



Window Space



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Jasmine Cardenas

To Save / To Make

November 20th – December 19th, 2020

Why do I do physical things? It is a language I've used since I was a child [...] I made objects to entertain myself, to explore materials, to gift to people. I collected and created. Using my hands comes natural to me.

[excerpt from Jasmine Cardenas journal notes]

Jasmine Cardenas is an Ecuadorian-Canadian artist whose practice explores childhood memories and cultural hybridity through the collection of personal images, objects and stories.

As a child, she would watch her mother cook with *achiote* almost every day.

These heart-shaped fruits can be found growing in clusters on shrubs and small trees in tropical regions throughout Abya Yala¹ and Southeast Asia². Although the plants are known by multiple names, the word *achiote* derives from the Uto-Aztecan language family and Nahuatl term *achiotl* - which roughly translates as:

a tree from the seeds

¹ “For those unfamiliar with the term Abya Yala, the concept emerged toward the end of the 1970s in Dulenega, or what, for others, is today San Blas, Panama, a Kuna Tule territory. Abya Yala in the Kuna language means “land in its full maturity.” Emilio del Valle Escalante, *Self Determination: A Perspective from Abya Yala* www.e-ir.info/2014/05/20/self-determination-a-perspective-from-abya-yala/

² “Found primarily in tropical and sub-tropical regions in Central and South America, plus the Caribbean. Additionally, the Spanish brought it to India, Sri Lanka, and Africa in the seventeenth century. Nicholas Gill, *New Worlder.com* www.newworlder.com/article/17912/achiote

*of which is made a paste
used as a seasoning
and for coloring things orange.*³

Covered in a protective, bright-red fuzz, the *achiote* fruit ripens slowly with the sun; falling off the tree once fully mature and splitting open to expose the numerous seeds within. After being soaked in water or warmed in oil, the pulp surrounding the seeds can be mixed into a paste for a vibrant yellow-orange dye - which Cardenas uses as a natural pigment and the material foundation of her multimedia installation *To Save/To Make*.

Both literally and figuratively, the *achiote* acts as glue, bridging lived experiences and honoring the artist's memories as she works through the anxieties of carrying and reckoning with a dual identity in a settler colonial society.

*Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar.
Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.*⁴

Because the pigment is quick to dry, Cardenas moves swiftly - yet with intention. As the floors and walls become her canvas, intuitive brushstrokes evoke traces of *brujería* and stories of superstition within her family. The street-facing window, once blank, is now transformed as the artist summons a sweeping, a clearing of energies, a protection against *mal de ojo*.⁵

Achiote for passion, for clarity, for courage.

The bright, orange brushstrokes cast a veil over the walls, revealing multiple sketches on recycled pulp paper: some suspended from the ceiling, others scattered

³ Online Nahuatl Dictionary, edited by Stephanie Wood: www.nahuatl.uoregon.edu/content/achiotl

⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

⁵ *Mal de ojo*: a Spanish term that translates to *Evil eye*, believed to be an illness brought on by another's evil intention

throughout like the seeds themselves. Abstract, dream-like figures emerge from these pieces: a floating tree branch, a silhouette, a crescent moon. The *achiote* takes up space seamlessly, acting as a transient self portrait as Cardenas extends her limbs to paint the out-of-reach corners, contemplating her ancestral and personal histories.

During our studio visit earlier this year, we spoke of the multiple ways in which traces of colonialism seep into our bodies and become embedded into extensions of ourselves. We exchanged stories of insomnia and sleep paralysis, and reflected on the emotional roots of disease and how they are carried over generations and manifested in the body.

When asked where her choice of medium falls within this process, Cardenas voices her desire to approach these emotions through playfulness, choosing quite intentionally to work with the simple tools and techniques she used as a child - as seen in the sculpture that sits in the centre of the installation, crafted intuitively from paper mache. The artist also expresses her use of natural materials as a way of remaining mindful and accountable towards the earth within her artistic practice.

I'm reminded that, in addition to being used as a dye and spice for preparing food, that *achiote* is an ancient medicine. Its bark, roots, fruits, flowers and seeds, when prepared properly, can reduce inflammation, treat skin damage, lower blood pressure and protect the eyes and liver - among many other properties.⁶

In our conversation, we spoke of lucid dreams as portals of remembering, however vague and ephemeral we may find the experiences to be. We discuss how belonging to a diaspora often feels like not belonging at all - and mull over the multiple ways

⁶ Ryan Raman, *What is Annatto? Uses, Benefits and Side Effects* www.healthline.com/nutrition/annatto#benefits

in which - as children of immigrants and guests on stolen land⁷ - we've been taught to hold each other up, to build homes wherever we find ourselves.

I envision the hard shells of the *achiote* fruit. An intuitive red, a refusal to crack open against their will, an honouring of boundaries, a protection against things to come - or perhaps things past. As I shift slowly from one painting to another, I find my eyes resting on the asymmetrical spaces Cardenas has left in between: making room, perhaps, for these tumultuous emotional currents of nostalgia and longing and childlike joy to pass through.

A lone eye rests to the left of the wall space, and I imagine *To Save/To Make* as an altar of sorts, acknowledging our ancestors guidance and honouring the resilience of the generations before us and everything they survived and fought for to bring us into this world. A deep knowing stirs in Cardena's gestures: a *remembering* that, time and time again, may only be channeled through a brush dipped in water, a hand buried in soil, a breath.

Achiote, in honour of the earth, of *la tierra*, our most ancient elder.

As the sun begins to set, the bright orange pigment seems to dullen, and I think of the term *mestizaje*, or *mestizx* which translates to "mixed"⁸ and how - in an academic attempt to compartmentalize a dual identity, it perpetuates a deeply rooted colonial vision of Abya Yala that actively erases Black and Indigenous ancestries, making room only for whiteness and prioritizing anything in its proximity.

I think of the complacency of non-Black and non-Indigenous Latinxs in upholding white supremacy and in our immense responsibility to continue unlearning and

⁷ The Toronto Purchase (1787) is deemed as the "surrender" of lands in the Toronto area from the Mississaugas of New Credit to the British crown, however the lack of the treaty's legitimacy has been proven time and time again. Author Unknown, Specific Claims Research Centre: www.specific-claims.ca/the%20toronto%20purchase%20specific%20claim

⁸ Ana María Enciso Noguera, *Structural Racism in Latin America remains hidden under the idea of mestizaje*: www.aldianews.com/articles/politics/structural-racism-latin-america-remains-hidden-under-idea-mestizaje/58654

dismantling racism within our families and communities. To remember that scarcity is a capitalist myth: that it was never about not being “enough” of our heritage, but about honouring the lineages that have brought us here and everything that we carry as a result : and choosing to leave behind what no longer serves the collective path towards liberation.

Perhaps this is the true clearing, the *mal de ojo* being unearthed and alchemized as we undo ourselves and recognize our wholeness.

May we pick up the pieces and remember abundance,
and like Cardenas' *achiote* paintings,
may these wounds heal
and fade with the sun.

~

-Alexia Bréard-Anderson