

Faces of Humanity:  
Painting Portraits of Immigrant Workers

Selma Arely Morales

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Committee:

David Brody

Ann Gale

Philip Govedare

Denzil Hurley

Zhi Lin

Helen O'Toole

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:  
School of Art

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Selma Arely Morales

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Selma Arely Morales

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Professor Ann Gale  
School of Art, Painting + Drawing

Through the years, immigration to the United States has significantly increased. Immigrants have been drawn to this country by attractive wages and pushed by the poverty in their home countries. Today, immigrant minority groups have been targeted with hate and negativity, creating a wave of panic, and devaluing them as human beings. The hard work that these individuals do mostly remains unseen and unappreciated. They remain invisible. In this thesis I seek to bring light and focus to these individuals' lives through portraiture, hoping that the viewer can appreciate them and begin to recognize the contributions they make to this country.

My personal life experiences play a major role in my artwork. Who I am and where I came from. I was born in Mexico and lived there until I was fourteen years old. At that age I moved to the United States. I went through the experience of merging into a new culture. Many times I felt out of place, undervalued, and faced discrimination in my school and in the community, and I also witnessed others go through the same thing. I became part of a minority group that in today's political climate is targeted with hate and negativity. Our President Donald Trump has profiled us as drug dealers, rapists and criminals in many of his speeches, creating a wave of panic and concern in the immigrant community. This issue of dehumanization and devaluation of the Mexican immigrant is not new. Since the 1800's, nativists have considered us inferior aliens. In 1920, a representative of the South Texas Cotton Growers' Association assured a Senate Committee on Immigration, that "there never was a more docile animal in the world than the Mexican" (Standart.) Through history, immigration to the United States has happened with many nations, But Mexican immigration, has been one of the largest one. Mexicans have been drawn by attractive American wages and the push of Mexican poverty.

The truth of the matter is that the majority of Mexican immigrants are good decent hardworking individuals just trying to pursue a better life for their families, the so-called "American Dream". It is painful to hear someone talk about my family, friends or myself this way. This issue has not only caused fear among us. It has caused discrimination and it has continued to devalue us as human beings.

This situation has sparked in me an intense desire to research and celebrate the hard work that my people do, that mostly of remains unseen and unappreciated. It remains invisible. I seek to share with the viewer our humanity, and aspects of our life that are not often known.

My research and work is influenced by diverse sources. Scholarly articles, a course in the Chicano studies, and artists that deal with similar issues are some of them.

I had the opportunity to Study with Professor Carolyn Pinedo-Turnovsky, who is a sociologist at the University of Washington. Her research examines meanings of race, ethnicity and gender, their intersections with immigration law/policy in the U.S. and the outcomes in shaping people's daily lives, in particular, their experiences in labor (University). The course was titled, "Working Latinas and Latinos," and it was a Sociological examination of Latina/o working lives. The class focused on inequalities and power relations that shape diverse socio-economic working experiences and social change across distinct Latino communities. It Covered race and gender consciousness, informal/formal work, labor recruitment, changing contexts of home and family, youth and children's work, organizing, and immigration and labor legislation. Taking this class introduced me to issues that are relevant today and the history behind them.

Through this course, I came across a scholarly article titled, "Structural Vulnerability and Hierarchies of Ethnicity and Citizenship on the Farm" by Seth M. Holmes PhD, MD. He is a medical anthropologist and physician whose work focuses broadly on the role that perceptions of difference play in the production and reproduction of social hierarchies and health disparities. Holmes spent summers on a farm in western Washington State, working, observing and researching. In his article, he examines the structural hierarchy that exists in this farm, from the owners at the top of the hierarchy, to the pickers at the bottom. He shares the experiences from each structural group; their responsibilities, aspects of their daily lives on the farm, and how they

are physically and emotionally affected by their current circumstances. This article exposes their vulnerability, and the harsh conditions these workers live in. How they are victims of minimum pay, no government protection because they are undocumented, verbal discrimination from coworkers in higher positions, and the living conditions of housing provided to them. It also exposes how even though these workers are aware of their current bad circumstances, they cannot do anything about it. They are trying to survive, and they are part of an endless cycle (Holmes.) The information that he brought in this article provided me with a great insight about the subject matter, which I then decided to pursue and focus on my work.

Wanting to create a body of work that would bring focus to these issues and the individuals affected by them, I considered the following artist, who's work deals with issues of identity, humanity and immigration.

Starting with the work of Kehinde Wiley, for example (Fig. iv), who focuses on black and brown figures that are part of minority groups. With his portraits he provides the viewer with a glance at who these individuals are, and the specifics of their culture today. Wiley echoes masterworks in his portraits. In an interview he shares what has driven him to do this work. He says, "If you look at the paintings that I love in art history, these are paintings where great, powerful men are being celebrated on the big walls of museums throughout the world. What feels really strange is not to be able to see a reflection of myself in that world" (Wiley.) Because of this, Wiley chooses to make paintings of black figures in poses that imitate those men through art history. This becomes a new way of seeing these individuals. Suddenly, they become powerful and celebrated.

He also imposes figures against backgrounds that are busy with patterns. This allows room for the viewer's interpretation, but it also speaks about the rich culture of the individuals. His portraits tend to be large scale; this empowers the figures. They feel appreciated and celebrated, which are some aspects that I seek for in my work. Like Wiley, in my own work the main characters are individuals from a minority group. These individuals are often overlooked by society, because the issue is not well known in the American culture. I have chosen traditional portraiture because the painted portrait adds sophistication, and it elevates the subject. I am also interested in color and patterns that can help celebrate my culture.

Second artist is Ramiro Gomez. He is a Mexican American artist from California. Son to immigrant parents, Ramiro too has witnessed what being part of a minority group feels like. In his work, he talks about issues related to immigrant labor and the invisibility and exclusion that these individuals confront in the United States. He is a multimedia artist, working in painting, collage, and board cut out installations (Weschler.) Ramiro paints on magazine pages that illustrate privileged rich environments. In an elaborate living room, he would paint an immigrant maid working (Fig. v). Outside of the beautiful garden of a Beverly Hills home he would place a board cut out figure of an immigrant blowing the leaves (Fig. vi). On the street, he would install a cut out figure of an immigrant nanny with a stroller carrying a Caucasian baby.

With his work, he confronts the viewer with the hard work that these individuals do, and the contribution that they make to American families. He places the worker in front of the fruit of their labor, giving them credit. His subjects also have names, making them feel real, and personal.

Like Ramiro, I also seek to bring light to immigrant workers who remain in the shadows and not often receive credit for their contributions to this country, and confront the viewer with that reality. In portrait Fig. ii and iii, I placed the worker in front of the fruit of their labor as well.

Xu Weixin is a Chinese artist that deals with historic events and contemporary social issues of China, such as the Cultural Revolution launched in 1966. In an Interview, Weixin mentions that there is a tendency to forget history, in this case the history of the ten-year Cultural Revolution. He feels responsible to make art to recover their memory (Branigan). In his work, he dares viewers (and his country) to confront its past by creating large-scale portraits of people that were involved in the revolution, either as victims or prosecutors. He thinks that history consist of events and stories, but that people are essential participants, and that is why he choses the genre of portraits. By portraying these individuals with monumentality and realism, he brings our focus to their lives(Oyobe). Weixin also has an interest in mine and construction workers (Fig. vii-viii). He feels a great respect and compassion for the hard work they do (Oyobe). With these portraits he shares with the viewer the harsh conditions in a contemporary China. Through this body of work, the viewer can see his interest in their humanity and vulnerability. He says, “they are people of Flesh and blood who have names and distinct personalities.” It is his efforts to capture their candid expressions, emphasizing that their lives and experiences are as important as that of any other human being that influences my work. He brings concrete voices often obscured by fragmented information.

Multimedia artist Wendy Red Star is a Portland-based artist Raised on the Apsáalooke (Crow) reservation in Montana. In her work she examines the tensions between traditional Native

American culture, colonialist histories, and contemporary representations of Native peoples. In an interview she says, “From a very young age, I always knew that there were these "Hollywood Indians" that weren't anything like a Crow, and I didn't even associate them with being Native or Crow. And I think every Native person kind of grows up with that, knowing that the made-up version is nothing like their reality of being whatever tribal nation they come from. That has always been a weird thing, and I often pull from that in my own artwork. I've always known that there's this sort of separation” (Fig. x.) It is this separation and gap between two groups that influence my work. Her use of materials with Crow elements such as traditional outfits, textiles and artifacts also have influenced my work in search for ways to incorporate aspects of my culture and celebrate them (Fig. ix.), as I have suggested in Fig. i.

Another source that has influenced my work is the writings of Juan Felipe Herrera.

He is Mexican-American poet, performer, writer, cartoonist, teacher, and activist.

In his writings, he talks about labor, immigration and the Chicano experience.

In one of his poems titled Mexican Differences, Mexican Similarities he writes, “You eat lettuce we irrigate lettuce. You eat grapes we irrigate grapes. You decorate Xmas trees we farm Xmas trees. You eat turkey on Thanksgiving Day we raise the turkeys for Thanksgiving Day. You sit at the table we serve the tables. You dance on the floors we mop the floors” (Herrera.) This poem describes the reality of immigrant workers in this country. It strongly illustrates the difference, the gap between two groups. This poem inspires me to deliver similar messages in my work, through imagery using painting and drawing.

With all these influences in mind, I created a series of paintings about immigrant workers.

Starting by choosing portraiture and focusing on individuals just like Wiley and Weixin. I feel

that this allows me to bring focus to the lives of these individuals. The workers become the main characters, making them primordial and important.

These portraits focus mainly on their faces and their hands (Fig. i-iii). The slightest gesture in their face and hand can tell so much about the situation that they are in, and how they feel in that moment in time.

The idea of a portrait Fig. i, was to both celebrate the culture and get specific with the current state of the individual. In my research regarding ways to bring one's culture into the picture plane, the work of Wiley and Red Star played a major Role.

One of the ways in which Wiley celebrates his culture is by his choices of backgrounds. They are very colorful and busy with patterns. This speaks about the vibrant richness of the African-American culture. Looking at Red Star's work, she often incorporates outfits or artifacts that are traditional to her Crow tribe. On Fig. ix, she has incorporated pattern designs that are very specific in fabrics of her culture, and very personal. In my piece, I decided to explore the possibility of having a pattern in the background that would celebrate my culture and visually open up alternative space possibilities. Looking into my own heritage, I began to research indigenous groups in my country. I chose to focus on the "Huichol" group, which is native to my home state of Jalisco(xi). This became not only celebratory, but very personal too. With this portrait I also wanted the viewer to get a glance of the situation in which the individual is placed. I decided to incorporate sweat in her face to suggest a physical condition of hard working and exhaustion. The expression on her face is also important. She is serious. She is not comfortable, but she is looking straight at you. Having this physical expression against such a decorated and celebratory background creates tension. This is something that differs my work from that of Wiley's. In my work I try to dig deep into facial expressions and the possibilities there are in the

slightest gesture. I feel that in his work his figures share a constant static serious face. My piece also shows a serious expression, but adding sweat to the face, for example, begins to say something more. My work is appreciating the character's real daily struggles and confronting the viewer with that reality.

The other two portraits (Fig. ii-iii) I began to develop in my research of the poem by Herrera, and the article by Holmes, that focus on farm labor. The portrait fig. ii incorporates different elements. Looking at Ramiro Gomez's *Work* and the way he brings focus to the workers, I decided to have the model carry a basket of tomatoes out on the fields (Fig. ii) This is a common scene if you go out to the fields. Men, women, pregnant women, teens, and even children carry heavy baskets on their shoulders under the sun for hours. They are surrounded with pesticides and dirt. They get the job done everyday (Holmes).

I also analyzed Xu Weixin's portraits of miners and construction workers, and how he is able to transmit information about the conditions in which the miners work in, by having dirt cover their entire faces. His work influenced my portrait by adding cues that would suggest this worker's conditions. I chose to have him expose his chest by having his shirt open. This is a suggestion in response to heat, to being exhausted and wanting to breath. Exposing his skin also allowed me to incorporate dirt, which is found also on his face and hands. The pose that the worker holds is very accurate to the way a farm worker would when working. The entire strength of his body is holding that basket. His Chest is firm. Arms are tense. His mouth is open and dry. He is thirsty. He is tired. He is looking straight at the viewer; he is confronting the viewer. He is the one that brings the food to your table. He is contributing to this country with his body and strength.

For portrait Fig. iii, I continued with the subject of farm labor for another piece as well. When female farm workers go out in the fields they cover themselves with fabrics and bandanas to be

protected from the elements. Sadly, they also cover themselves to not be seen, and avoid sexual harassment. This issue has taken place, and continues to happen (University). With this in mind, and looking through the paintings of Weixin, I created a portrait of a woman holding a basket of apples. She is fully draped to protect herself, but the choices of her posture reveal more. With her hand she is either covering or uncovering her face. Her mouth is open, it is grasping for air or for words. The hand itself has been injured. I decided to incorporate blood to make a more dramatic statement, and to talk about how immigrants continue to work even if they are physically hurting or injured (Holmes.) This was strongly influenced by Weixin's miner portraits, where the worker sometimes has blood. The gesture of her full arm and hand not only suggest injury and pain, but it also is pushed against her chest. She is pulling away from the viewer. She is protecting herself.

With this body of work, and the choices I have made in the process of creating them, I seek to share with the viewer their humanity and aspects of their lives. Hoping that the viewer can appreciate them and begin to recognize the contributions they make to this country.

List of Illustrations



- i. Guadalupe  
Oil on Canvas  
65.5 x 60 in



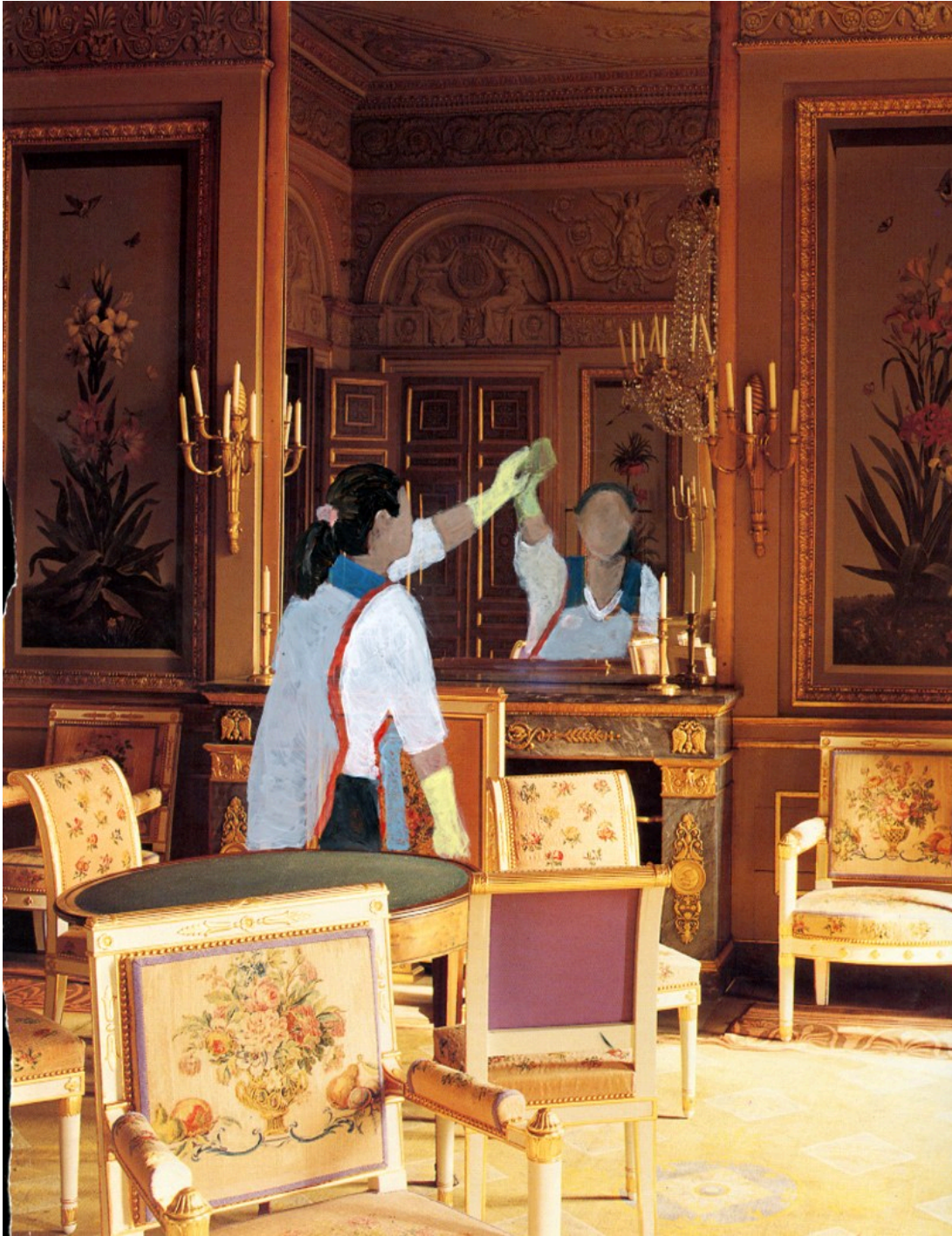
ii. Juan Jose  
Oil on Canvas  
65.5 x 60 in



iii. Arely  
Oil on Canvas  
65.5 x 60 in



iv. Kehindy Wiley  
The Sisters Zenaide and Charlotte Bonaparte  
Oil on Linen  
83.5 x 63 in



v. Ramiro Gomez  
Miriam's Reflection (The New Gilded Age)  
Acrylic on magazine  
11 x 8.5 in



vi. Ramiro Gomez  
Gardener, Mapleton Dr. and Faring Rd. Beverly Hills, 2012



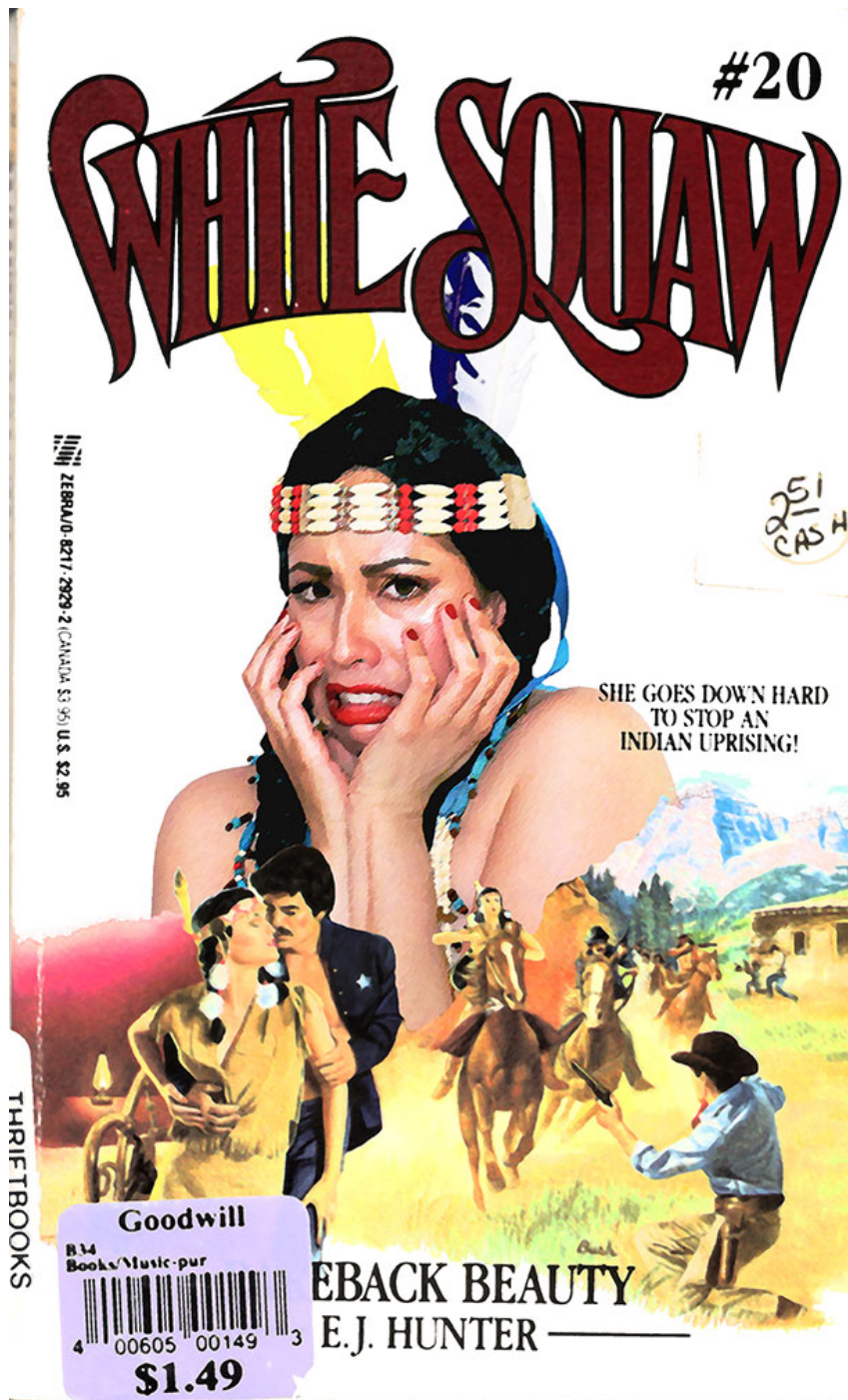
vii. Xu Weixin  
The Worker's Place  
Oil on Linen  
200 cm x 220 cm



viii. Xu Weixin  
Seven Miners  
Oil on Linen



ix. Wendy Red Star  
Apsáalooke Feminist 1, 2016  
Digital print on silver rag,  
34 x 40 in



- x. Wendy Red Star  
White Squaw Series



xi. Huichol Indigenous group from Jalisco, Mexico.

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