

JENELLE ESPARZA

IT COULD ONLY BE LIVED



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

OCTOBER 22 - DECEMBER 15, 2022

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Developing a visual language of the South Texas Landscape by Rigoberto Luna

Jenelle Esparza has a profound connection with nature within the South Texas landscape that she accredits to the women in her family. A native of Corpus Christi, Esparza recalls visiting the beaches, jetties, and waterfronts near Shoreline Blvd. and weekend trips to her grandparent's ranch in the tiny town of Premont, TX. It was here the matriarch of the family, Idolina Olivarez, Esparza's grandmother, told stories of her childhood days working in the cotton fields of South Texas long before the fiber became a staple of Esparza's studio practice.

Esparza began her professional career as an artist shortly after graduating from the University of Texas at San Antonio with a concentration in photography. A part-time job in a digital print studio allowed her to create monumental photographs, shot primarily in black and white on a large format film camera, while still a student at UTSA.

Her first solo exhibition, *As They Were* (2012), showcased photos inspired by Mesoamerican imagery and the compositions of artists like Cuba's María Magdalena Campos-Pons and German-born American Kiki Smith. Thematically, she focused on introspection and the human form paired with found and antique objects—including turkey feathers and a cast iron radiator. Soon after, Esparza found herself out of school and no longer working at the print studio. A dramatic shift in her work quickly developed when the resources provided by the university and her workplace were no longer available. It would begin a journey of exploring new materials and methods as a source of inspiration to tell her own story as well as the narratives of her ancestors.

While continuing to grow and develop her artistic voice, she introduced other interests into her work. These included palmistry, concepts exploring nature and the human connection, as well as elements of the human



Installation view, The Massacre of Borders 1 & 2, 2022

form and patterns found outdoors. Esparza's first large-scale city public art project, *Us and Them* (2012), featured 62 handprints from notable San Antonio community members intermingled with various printed native leaves.

In 2016, Esparza was awarded her first significant grant by the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture. With the support of this award, she explored her family's interconnected history with South Texas labor by revisiting her grandmother's stories of cotton fields. The financial backing provided by NALAC allowed Esparza to enroll in metalworking courses and learn the process of bronze casting. The result was a multi-media exhibition that included found objects, a mural-sized photo memorializing the cotton fields in Banquete, TX, and delicately cast bronze cotton spurs displayed within an infinity mirror box, creating the illusion of endless cotton rows. Her *El Color de la Obra* (2016) exhibition would begin a series of installations, including *Yo Solita Me Enseñé* (2017) and *LUCRE* (2017), that revolved around South Texas laborers, violence, exploitation, and cotton's role in the collective story of the United States.

In what would prove to be a breakthrough moment for Esparza, in 2018 historian and curator Jeffreen M. Hayes, Ph.D. chose Esparza as an Artpace International Artist-in-Residence from the Texas open call. Esparza

accepted the opportunity and again challenged herself to learn a new skill and medium, shifting her focus to natural fibers and the art of weaving. Esparza immediately got to work, enrolling in classes and purchasing a used loom. She worked eight-hour days for the entirety of the two-month residency. Her efforts produced five large-scale handwoven tapestries, her first ever. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art would include *Dancer in an Unconscious Rhythm III-IV* (2018) tapestries in *State of the Art 2020*, which later traveled to DePaul University (2019) and Louisiana State University (2022). Esparza explained that the work "expresses the connection between the body and the cotton fields, with each piece representing the physical toll of labor on the body and spirit to reveal its stress, strain, and strength." *Gathering Bones* (2018) represented Esparza's heritage, cultural rootedness, and shared link to the lesser-known histories of Tejanos in the cotton fields.

Esparza has cultivated a vocabulary using the combination of cotton fiber, vintage tools, and found objects to unravel Texas mythologies and reveal looted lands. Her latest solo exhibitions, *Old Souls* (2021) and *It Could Only Be Lived* (2022), display her proficiency in utilizing her abstracted textiles and family heirlooms to serve as a vehicle for unearthing histories and memories of an area with a tumultuous past.



Cultivator, 2021
family heirloom, cotton rope, wire, 57 x 34 x 38"

Cover Panel: Installation View, *It Could Only Be Lived*

Unearthing Histories and Subtly Swaying into Texan Landscapes by Marissa Del Toro

A scythe and branch delicately wrapped in cotton rope ever so slightly sways in the exhibition's entryway. Suspended from the ceiling, braided strands lightly touch the ground below while simultaneously twisted tendrils reach outward and upward. The curvature and limb-like features of the scythe and branch bear a non-representational characteristic to a body. The non-figural body paired with cotton is a reference to Jenelle Esparza's South Texas ancestral lineage of cotton-picker laborers and the landscape of that region that holds a history of violence. Titled *Umbilical* (2021), this work opens Esparza's solo exhibition, *It Could Only Be Lived*, at Women & Their Work and lays bare what the artist has described as the witnessing of landscapes through abstract weavings and sculptures.

Esparza presents the role of the landscape as a witness and record of history and instills a visceral feeling concerning the true history of Texas. Through a language of abstracted cotton weavings and appropriated family farming tools and heirlooms, her artworks unearth the observations of the Texas region between the



Umbilical, 2021

family heirloom, found branch, cotton rope, wire

Rio Grande and the Gulf of Mexico as a vessel for violence. She analyzes the horrific history of lynching and racial terror laid against ethnic Mexicans in Texas and conceptually links it to the materiality of cotton via the state's deep history of labored cotton picking as a form of poetic transformation and catharsis.

Often unspoken and lesser known, the history of violence against and lynching of ethnic Mexicans in Texas occurred from the mid-19th to early-20th century following Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, which set off a continuous series of conflicts, rebellions, and the pursuit of land expansion. In her book, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*, the scholar Monica Muñoz Martinez recounts the horror in the Texas borderlands, highlighting how Anglo-Texans and Texas Rangers carried out state-sanctioned terror to "enable a culture of U.S. imperialism that justified Anglo domination in South Texas and in the U.S. West more broadly."^[1] However, the origins of this inhumanity begin with the British invasion of the uppermost region of North America and what historian Andrew J. Torget describes as the cotton revolution.^[2] The implementation of cotton production as an economic resource for the British commercial empire resulted in the forced migration and enslavement of Africans, a greater pursuit for expansion of the United States, an establishment of white supremacist imperialism, and ultimately, a political chasm between pro- and anti-slavery forces. The quest for expansion placed the Southwest, primarily Texas, as a prime target and set off numerous conflicts between Great Britain, Mexico, and the United States for several decades.

As Esparza creates warps and wefts with dyed and undyed cotton, her patterns are intuitive with a painterly playfulness. During one of our studio visits, she described her process as rhythmic and labor-involved, akin to a ritual where the body instinctively recalls the movements for a ceremony. Working upwards of eight hours a day, she loosens and tightens her threads to create an abstract visual language where lines of color intersect in



Between the Soil and the Sun, 2022
cotton and acrylic yarn, wood, 31.5 x 17"

varying compositions that reference the landscape and the body. In *Between the Soil and the Sun* (2022), sprouts of green and brown thread reach outwards as if they were a patch of luscious grass growing beneath the sun. Esparza described these curled shapes as tendrils, representing roots, regrowth, and plant regeneration, where nutrients are recirculated into the soil for a new life. They also function as a metaphor for our ancestors and departed relatives who share lessons on life beyond their passing. Using a poem by Laurie Ann Guerrero as inspiration for the work's title, Esparza reminds us of the importance of keeping history alive as a form of empowerment, that we "are the bloom that holds the root, making magic between the soil and the sun."^[3]

Esparza's use of coiled cotton speaks to the torment imbued in its fibers and its historical cultivation within the United States but also the knowledge and legacy her ancestors imparted. Consistently paired with fibers, the tools and heirlooms mimic bodies, the landscape, and the history of labor and technology of her ancestors. Esparza's weavings and sculptures offer a visual language for a transformative view of a more complete history, a needed and cathartic perspective to guide our future.

Jenelle Esparza

EDUCATION

- 2010 BFA, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX
2007 Associate of Arts, Del Mar College, Corpus Christi, TX

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *It Could Only Be Lived*, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX
Vessels, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX, curated by Rene Barilleaux
2021 *Old Souls*, Presa House Gallery, San Antonio, TX, curated by Rigoberto Luna
2020 *Through the Threshold*, Luminaria showcase at San Antonio Botanical Gardens
2018 *Gathering Bones*, Artpace, San Antonio, TX, curated by Dr. Jeffreen Hayes
2017 *Yo Solita Me Enseñé*, South Texas College, McAllen, TX, curated by Gina Otvos
LUCRE, Provenance Gallery, San Antonio, TX, curated by Stephanie Torres

- 2016 *El Color de la Obra*, Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio, TX
2012 *As They Were*, REM Gallery, San Antonio, TX

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *Formation*, Kinfolk House, Fort Worth, TX curated by Jessica Fuentes and Leticia and Sedrick Huckaby
Sites of Memory, DiverseWorks, Houston, TX, Curated by Ashley DeHoyos
Son de Alla, Son de Aca, South Broadway Cultural Center, Albuquerque, NM, Curated by Rigoberto Luna, Vicente Telles, and Ricardo Islas
State of the Art: Record, LSU Museum of Art, Baton Rouge, LA (travelled)
2020 *State of the Art II 2020*, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, The Momentary, Bentonville, AR, curated by Lauren Haynes, Allison Glenn, and Alejo Benedetti
2019 *Remember Where You Are*, DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, IL, curated by Mia Lopez

Visit jenelleesparza.com for a complete CV



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[1] Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 15.
[2] Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850*, The David J. Weber Series in the New Borderlands History (Chapel Hill (N.C.): The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
[3] Laurie Ann Guerrero, "Poets in the Classroom: What We Do When We Teach Writing," ed. Isabel Baca and Yndalecio Isaac Hinojosa, *Latinx Writing and Rhetoric Studies* 1, no. 1 (June 8, 2020): 127–33, <https://latinxwritingandrhetoricstudies.com/journal-issues/lwrs-volume-1-issue-1/>.



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WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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Photographs by Hector Tednoir Martinez

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Women & Their Work is a visual and performing arts organization located in Austin that serves as a catalyst for new ideas in contemporary art. Since 1978, Women & Their Work has created significant opportunities for artists and audiences to experience contemporary art through ambitious exhibitions, commissions of new work, performances and programs that inform audiences of all ages. We have actively developed the careers of more than 1,900 women artists, presenting 333 visual art exhibitions, 161 music, dance and theater events, 30 spoken word and literary performances, 16 film festivals and 799 programs & education workshops with the goal of ensuring that diverse women artists are equitably represented in all forms of art. Women & Their Work helps meet an important need in Texas providing exhibition and performance opportunities and helping to attract critical attention to the work produced here; it is the only organization of its kind in the region and one of the few organizations in

the United States that dedicates itself to the work of women artists. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *ArtForum*, and on *National Public Radio* and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2020, the Smithsonian Archives of American Art acquired the 42-year archive of Women & Their Work ensuring that our entire history of the work of women artists and our website will be preserved in perpetuity.



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