federal poverty level¹. The resident discussed how some displaced people they interacted with used to be teachers, labor workers, and even medical staff. The interview concluded with the resident's final thoughts: "Nobody realizes the majority of us are one paycheck away. All it takes is an accident".

Many individuals in higher socioeconomic brackets commonly make the misguided assumption that low-income individuals somehow deserve to live in poverty as punishment for their accumulation of poor choices, substance abuse, or laziness. Socioeconomics refers to the quality of one's social and economic upbringing concerning healthcare, education, financial stability, communal

¹ Andy Olin, "Map of Houston Area's Distressed and Prosperous Zip Codes Shows Ongoing and Growing Inequality: Kinder Institute for Urban Research," Kinder Institute for Urban Research | Rice University, November 5, 2020, <https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/map-houston-areas-distressed-and-prosperous-zip-codes-shows-ongoing-and-growing>.

environment, and social interaction.² The isolation and quality decline in any of the factors will result in an elevated allostatic load. An allostatic load is defined as the long-term accumulation of chronic stress that results in the body's mental and physical wear and tear.³ Historically, society finds it convenient to blame victims of economic oppression rather than to analyze and understand the system structured specifically to exploit victims, who are usually minorities. Growing up in Channelview, a refinery subdivision on the east side of Houston, I have witnessed the daily aspiration of equipping resilience and persistence in hopes of elevating to a higher-class division. I have also seen how the pursuit of higher economic classes can result in physical and psychological wear on adults, leading to neglect and abuse towards their families.

This series functions as a dual narrative between developing children exposed to adversity and the impact of class discrimination faced by adults. Contextual relevance is present through the careful selection of materials and symbols. A common sustainable practice in poverty culture involves repurposing objects that have lost their original functionality or passing down materials to their younger kin instead of making a potentially costly purchase. I scavenge and gather bedsheets, curtains, work uniforms, hardware, cardboard, and

² "Socio-Economic Adjective - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.Com," Oxford English Dictionary, September 2009, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/socio-economic>.

³ Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (Boston, Massachusetts: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

newspaper: items considered disposable, accessible, and abundant to form sculptures that echo abstract forms of processed cattle. Cattle are a reoccurring motif in this series as a reference to working-class people. Cattle are one of the few animals exploited for the entirety of their body, their labor, and for other's entertainment, usually with no benefit or end reward. Their flesh, skin, bones, milk, organs, and feces are utilized for what society calls the "greater good." A system benefiting from exploitation is a system that produces complicit and content partakers. The symbolic parallel between low-class citizens and cattle visually informs my collection, functioning as a narrative for my personal anecdotal memory and collective communal reality.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IDENTITY

The stereotypical representations of lower-class minority groups suggest a mythical familial bliss that doesn't correlate with reality: large families comically gathered around a patriarch/matriarch, all exhibiting strong bonds and inexhaustible gumption.

The notion of socioeconomic isolation within a family and community was initially developed through personal experiences. Growing up in a blended household, my family is much larger than average, but we did not have the stereotypical blood-is-thicker-than-water experience. Unknowingly, my sister and I experienced cultural isolation early in life. We were the first generation sundered from our island and family. Eating abuela's food, enjoying cousins as our first best friends, speaking the native language, celebrating family reunions, and being engrossed in our culture are experiences we cannot share with the majority of our colleagues. That is a circumstance many migrant families accept in exchange for a potential chance at a better lifestyle. Divorce, parental alienation, substance abuse, neglect, and physical abuse are side effects that can develop when a family is in pursuit of stability while enduring a low socioeconomic status. Children subjected to dysfunctional environments cannot

grasp the long-term psychological damage inflicted on them. In contrast, adults who grew up in the same circumstances cannot easily recognize the reactive behavior they inflict on others.

Put a frog in boiling water; it will jump out. Place the frog in water at room temperature and slowly bring it to a boil; it will remain and boil to death. It wasn't until my later years in high school that I realized it wasn't just my family that functioned in a dysfunctional manner. None of my peers in high school had a nuclear family structure. The majority of us had a form of substance in our homes. Each of us had either been subjected to neglect, psychological abuse, or assault. The root problem was almost always financially based. These topics are considered taboo to speak out against in many ethnic cultures. We are taught it is better to maintain peace than to address subjects that may escalate to unwanted conflicts, resulting in isolative or aggressive interactions and compulsive social behavior.

While stress is not a viable excuse to mistreat relatives, understanding an individual's psychological response to stress and economic circumstances puts much into perspective. Sunnyside is a neighborhood in Houston that has been ranked the most dangerous in the city.⁴ Sunnyside has a 79.4% black population

⁴ Annita Freeman, "This Houston Neighborhood Ranked as One the Most Dangerous Areas in Nation; Can You Guess Which One?," FOX 26 Houston, December 31, 2023, <https://www.fox26houston.com/news/10-most-dangerous-neighborhoods-in-houston-according-to-propertyclub>.

with the lowest median income of \$27,100; additionally, less than 40% of that population owns a home. Less than 22% of the Third Ward's black residents own their homes despite making up 65% of the neighborhood's population.⁵ The majority of these homes are single-parent households, with an average of three or more children per household. \$68,000 is the estimated income to live comfortably in Houston. These statistics are also mirrored in Hispanic communities, where the population is double that of the black and white populous combined.

In Texas, laws implemented, such as the (SB-17) Anti-DEI bill, SB 4 racial profiling bill, and Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization overturning Roe v. Wade, are legislations that disproportionately affect minorities. As a child, it is difficult to comprehend and recognize the full effects of racially motivated laws, whereas, for an adult, it is not only considered an obstruction of identity, but it's another thing to stress about.

⁵ Andy Olin, "Map of Houston Area's Distressed and Prosperous Zip Codes Shows Ongoing and Growing Inequality: Kinder Institute for Urban Research," Kinder Institute for Urban Research | Rice University, November 5, 2020, <https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/map-houston-areas-distressed-and-prosperous-zip-codes-shows-ongoing-and-growing>.

RESEARCH

The personal experience of growing up in a dysfunctional family that lacked structural integrity formed a basis for my work but was not enough in itself to justify my concepts. I initially observed the behavioral patterns of the adults in my life. As a collective, they struggle with communication, emotional regulation, depression, and accountability. I then looked at my siblings, peers, and myself. From what I gathered, we struggle with self-esteem, anxiety, depression, compulsivity, and self-destructive behaviors. I had a theory that a significant portion of our mutual experience was attributed to our upbringing in economically disadvantaged communities. The similarities we share in this regard are not coincidental, but rather evidence of the impact that socioeconomic status can have on one's life trajectory. Such circumstances predetermine a set of unique challenges that are not experienced by individuals from more privileged backgrounds.

I started researching the psychological development of children growing up in poverty. In the 1990s, various social experiments and studies emerged to explore the correlation between class status and a child's IQ. The Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley study, also known amongst Psychologists as the "30 Million Word Gap"

was published in 1995. The premise was that children raised with high-class backgrounds are subjected to hearing an average of 2,153 words per waking hour, whereas children brought up on welfare only heard 616 words. In 4 years, the higher-class subjects were believed to have been exposed to 45 million words, whereas the economically disadvantaged children only accumulated 13 Million words.⁶ This experiment has been heavily criticized due to a variety of variables that were not considered, such as the theory that it's the disconnect between linguistic practices at home and school may contribute to language and achievement gaps rather than the number of words exposed to a child.

The 1960s Perry Elementary School project was an early childhood intervention experiment that recruited children from black families derived from low-income neighborhoods. The 4-year-old recruits were randomly divided into treatment and control groups. The children in the treatment group were enrolled in a 2-year high-quality program, and the control group was left to fend for themselves. This project aimed to determine whether a positive educational experience boosted an individual's IQ. The experiment was intended to follow the recipients for the rest of their lives. After two years, the project was deemed a failure after no significant difference in IQ levels was present between the two groups. However, a different outcome was observed a decade after the failure

⁶ Betty Hart and Todd R Risely, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, 2nd ed. (Lieu de publication non identifié: Brookes publishing, 2018).

was declared. There was a significant recorded difference in social and behavioral developments among the groups. Students in the control group were more likely to swear, lie, cheat, steal, and be absent. The treatment group, now in their forties, have demonstrated the ability to acquire stable jobs, develop healthy social interactions, become homeowners, and are more likely to have clean records. Unfortunately, the control group did not have the same results.⁷

The original ACEs Study (Adverse Childhood Experiences) was conducted in two waves from 1995 to 1997. The study's premise is that there is a direct correlation between childhood traumatic experiences and lifelong health issues. The traumatic events are listed as experienced/witnessed physical, substance, psychological, and sexual abuse/neglect, divorce, separation, relative alienation, and imprisonment. The system that regulates stress is known as the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. When in distress, the hypothalamus gland sends signals to the body that activate the emotions of adrenaline, fear, and anxiety. Physical responses include dry mouth, clammy hands, and increased heart rate⁸. The author of *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, Robert Sapolsky, explains that our stress-response system evolved to react to brief and acute stresses. It was a normal response when dealing with predators in the wild, but

⁷ Joel H. Spring, *American Education* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

⁸ Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (Boston, Massachusetts: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

modern humans are hardly ever under predatorial threats nowadays. Instead, most of our stress today comes from mental processes. We continuously activate our emergency stress response system for months on end by worrying about daily life issues like mortgages, relationships, and jobs. Over the past fifty years, scientists have discovered that this phenomenon is not merely inefficient but, also highly destructive. Overloading the HPA axis, especially in infancy and childhood, produces severe and long-lasting negative effects.⁹ This development is also known as the Allostatic Load. Allostatic load refers to the cumulative burden of chronic stress and life events that result in the mental wear and tear of the body¹⁰. Physiological damages occur in the form of hypertension, elevated cortisol levels, immune dysfunction, and metabolic dysregulation. Mood disorders, cognitive decline, substance abuse, and sleep disorders develop through psychological loads. Emotional reactivity, decreased resilience, emotional dysregulation, and anxiety are emotional adaptations in response to chronic exposure to stress. Adults and children experiencing elevated allostatic loads are most likely to develop addiction, obesity, and suicidal tendencies.

⁹ Robert M. Sapolsky, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers the Acclaimed Guide to Stress, Stress-Related Diseases, and Coping* (New York: ©1994, 1998 by W.H. Freeman, and 2004 by Robert M. Sapolsky. Used by arrangement with Henry Holt and Company, 2004).

¹⁰ Jenny Guidi et al., "Allostatic Load and Its Impact on Health: A Systematic Review," *Psychotherapy and psychosomatics*, August 14, 2020, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32799204/>.

INFLUENCES

I felt the most drawn to art with abject visuals. Francis Bacon, an artist who witnessed the worst of humanity through both World Wars, developed a nihilistic outlook toward the perpetual existential horrors humanity offers. His form of expression is parallel to how modern children who've been desensitized through adversity seek to create explicit and graphic visual content. My meat forms mimic the hanging flayed meat in Bacon's *Figure with Meat* (1954), a perverted version of Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650). The pope is entrapped in a veil harboring a disfigured face, silently screaming. He is surrounded by two hanging meat carcasses, a quotation of Rembrandt van Rijn's *Slaughtered Ox* and Chaim Soutine's carcass paintings.¹¹ While the pope remains the vantage point, the flayed torso always has my full undivided attention.

My conceptual influences are a combination of Rasquachismo art and the Arte Povera movement. Rasquachismo is derived from the Spanish slur for Mexicans and Latin Americans, *rasquache*, meaning low class and impoverished.¹² Chicano artists embrace the "make the most from the least" and

¹¹ John Rothenstein, *British Art since 1900: An Anthology* (London: Phaidon Press, 1962).

¹² Maria Anderson, "A Lesson in 'Rasquachismo' Art: Chicano Aesthetics and the 'Sensibilities of the Barrio,'" Smithsonian Institution, January 31, 2017, <https://www.si.edu/stories/lesson-rasquachismo-art>.

underdog attitude by combining survival practices with inventive ideas, creating a unique form of resistance art. Discovering this subculture of art validated the premise of my work. For the year and a half that I've been developing this body of work, I felt inadequate compared to my peers. I couldn't afford or transport wood, metal, or stone. I don't know how to properly use power tools or how to make successful molds on the first try. I am terrified of wasting costly material. I gathered accessible objects and improvised conjoining methods. To find an art culture composed of people cut from the same cloth was a massive relief to my self-esteem. It's not just me, it's a whole movement. A portion of my materials consists of bedsheets, work uniforms, hardware, negatives, and miscellaneous domestic objects. With the inability to acquire expensive materials, I made do with what I had.

Arte Povera is a 1960s Italian radical post-war movement that translates into "poor art." Critic and curator Germano Celant, along with critical artists Mario Merz, Luciano Fabro, Alighiero Boetti, and Jannis Kounellis, held anti-institutional ideals and rejected the commercialization of art. They radicalized galleries by creating sculptures of ordinary, natural, and "poor" materials like dirt, sticks, rags, and found objects. In her article Introduction, Clair Gilman describes it best: "...Arte Povera joins American tendencies like Post-Minimalism, Process, and Earth art in celebrating the body, spontaneous behavior, and soft and organic

materials in opposition to Minimalism's hard-edge forms. (p.4)¹³ The final installation was not their objective but rather the exploration of concepts, processes, and evidence of human involvement.

Additionally, Felix Gonzales-Torres and the Fluxus/performance movements conceptually inspired me to incorporate art in which the audience can immerse themselves and become a part of the exhibition rather than just being a spectator. Gonzales-Torres was a Queer Cuban-American sculptural artist who focused on queer and Latin activism. *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991 was an installation piece and a tribute to his late partner, Ross, who passed away from complications of AIDs. The work comprised thousands of commercialized candies piled up against a corner. The pile weighed about the average weight of an adult man. Viewers were allowed to take a single piece of candy, a seemingly unique and fun gesture for the audience. However, his true intentions portrayed the reality of the loss he experienced with his partner. Over time, the pile became scarce until it withered into nothingness, which is precisely how AIDs affects the human body and highlights the consumption of bystanders who partake in a system that benefits them without returning the favor.

¹³ Gilman, Claire. "Introduction." *October* 124 (2008): 3–7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40368497>.

METHODOLOGY AND SYMBOLISM

Cardboard, plastic bags, Styrofoam, and newspaper are accessible and abundant disposable materials. These objects typically have a one-time use purpose before they are discarded. I scavenge and gather these materials to keep my projects cost-effective and include intentionality between my forms and conceptual influences.

Bedsheets, uniforms, hardware, undeveloped negatives, and assorted domestic objects were collected from family members and storage areas. These items have been in our family for decades and have silently witnessed our generational trials and tribulations.

I've only met my abuela four times in my 26 years of existence, but when my sister and I were toddlers, just like any loving grandma, she would make us handmade outfits. I've combined the domestic objects with sewing, knitting, crocheting, and embroidery methods to pay homage to the family member I never grew up with, let alone learned from. Developing this portion of the show also acted as a form of self-healing.

The idea of the bull came to be while researching the statistics about how men make up most suicide cases. The abject visual of a person hanging

reminded me of hanging meat in a butcher shop. The similarities between cattle and working men became more noticeable on a conceptual level. Cattle are often exploited to their fullest extent. Their meat, skin, bones, milk, and even their manure are all utilized for human consumption. Unfortunately, this exploitation also extends to their use in entertainment. In events like bullfights, bull running, and rodeos, bulls are often taunted and provoked to the point of exhaustion and sometimes death. These animals are portrayed as uncontrollable beasts that must be tamed or put down. This treatment is both humiliating and cruel. Refinery operators, construction laborers, and custodial jobs are all occupations that are necessary for society to function. These jobs are often humiliating, have a high occupational fatality, and are not worth the benefits offered. A tragic example of this is the fatal Baltimore bridge collapse that occurred this year in early April. The six fatalities were that of migrant Latino men. They were working in dangerous conditions in unconventional hours. Most of them had children and families they were actively supporting¹⁴. They had goals and ambitions to do better things in life. They will likely hire more migrant Latino workers to rebuild

¹⁴ Ramishah Maruf and Gloria Pazmino, "Latino Immigrant Workers Died on the Baltimore Bridge. More Will Likely Rebuild It | CNN Business," CNN Business, April 4, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/04/business/immigrant-workers-baltimore-bridge/index.html>.

that bridge. When workers demand better working conditions, are injured, or die, they are easily replaced.

The metaphor of the bull is not reserved for the men of low-income working-class families. It represents the mothers who lose their identity to motherhood or sacrifice the opportunity of motherhood to support their families financially. It represents the children who are forced to grow up faster than the rest of their peers because the privilege of just being a kid is not a viable option. It represents the individuals who keep striving for a better life despite experiencing adversity after adversity.

CONCLUSION

I grew up in a low-income community with a blended family. I was lucky to have two working-class fathers who tried their best to prepare me for the realities they've been facing for decades. As a child, I never understood how my family could be so big yet so separated and full of frustration. But as an adult researching the lasting psychological impact of adverse experiences and class disparities on an individual's psyche, I can see beyond my own perception of drastic life events and comprehend my parent's perspective more than ever.

While instances of neglect or abuse are unforgivable and unacceptable, I have developed the ability to reflect and address traumatic experiences, discovering answers to questions I have once overlooked— providing myself with closure. The objects and materials that held so much emotional baggage and unpleasant memories have been transformed into work that no longer demands confrontation. They now serve as a reminder that things can, in fact, change.

INSTALLATION

"It's Bullshit!!" is an exhibition consisting of 12 installations split between two gallery rooms. The front gallery represents the class disparities and adversity experienced by adults in lower socio-economic and working-class backgrounds, a reality many people cannot escape despite their efforts. The back gallery reflects the ephemeral memory of a child growing up in those circumstances, demonstrated by incorporating personal belongings, images, and collaborative family contributions.

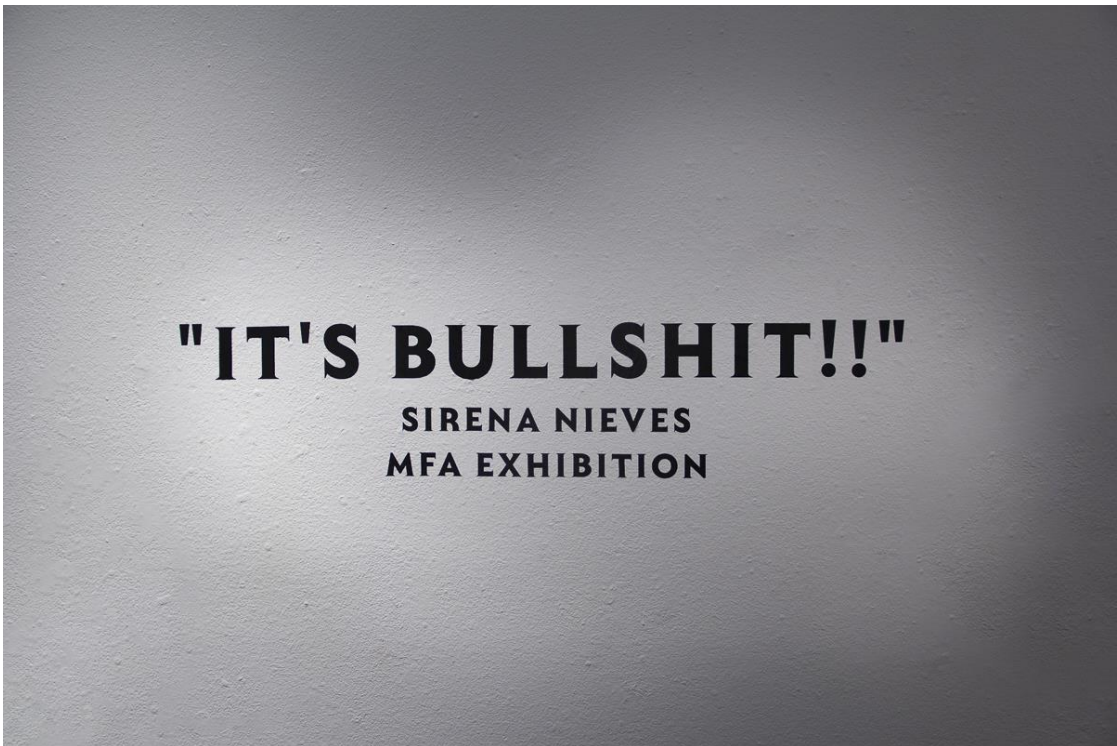


Figure 1 Exhibition Title

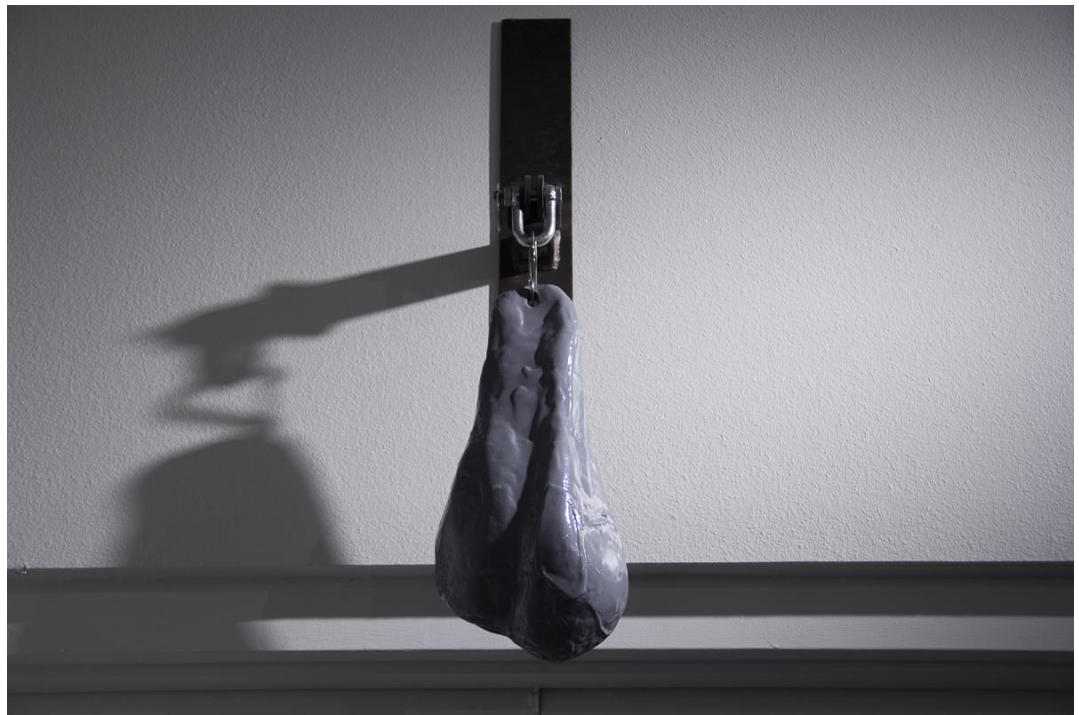


Figure 2 Egotistical



Figure 3 Liminal Tension and Silent Suspension



Figure 4 Consumption of Labor With No Reward

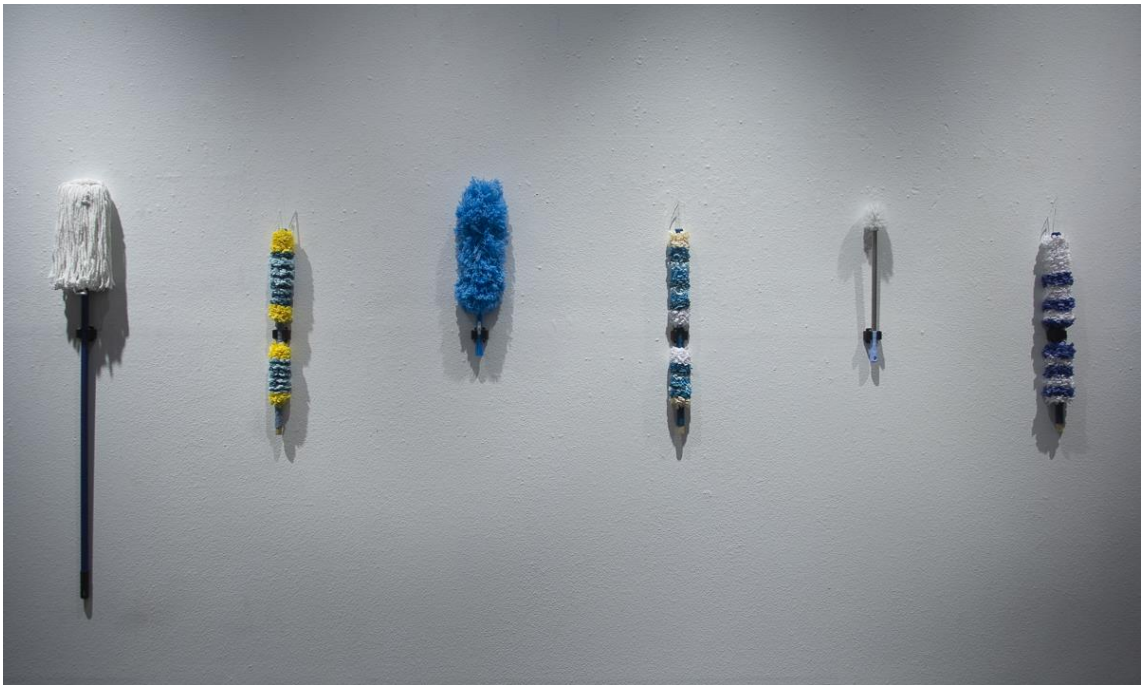


Figure 5 "I Swear It's Not a Humiliation Kink"



Figure 6 What Happens In The Break Room, Stays In The Break Room (closed)



Figure 7 What Happens In The Break Room, Stays In The Break Room (open)



Figure 8 What Happens in The Break Room, Stays in The Break Room:

A. Barbacoa On a Hot Sunday Morning



Figure 9 What Happens In The Break Room, Stays In The Break Room:

B. B.D.S.M (Bulls Don't Say Moo)



Figure 10 What Happens In The Break Room, Stays In The Break Room:

C. ¿Tengo Leche?

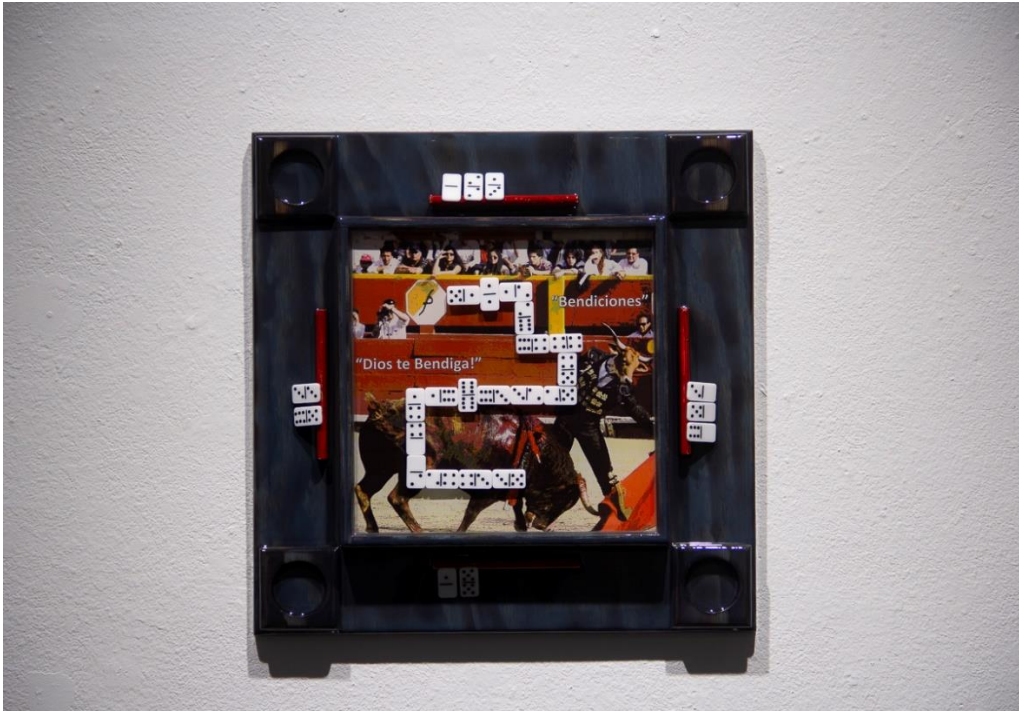


Figure 11 The Exchange of Adrenaline and Prayers



Figure 12 The Bootstrap Fallacy, Put Some Respect on It



Figure 13 Act III: Tercio De Muerto



Figure 14 Act III: Tercio De Muerto (Detail)



Figure 15 Hide, The Load



Figure 16 Hide, The Load (Underneath)



Figure 17 Rancid Memories



Figure 18 Abuelas Home Made Tripa



Figure 19 August 4, 2005 (pre-performance)



Figure 20 August 4, 2005 (post-performance, detail 1)



Figure 21 August 4, 2005 (post-performance detail 2)

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VITA

Sirena Nieves was raised in a blue-collar community on the outskirts of Houston. After graduating high school, Nieves studied at San Jacinto North Campus Community College, where she received her Associate of Fine Arts in 2018. Nieves went on to pursue her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Painting from Lamar University in Beaumont. After she graduated in 2020, she enrolled in the Ceramics MFA program at Stephen F. Austin State University in 2021. She discovered her love for sculpture through the exploration and experimentation of materials and techniques. She received her Master of Fine Arts in Studio Sculpture with a secondary focus in ceramics in 2024.

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Chicago Manual Style

This thesis was typed by Sirena Nieves