

CONTESTED TERRAIN

by

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of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

Art

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ABSTRACT

As a product of multiple cultures and identities, my art is used as a vehicle to explore the creation of my personal narrative within the hybrid cultures of the borderlands. I am interested in generative questions such as: What role does spoken and visual language play in the transmission of culture? How did my loss of language at a young age disconnect me from my culture? What symbols, synonymous with my culture, could be transformed and infused with new meaning? How can I overcome and transform racist language and ideologies that I have confronted in my life? What do I have to say about my past and do I want to form those memories in my work? My thesis exhibition is about the many borders I have crossed in my life. I carry many of these borders with me in my memories, and produce work about these physical and psychological borders through a variety of media. Clay, photo, installation and sculpture come together to create a body of work that allows me to navigate the borderlands that I occupy. The use of personal and pop imagery allows me to construct my story, facilitate the creation of my identity and push my audience to explore their identity.

An ability to understand the hybrid nature of culture develops from an experience of dealing with dominant culture from the outside. The artist who understands and practices hybridity in this way can be at the same time an insider and an outsider, an expert in border crossings, a temporary member of multiple communities, a citizen of two or more nations. His/her job is to trespass, bridge, interconnect, reinterpret, remap, and redefine; to find the outer limits of his/her culture and cross them- Guillermo Gomez-Pena, 1996

Most of my life I have felt like an outsider, not quite fitting into my native- born culture of my parents (I am Mexican, Puerto Rican and Spanish) or the dominant Anglo-culture of my childhood. Although Spanish is my first language, it was “English Only” at my elementary school and I remember feeling acutely aware of my otherness. My mother’s push for me to assimilate and her remarrying an Anglo caused me to deny and feel ashamed of my first language. Over the years I experienced my share of racism and hate speech. I remember feeling very conscious of my brown skin and wishing to be like everyone else. It wasn’t until college that I started to feel some pride in my brown skin and the cultural heritage of my parents. Almost completely disconnected from my childhood language, and by extension my culture and identity, I travelled to Mexico in the summer of 1998 to recover my mother tongue. I spent two summers immersing myself in the language and culture of Mexico looking to make connections that was severed in childhood. I travelled even further into Latin America, taking in the native cultures, archeological sites and the foods of my ancestors. After returning home I took a job at Cesar Chavez HS on the East side of Houston, Texas. Although I had grown up in Houston, I had never ventured to the east side of town. Walking through the halls of Chavez I looked around and thought about how much these students looked like me. And then I opened my mouth; it was clear from my gringo accent that Spanish, even though it was my mother tongue, was a foreign language to me. 10 years in the Barrio and I

developed my street smarts as well as an indoctrination into the Mexican-American experience, one that I only had vague notions about having not grown up with my biological father. The music, food, and most importantly the art and street culture let me admit my Mexican-ness and embrace a culture only somewhat familiar to me.

The use of clay has a long history in Latin America dating back thousands of years. My connection to clay really goes back to my childhood and viewing the remnants of cultures past through their ceramic objects that were left behind and displayed at the Museum of Fine Art in Houston, Texas. I was intrigued by the permanence of the material and its ability to transmit ideas and beliefs. In many ways clay also mimics the hybridity that that comes out of the US/Mexico border area. The process of creating my work happens over time as I build up multiple layers in the surface of my clay work. The process of melting and layering is one that naturally occurs in the borderlands. Atmospheric firing of clay also has uncertainty and risk built in to it, never quite knowing what results you are going to get. These surprises and unexpected results often delight and inspire me, pushing me on to further investigation and inspiration. The hybrid cultures that are created in the borderlands have the same effect, pushing the boundaries of what's possible, by creating the unexpected fusion of culture and identities. Although clay is my passion, I have let the ideas and the conceptual framework dictate the materials and processes that I engaged in while creating my thesis exhibition. Projected imagery and photography coexist with slip-cast ceramic pieces infused with original and appropriated imagery. This multi-layered hybrid mix of media and techniques

approximates the unique, often contradictory spirit of the border aesthetic I am seeking to create.

When I arrived at MSU three years ago my work mainly consisted of functional ceramic objects with self-portrait decal images on them. I think subconsciously I was always searching for meaning from my cultural past and a way to construct an identity story through the creation of functional and sculptural objects adorned with appropriated images and self-portraits. A career of teaching high school art left me feeling unfulfilled and frustrated due to teaching six overcrowded classes a day to almost two-hundred unappreciative students trying to navigate dysfunctional urban school system. After receiving a Fund for Teachers grant, an opportunity to spend summer 2010 in Japan changed the trajectory of my artistic ambitions. Immersing myself in the art and culture of Japan, I stayed with artists, visited museums and world-heritage sights as well as witnessed firsthand artists and designers making a good living off of their work. I was completely reinvigorated and soon was back in the studio preparing to get into graduate school. My pre-graduate schoolwork also contained one very important breakthrough for me, my first attempts at images and transfers on clay. Having started off as a photographer, and finding clay later in college, melding the two seemed new and exciting and certainly an endeavor I wished to pursue in grad school. Ten years' worth of teaching graphics also gave me the skills necessary to start my investigation. Thinking back on this work I see my desire to inject myself into the work literally through the use of self-portrait imagery as well as connect to American, Mexican-American and Mexican culture through the appropriation of pictures, symbols and signs on my work. These first

attempts at melding clay with print helped me to realize the power of clay as a canvas for images. As I progressed in this research I began to use images that were created specifically for the forms they were placed on creating a strong union between vessel and image and adding another layer of meaning in my work.

My first year in graduate school was defined by research and experimentation. Midway through the year I learned some very interesting family history. It was revealed to my mom that her father had been an Anarchist in the Spanish Civil War and had fought against Franco. This event provided me a focus and I began making work in reaction to these new found forms of identity and unexpected family history. This new body of work took the form of Molotov cocktails with imagery of anarchist women fighters enshrining them. I was drawn to the female revolutionary figures after reading Farewell, Catalonia by George Orwell, and learning of the bravery and tenacity of the women fighters who fought side by side with the men to protect Catalonia from the fascists. This work included many firsts for me including the creation of molds for slip casting porcelain, using actual rags dipped in slip and fired to create the wicks of the Molotov cocktails, and new bright, fiesta ware glaze colors. Although I learned a lot technically from the creation of this work, I struggled to find the right imagery that would allow me to connect to my family history and develop my identity in the work. I dedicated myself to more research and began looking at artists who created work based on the creation of identity.

Throughout my time in graduate school I have looked at many artists who work in the borderlands. With each of these artists I have investigated how they navigate the

borderlands and come to construct and understand their identity. The common thread between these artists is the creation of identity formed through the negotiation, physically and internally, of the borderlands. The borderlands have also produced many hybrid cultures, which these artists participate in, and help us to understand the complex intricacies of the borderlands. Hybridity binds these artists' together conceptually, even though their work varies considerably. The artist I have spent the most time researching is Guillermo Gomez-Pena. The overarching theme in Gomez-Pena's work is the border. For Gomez-Pena the border can be a physical or psychological construct. "I make art about the misunderstandings that take place at the border zone. But for me, the border is no longer located at any fixed geopolitical site. I carry the border with me, and I find new borders wherever I go." (Gomez-Pena 12) Gomez-Pena thrives in hybrid cultures and asks his audience to consider the possibility that they too, knowingly or unknowingly occupy these same spaces. Gomez-Pena is a performance artist that uses his hyper-stylized, over the top interpretations of cultural exchange to highlight the absurdity of these interactions and also to spotlight the fear of the "other" typified by cultural misunderstandings. Gomez-Pena's work has helped me to contextualize my struggle to make sense of my multiple identities, and feelings of otherness. Gomez-Pena's work also ties me to a time after college when I was first discovering my "Mexicaness" and just beginning down the road of self-discovery that has led me to where I am today.

Los Angeles-based artist Christina Fernandez has her own unique take on the borderlands and her family history. One of her most acclaimed pieces is entitled, *Maria's*

Great Expedition. This piece is comprised of six photographs and a map that details the journey her grandmother took across the US-Mexico border, through the desert southwest and eventually ending up in California. These photos are staged and Fernandez stars in each one, a la Cindy Sherman, and portrays the role of her great-grandmother, Maria. The photos start in 1910 in Mexico and end in 1950 in San Diego, California. Retelling her own family history, as well as the history of thousands of other Mexican-American families, allows Fernandez the space to construct her personal narrative, connect to her past, and to a greater community of Mexican and Mexican-Americans living in the US. Although re-created by the artist in this time and place, we see before our eyes the transformation of a young migrant girl into a woman firmly acculturated in her adopted homeland. This work helped me to contextualize my family's immigration story, and even though quite different, the process of assimilation is one that all immigrants experience in their own unique ways.

The *Sangrado Corazon/ Sacred Heart* series by artist Delilah Montoya deals with the representation of the Sacred Heart as a religious icon as well as a pop reproduction. The series also involved the participation of members of her community whose identity is steeped in the Catholic traditions the Spaniards brought to the new world as well as the intermixing of the native religions. The work in this series depicts a hybrid culture that has developed along the US-Mexico borderlands and the iconic symbols which transmit and propagate it. Part of the power of Montoya's work lays in the fact that she has chosen to take her pseudo religious photos out of the context of where traditional Catholic ceremonies take place, mainly the church or home altar. These

altars were created in heavily dilapidated and abandoned buildings in her East Los Angeles neighborhood. Montoya chose to incorporate another potent symbol of Chicano culture, graffiti, and create a new context for ritual and ceremony. She also exclusively used women in this series, perhaps a comment on the male control of ceremony in the traditional Catholic religion.

The photos by Chicano photographer Chuck Ramirez, especially those from the Coconut Series, show the artist's struggle for identity and acceptance from both the dominant culture and that of his Mexican ancestry. The pieces are entitled, *Outer Shell*, *Inner Shell* and *White Coconut*. To the casual observer these may appear to be photos merely depicting coconuts, but for people from Spanish speaking cultural backgrounds, who don't speak very good Spanish, the coconut has a negative connotation symbolizing being brown on the outside but white on the inside. According to Carla Stellweg, "Ramirez transforms the slur "coconut"—brown on the outside, white on the inside—and converts degrading name-calling into the proud tag of another, more layered identity". With this piece Ramirez proudly "owns" his hybrid identity and turns a derogatory term into one of strength. Many of the artists of the borderlands have been forced to straddle two cultures, not fully feeling accepted by either one. They tend to work and exist somewhere between the two worlds. This hybrid space serves as a rich source of inspiration that not only informs each artist's work, but allows a space to actually create new culture and identity. This is also the space that allows each artist to explore the relationships between dominant and minority cultures which often become amplified in the borderlands.

My research for my show led me to San Diego, Tijuana and the borderlands that separate the two. Having lived and gone to college in Southern California it was definitely a homecoming for me. It has been many years since travelling in this border zone I wanted to reacquaint myself with the food, music, culture and liveliness of this place I carry with me in my memories. Although many similarities exist, the borderlands in California and those of my native Texas have remarkable differences starting with the physical border itself. In Texas we have the natural border of the Rio Grande River as opposed to the fence. The communities are also quite different, many Californians of Mexican descent refer to themselves as Chicanos, whereas in Texas, they go by Tejanos. Since my indoctrination of “Mexicaness” really began in California and continued when I moved back to Texas after college, I consider myself part of both those worlds. My main reason for travelling to Tijuana was to document the border fence that would play a prominent role in my thesis show. I spent two days interacting with the fence and got to see it in multiple locations and different contexts. There are actually multiple fences built by multiple presidents and the redundancy of it all is quite amusing. Each president since Clinton, wanting to appear tough on immigration, has built their own section of the fence just yards behind each other. The most ridiculous aspect has to be where the fence juts into the Pacific Ocean and goes out about 100 yards and just stops. What I found in the physical place of the border were two worlds that co-existed side by side, one a militarized zone, the other a vibrant community going about their daily life

As a product of multiple cultures and identities, my art is used as a vehicle to explore the creation of my personal narrative within the hybrid cultures of the borderlands. I am interested in generative questions such as: What role does spoken and visual language play in the transmission of culture? How did my loss of language at a young age disconnect me from my culture? What symbols, synonymous with my culture, could be transformed and infused with new meaning? How can I overcome and transform racist language and ideologies that I have confronted in my life? What do I have to say about my past and do I want to form those memories in my work?

I have crossed many borders in my life and the physical one situated between the US and Mexico has a special significance for me. The first time I crossed it was an illegal crossing for sure, but not in the way you might think. My first crossing was from the US to Mexico, kidnapped by my father who was unhappy about his amount of visitation after my parent's divorce, I was 2. I don't really remember much about that time, the few vague memories I have I cannot tell if they are real or made-up. What I do know is that I was gone for 9 months before my mother got me back and after that I was not to see my father again until I was in my mid-twenties. I also crossed the border in search of my childhood language. This was my first time in the interior of Mexico and I spent two summers in Cuernavaca in a Spanish language immersion school, relearning my first language and discovering some of the many archeological sites located in Mexico. Then I crossed the border in search of revolution. Freshly out of college I took multiple trips into the interior of Mexico, looking to understand the Zapatista indigenous movement in Chiapas the late 1990's. Although I didn't find Subcomandante Marcos, I

witnessed firsthand the poverty and income disparity that exists in the indigenous communities of Mexico. All of these experiences cemented my connection to Mexico and inspired the work I created for my thesis exhibition.

In my thesis show I created an environment that will provide the audience a space in which to interact with the work and contemplate the borderlands. When first approaching the space the viewer is overwhelmed by a fence stretching the length of the gallery and terminating in a large projected triptych self-portrait. The projection is a piece about my name and the confusion that normally accompanies people trying to pronounce it. My mouth covered with the familiar name tag announcing, “Hello my name is.....” The strained face looks upwards, suffocated and silenced, waiting to be labeled. The piece touches on many issues, including how I name myself vs. how people name me, taking on multiple names, language as a border/barrier to be negotiated, being silenced, and the retaking/owning of insults. The enlarged projection is bisected by the fence alluding to my divided identities. This powerful image is represented multiple time and in multiple contexts throughout my show.

The fence bisecting the gallery acts as a physical barrier as well a psychological one dividing the space. As you confront the fence it mimics the expanse and perspective of the US/Mexico border by starting at the height of the ceiling and tapering down to barely inches off the ground. The border fence serves multiple purposes in my installation. Firstly, at its most basic level it separates and divides people. I am also disrupting the flow and movement through the gallery space which normally serves as a thoroughway for pedestrian traffic. Through the barrier I call attention to the struggle for

all those who cross, both ways, legally and illegally. I shine a light on the absurdity of the man-made barrier impeding the flow of humanity. The border fence also forces the viewer to ponder their relationship to it and those on the other side creating insider/outsider perspectives. Those with the right paperwork can freely move between these spaces, but without papers, one can only glimpse and wonder what lays on the other side. Through the strategic placement of lights, I have also sought to recreate the dramatic shadows that are created by the border fence as it protrudes into the Pacific Ocean. The long, beautiful shadows created by US Border Patrol lights, emanate from the divisive barrier engulfing all who pass. As the viewer walks through the gallery space, they too are engulfed in shadows and as they peer through the fence they see these same shadows mimicked by the photos on the wall. This shadowy connection has the effect of giving the viewer in Montana a glimpse of the Tijuana border zone as well as prompt them to find a way to cross to the other side to continue exploring the show. The dim lighting and dark shadows also seek to increase the sense of foreboding and sense of danger one might experience at the border. It is also not readily apparent what side of the border one is on. This helps add to the confusion and prompts the viewer to ponder what side they belong on and how they construct their own identity.

The digital color photos that lay on the other side of the fence seek to document the normalization of the border wall, among the people who live in its shadow on the Mexican side. These seductive images draw you in until you realize the presence of a divisive scar separating the landscape. These photos begin with an image of kids playing soccer in the long evening shadows of the wall. The border patrol looms ominously on

the other side, keeping the peace. A young couple embraces in another, watching the waves roll in off the pacific, the wall ever present. Graffiti that alludes to all those who have made the perilous journey to “El Norte” pervades most of the wall on the Mexican side. A community garden even occupies its little corner of space in the shadow of the wall. It is easy to think of immigration and the flow of people in abstract terms, but when you encounter the sheer physical presence of the wall, and the power that it wields over people to direct and control their movement, you get a sense of the complexity of life at the border. What I captured in these photos is a vibrant community of people who occupy the space directly south of the US/Mexico border fence, raising their kids, going out to eat, enjoying their time on the beach, listening to live music, basically living their life. What I was unable to capture was the view from US side directly across from the fence or should I say fences. The US side looks like the DMZ that it is, complete with barbed wire, military vehicles, spot lights as well as the ever present border patrol agent standing by. What once was an area, dubbed “Friendship Park”, is now an empty concrete slab that no longer hosts transnational family reunions and has been replaced by yet another fence.

On a separate wall across from my digital color photographs, one is confronted by a series of grainy red-toned images. These images are the product of analog photo technology of the 1970’s and 80’s and are captured on a plastic 35mm twin lens film camera called Holga. Known for its low-fidelity aesthetic, the Holga's low-cost construction and simple meniscus lens often yields pictures that display vignetting, blur, light leaks, and other distortions. Because of the low fi

technology and the effect these photos invoke, they are tied directly and thematically to my memories of my first border crossing. Upon closer examination one questions the veracity of what is being presented as a genuine memory or reconstructed one. The photos themselves take on burnt red tones that hint at the warm contested landscape demarcated and intersected by the manmade wall created to divide the United States from Mexico. The photos are arranged in an irregular grid pattern reinforcing the disruption and division of space and alluding to the disjointed nature of memory. With these photos it is hard to know what side of the border you are on and because of the split frames and the changes in perspective, it is possible to be on both sides simultaneously within the same photo. It is also possible to be tunneled in unable to escape the massive structures holding you in. Many of the photos are double exposed alluding to the multilayered surreal landscapes one confronts at the border as well as the memories associated with my childhood and the multiple crossings I have made throughout my life. These photos offer a contrasting view of the same contested space offering the viewer not a direct representation, but of a feeling directly tied to the border fence.

The slip-cast ceramic boom boxes are presented in the back of the gallery. They function as a container for memories and experiences. Starting with the form itself, this boom box is the same model I received as a kid. In many ways slip-casting mimics photography becoming a surrogate for reality. But just like a photograph, these boom boxes are open to manipulation and can be altered to create a desired effect. The boom boxes contain both personal and pop imagery as I navigate between the personal and universal. The first boom box one encounters has the now familiar “Hello my name is”

graphic on the speaker grills. The entire rest of the boom box is covered in highly stylized graffiti text that spew out a range of bilingual insults related to the border, immigration and being Hispanic. I created this piece as a way of taking back and owning the insults that have come from both Anglo's and Latinos. This piece was inspired by the Chuck Ramirez photographs I researched and hints at the complex layered identity I have, not quite fitting into either the dominant Anglo or minority Hispanic culture. As you move down the row of boom boxes you encounter a piece that is based on a highway sign found in southern California along the corridors of Interstate 5 leaving the San Ysidro Port of Entry at the United States-Mexico border crossing. Created after a number of immigrant deaths in the late 1980's and early 1990's, this caution sign is meant to signify the immigrants who may be running across the freeway. This sign has become a pop culture icon and has undergone many iterations, almost universally recognizable as a potent symbol of the immigrant's plight. My boom box version is cracked down the middle and figures emanate in both directions from this crack in the boom box that approximates a border. Some body parts of the figures are intentionally missing and have seemingly lost their grip on those they are trying to pull across. I created this piece comment on the many lives lost crossing the US/Mexico border. Also, because of the figures moving away from the border in both directions, I am alluding to the fact that migration is happening in both directions and in the past couple of years we have had a net loss of immigrants from Mexico who have willingly returned home. The last boom box piece I will discuss is also based on personal imagery. Here a self-portrait shows me with my tongue outstretched being strangled by a knot in a rope. I created this

piece to talk about the loss of my first language. In the background are the colossal Olmec heads with the now familiar, “My name is sticker” covering their mouths. I cover their mouths and placed the word extinct there to symbolize the fact that my pre-Columbian ancestors may be gone, but I carry them with me and find inspiration in their art and the clues to their civilization that were left behind.

In the corner of the gallery, occupying its own territory is an altar created with slip-cast ceramic boom boxes. My idea of an altar has never come from a purely religious context. I see this altar as being tied to memory and I approached it as a repository for personal and sacred objects. This piece is my most personal in the show, as I am allowing the viewer a glimpse into my sacred space of memory. Religious icons, mingle with pre-Columbian ceramic heads, sacred dirt from New Mexico, photos of my grandparents, candles, robots and screen printed tortillas. Typically, alters are found at church or in people’s private homes, but by putting this piece in the white secessionist gallery, has completely changed its context. Just as Montoya sought to change the context of her *Sacred Heart* photography series by moving it to the barrio and subverting the church, I too have moved the private space, into the public realm in an attempt to pay homage to my past and create a trigger for the audience's memories.

My work is about the many borders I have crossed in my life. I carry many of these borders with me in my memories, and produce work about these physical and psychological borders through a variety of media. Clay, photo, installation and sculpture come together to create a body of work that allows me to navigate the borderlands that I

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Image 1-Contested Terrain Show Title



Image 2-Made in Mexico



Image 3-Projected image view



Image 5-Ceramic Boom Box Altar view 2



Image 6-Ceramic Boom Box Altar detail



Image 7-Projected image, Hello my name is....



Image 8-Projected image, Hello my name is.... Detail

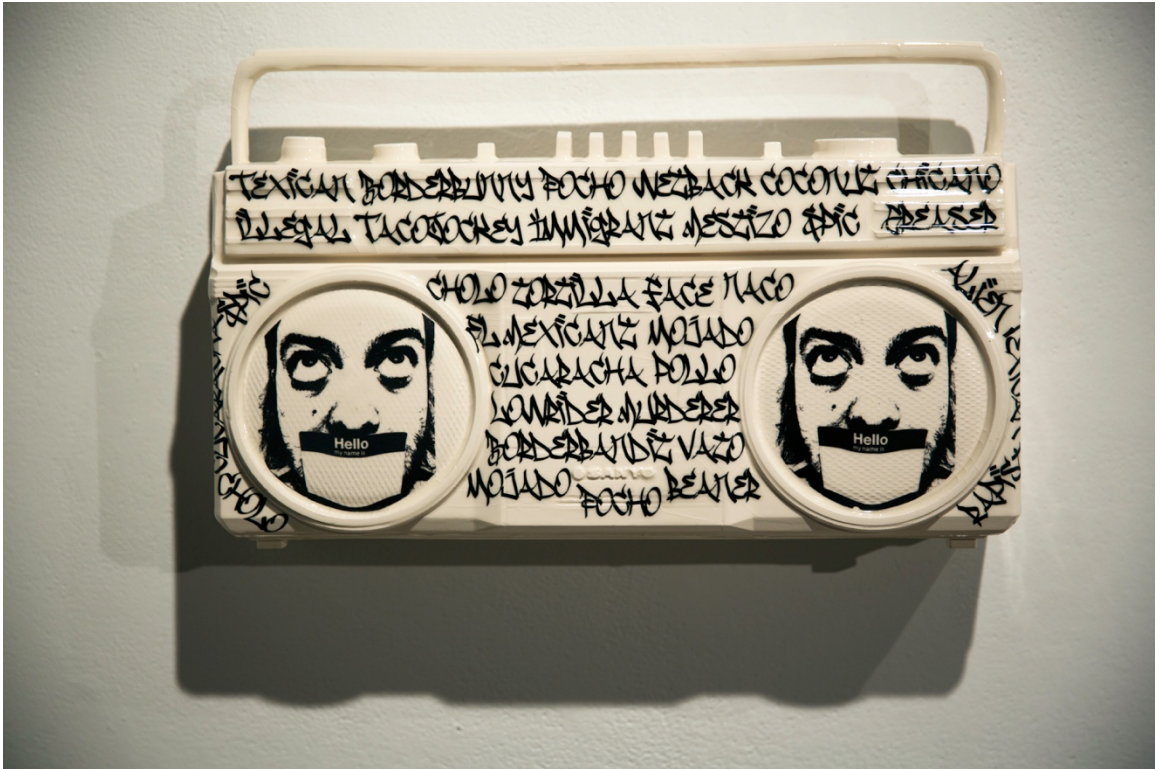


Image 9-Hello my name is.... Boom Box



Image 10-Hello my name is.... Boom Box detail



Image 11-Caution, Run Faster



Image 12- Sorry for the inconvenience



Image 13- Sorry for the inconvenience detail

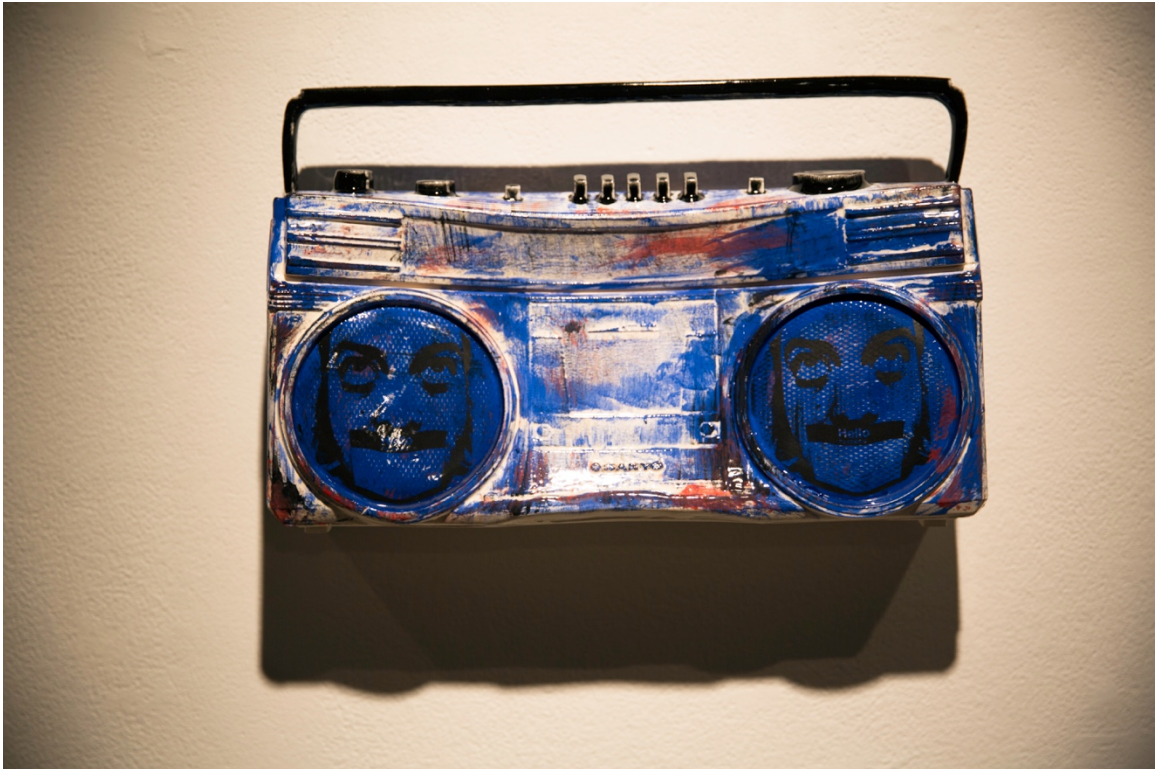


Image 14-Hello my name is.... Deflated



Image 15-Hello my name is.... Deflated detail



Image 16-Que Boom Box



Image 17-Que Boom Box detail



Image 18-Hello my name is.... wall piece



Image 19-Installation detail with altar and projection



Image 20-Border wall photos installation view



Image 21-Border wall photos installation view 2



Image 22-Holga border photos installation view



Image 23-Installation view 2