

Can you see me?

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

Maria Cabrera

Major: Art, Science, and Innovation Minors: Computer Science and Communications and
Cultural Studies

15 April 2024

Project Board:

Professor Heather Brand

Professor Douglas Luman

Honor Code Pledge:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maria Cabrera", written in a cursive style.

Maria Cabrera

Artist Statement

I am the child of two immigrant parents who left their life behind to give me a better one. While I will always be indebted to them for their sacrifice and will always admire the extreme strength they showed by raising three children alone in a country they knew nothing about, I had to think of myself for once. My life has always been about honoring my family, making them proud and sharing their story so it was time for me to share my story. Making *Can you see me?* felt selfish since I felt I didn't have the right to complain about my life. '*Can you see me?*' is a conversation between what my family/society wanted me to be as a first generation child and how I see myself. While from an outside perspective, the piece contains a very dark story, it actually tells a very liberating story that allowed me to heal and accept myself. I could finally stop hiding behind a mask and share what I had felt my whole life. I also want others to understand that they are not alone in feeling the way I do and it is okay to have these emotions. You just can't let them hold you back.

There are two different engraving styles on two different sized mirrors; hand engraving on 4x4 mirrors and laser engraving on 12x12 mirrors. The hand engraving takes away some reflection and is on the top layer of the mirror to mimic a branding that ties you to something. The smaller size of mirrors serve as a comparison of me having to conform to expectations vs the larger mirrors are meant to represent the 'power that is held over me'. The laser engraving appears to be inside the mirror and doesn't take away the reflective material off the mirror to symbolize not being able to escape the expectations placed upon me. While this piece is very meaningful to me, I created it in a way that the viewer could easily place themselves in my shoes and connect to the words in their own way. Since a mirror reflects, you are forced to see yourself

in the piece and feel connected to it in some sort of way. Especially since the words are also in your face.

My art style grew and developed around one quote which I read when I first picked up a camera. The quote written by Dr. Suess read “Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory.” So my art started to become something I called a play on memories as I have always been interested in capturing moments to keep forever. Later my art grew a little more and became about sharing who I was and how my culture shaped me to be who I am today.

I highlighted the struggles my parents had leaving their life behind to come to the United States as this was what defined how my life would be. I am the oldest of two, the first to go to college, the first to get a job and the one who will change my family’s life for the better. I was always proud of the traits instilled into me, until I realized that because of this, I did not know who I was. I am just going with the motions and doing what I am being told to do. I realized my life was decided for me and I had no say. Since the moment I was born, my life was never mine. I had to perfect English and Spanish in no time so I could be the family translator. I was a six year old, translating medical terms from my special needs brother’s doctors. I was a seven year old translating legal documents from my parents’ immigrant lawyers. Every year, I translated harder and harder words but my voice was never heard. Gloria E. Anzaldua said in her book *Light in the Dark Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* “As a child I depended on this “imaginal intelligence” for guidance, companionship, and comfort.” (36) Similar to Anzaldua, the one and only thing I owned were my thoughts and these were the only things that I would rely on when I wasn’t being molded into the ideal offspring.

Could I really? Who was I? My parents would often say I was the child of immigrants, the translator, the one they depended on, a first generation, the pride and joy of the family, the one who always smiled, the one who never stopped working, I was strong, independent, and

capable, the problem solver, I was the success of my family. Or at least that's what my parents thought. On the other hand, my secret was that I was breaking under the pressure, I had no voice, I was alone, I couldn't take it anymore, I was the shame and disgrace of the family, the biggest faker of happiness, the one who was tired, I was weak, broken, and worthless, I couldn't do anything, I was the failure of my family. This is how I see myself every time I look in a mirror, every time I face my family, everytime I think about my life and my future, these truths look back at me. I am not who you think I am, but at the same time, I do not know who I am.

As I child, I believed my parents were the perfect parents but the more I grew, the more I saw their flaws. They were always involved in my life... because they needed me to become the perfect child. They were supportive in a way that made me do what they wish of me but they never accepted the real me. Rather, they never let me grow into the person I wanted to be since they couldn't risk me not becoming the perfect child they risked their lives for. In exchange for the sacrifices they made, they took my soul and crushed it under the weight of all the expectations placed upon me. As an adult, I am learning that love doesn't equate to how much you can do for someone but it is based on who you are. I struggle to accept myself for who I am since I had been drilled that I needed to become the perfect child for so long. Not only do I struggle to accept myself but I am struggling to find the person I am meant to be.

When thinking of what art project I wanted to create, I realized it was time to make something that explained who I was. It was time to share with the world what I have kept inside for so long so I could start accepting that I am more than what I have been told to be. I started by thinking about what medium to use. As a photographer, my first instinct was to use photography to define myself but ultimately, I couldn't think of a way to truly express my life that also felt connectable to a viewer. I wanted the viewer to be able to put themselves in my shoes without it

feeling like it was someone else's life. After researching different mediums, I settled on using mirrors to share how I see myself with the world.

According to Christopher Jones, in art the reflection in a mirror becomes a portal into an “anti-world” — a more truthful version of our own. This in mind, mirrors in conversation with life are what one can truly never hide from. According to writer Lisa Betz, people hide their true selves because of the fear that something about us that is flawed or deficient will become obvious to others. And when that flawed something is revealed, we will be humiliated, judged, or rejected. While one may try to hide their true selves, a mirror will reflect everything you wish to hide right back at you. No matter how much you try to hide it from those around you, you can never truly keep a secret from yourself as it will always find a way to be seen.

Mirrors reflect your true self back at you but my art project will reflect my true self back at the viewer and offer them an opportunity to see themselves as I see myself but still have the ability to place themselves in the piece. If I added a picture, it would become too impersonal to the viewer so instead I added words to the mirrors. Since many of my pieces need to have a huge labor aspect to them so I feel as if I have put my whole self into them, I would choose engrave them. The act of engraving adds a permanent aspect to the piece as the words, like a branding which would regularly symbolize the ownership. Since the engraving pen I used would spin to chip away at the material, I would often lose control of what I was attempting to write so freehanding the text was no longer an option. I printed out text on paper and would cut it out by hand then tape it onto the mirror as a stencil. This only worked for a few letters as the more I traced, the more the paper would rip and move. I upgraded my printer paper to sticker paper, which solved the problem. The sticker paper would stick well to the surface of the mirror and wouldn't move with the spinning of the engraving pen.

Once I printed the text on sticker paper, I still had to manually cut out every single letter to create the stencil. Adding the aspect of extreme manual labor instead of using available machines to cut my production time significantly had a meaning behind it. Using machines wouldn't allow me to add pieces of myself to each piece like I wanted to. Besides the feeling of exposure I am getting from writing down parts of myself I have always kept hidden from the world, I wanted to feel a bigger sense of connection to the piece and I wouldn't get that with just simple words. By manually cutting the stencils, I made each letter individual and imperfect so each one has a story. Then the act of having to go over each letter enough to scrape off the mirror material creates different depths for each section of the letters, allowing for the viewer to see now much of myself is in every single part.

There are two versions of the piece, the version of myself and the version of my challenges. The version of myself is the one that I put ten times of work into to become my full vulnerable self. This version is also the ones displayed on smaller mirrors to show how my life has always been about me belittling myself and conforming to what I am being told around me. Since all the letters are hand engraved, none of them have clean edges. While the roughness may look accidentally it serves a purpose, the roughness signifies how much I went through to become the perfect child my parents envisioned me to be. It shows all the parts of me that would break to become this perfection that I was never able to achieve and everything of me that I lost forever. This is the same reason as to why the words are scratched on and not see through. The words look like I struggled to write them in but that wasn't true.

For the second version of the conversation, I have mirrors that are three times the size of the ones representing my version. This version is the one representing all the pressures that were put on me and are the traits I was supposed to develop. This version is bigger because it

represents the thing that controls me and ultimately overpower me no matter the fight I try to put up. The text on these mirrors were engraved with a laser engraver, so the letters are very clean and precise. This was done in correlation with the roughness of the words written on the mirrors representing myself. Those were written roughly while these were written precisely to explain how my family wished I was the perfect child, the one who followed all their rules and the one who threw away their life to align with their wishes. While a laser being shot on a mirror would reflect back on itself and cause a fire, I engraved everything backwards on the back of the mirror to avoid a dangerous situation. In Adobe Illustrator, I would flip my text so when I sent it to the laser printer, it would print backwards so when the mirror was flipped, it would look perfect.

Engraving at the depthness I did, allowed me to make the words completely see through. This being the opposite of the representation of myself. When you look in the mirror, the transparent words blend with the mirror and don't obstruct your vision in any way. While on the other hand, the words written with the engraving pen are in your face and hiding parts of the reflection. Abstractly, this means you can't run away from your true self no matter how hard you try because the demons you run from will always be there to face you. You could try cleaning the mirror but those words you fear will never come off so you either accept what is facing back at you or you have to look away from yourself. Once you look away, you may not be seeing the words but they are still there and will always remain. Oppositely, the bigger mirrors don't obstruct your reflection because in the perfect world I was supposed to live in, I am the perfect child, why wouldn't my reflection be just as perfect as the standards set on me? Being engraved in the back also creates the illusion that the words are inside the mirror so they are trapped in the perfect world and will remain there with my reflection since I was never able to achieve the wish placed on me.

The piece is displayed in a corner of the gallery with a wall opposite of the mirrors, this being done to simulate the prison I was condemned to at birth. There only being one entrance and exit is just like the life I was dealt, I either conform to what my parents wish of me or I am trapped until I give up and accept my fate. The wall opposite of the mirrors is there so I can control what can be seen in the reflection of the mirrors, while each person will see their reflection when looking in the mirrors, I will be able to control what is seen behind them. I am leaving this wall blank because I want the viewer to focus on the words and the blankness represents the help I was never given to become the person I wanted to be. I never learned who that person was because I was never given the opportunity to explore who I wanted to be, given all the expectations that were set on me.

An artist I related to both personally and artistically was Mexican American scholar Gloria E. Anzaldua. I focused on her book *Light in the Dark Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* because it was the piece of work she worked on her whole life so it was the perfect example of who she was as a person and an artist. In the book she says “My job as an artist is to bear witness to what haunts us, to step back and attempt to see the pattern in these events (personal and societal), and how we can repair el daño (the damage) by using the imagination and its visions.” (10) Since my whole piece is about discovering who I am even after everything my parents unintentionally put me through growing up, this was one of the quotes my art and I related to the most. Not only because my whole life is coming back to haunt me but because I am using my art as a way to repair everything that is broken. I am using this art project as a way to accept and find who I am so I can finally overcome it all and no longer be defined by what I was raised to be, much as Anzaldua also did. She stated “In these imaginings I process feelings, traumas, negativities resulting from gender, racial, or other oppressions, and I mourn

my losses. These stories— both those I create and those created for me by something outside of myself (soul, spirit, the universe’s consciousness)— nourish me, heal me in ways I don’t completely understand. Estos ensueños serve a healing function.” (34) Just like Anzaldua uses her dreams to heal, I am using art to start my healing journey.

Anzaldua also states that “Every action is the result of a decision, internal conflict, struggle, resolution, or stalemate.” (5) so everyone will have something that will allow them to connect to my piece. Not every viewer will be the child of immigrant parents who were handed nonstop challenges growing up but they will have a struggle that allows them to relate to what the mirrors of the art piece reflect back to them. If that struggle is hidden away, it shall resurface and force acknowledgement.

Diane Arbus was an American photographer who pushed the boundaries of comfort with her art. Often her subjects were “the physically malformed - dwarfs, midgets, giants, twins and transvestites with sideshow relationships to society and physically normal people, whose edge was a fact of their social class and whose condition, like the malformed, was loneliness and the psychological despair of boredom.” She would call her pictures “visual boomerangs” as her camera “reflected the visual confrontations we choose not to have, the appearance of horrors that stop us but are hard to see.” (30) My art, similar to Arbus’, is about having the truth you have hidden down, reflect back at you. While Arbus works with photography and specific subjects and I work with mirrors, both pieces convey the same emotional goal. Arbus likes to use space in her photography to both “literally and figuratively frame the subject and push them out to confront and envelop [the viewer]” (30). She’ll keep her subjects in the middle of the image with minimal background so as to not distract the viewer. For example, *Topless dancer in her dressing room San Francisco, Cal. 1968* taken in 1968 portrays a dancer sitting in the center of a room staring

directly at the camera. Surrounded by very few items and her clothing match the color of the room so your eyes are forced to see her breasts, which are at the very center of the image and the lightest thing visual. While at first glance with society's standards in mind, a viewer would believe this image is about nudity. While its intended goal was actually to portray nakedness and how the "camera has stripped bare the nudist's freedom". (32)

Taking into consideration how one's eyes look at something in front of them, the text engraved on the mirrors takes up most of the empty space so your eyes are forced to read the text, no matter what part of the piece you are observing. As Arbus said once "Everyone has this thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that's what people observe. You see someone on the street and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw." (33). Knowing this is human habit, using mirrors instead of any other artistic medium, forces one to break the cycle and literally look back at one's self and realize not other's flaws, but your own. Arbus once said "a photograph is a secret about a secret." (35) this is also applicable to someone's reflection. You are the only one who can see your reflection at its purest form, with the flaws and imperfections but you would never share what you truly see with others out of the fear of judgment. The same judgment one gives to others, a cycle that never breaks.

In an interview, Genesis Baez talks about images she had of Puerto Rico when she immigrated to the United States, she says "These images were powerful objects, with much assigned to them. They represented other worlds and other lives that I felt an unspoken relationship to. These images were like clues." In this project, I have two different versions of myself, one as I see myself and one as my family sees me. These are the two lives I have grown up in, I had a connection with both but at the same time I had a connection with neither. They were who I was supposed to be or wanted to be but I was never enough of myself for either of

these lives to be true. Like Baez explained more in her project *Otra Vida, Otra Vez* she never quite knows where her world ended and the outside world began. She said “I think it's important to acknowledge the tenuous line between individual and collective histories and trauma.” These feelings are the same ones I had growing up and still struggle with now. I’ve always had two sides of myself but never knew who I was and who the expectations around me were. I had a different life than the kids at my school because of the challenges that came with being a first generation child of an immigrant.

After it all, I learned I still have a long path ahead of me to find and accept myself without the pressures placed upon me by my family. As Gloria E. Anzaldua, Diane Arbus and Genesis Baez did before me, I used this art as a teacher to find myself. Mirrors with text became an extension of myself to share my story with others and to share that challenges only define you, if you allow them to.

Works Cited

ANZALDÚA, GLORIA E. *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by ANALOUISE KEATING. Duke University Press, 2015.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1220hmq>.

Arbus, Diane. *Topless dancer in her dressing room San Francisco, Cal 1968*. 1968. *Moma.Org*.

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/89221>.

Báez, Genesis. *Otra Vida, Otra Vez*. 2011. *Www.Genesisbaez.Com*.

<http://www.genesisbaez.com/otra-vida-otra-vez/0tulwhyp75dv4csohp4cnlkxyxbow>.

Betz, Lisa E. "Why Do I Hide My Authentic Self? - Lisa E Betz." Lisa E Betz - Quietly

Unconventional, October 18, 2021.

<https://lisaebetz.com/2021/10/26/why-do-i-hide-my-authentic-self/>.

Delano, Jack, and Genesis Báez. Interview: Genesis Báez. Other. *Www.Fototazo.Com*, September 11, 2015.

Goldman, Judith. "Diane Arbus: The Gap between Intention and Effect." *Art Journal* 34, no. 1 (1974): 30–35. <https://doi.org/10.2307/775864>.

Jones, Christopher P. "Decoding Reflections: The Meaning of Mirrors in Art." Medium.com, October 2, 2023.

<https://christopherpjones.medium.com/decoding-reflections-the-meaning-of-mirrors-in-art-f7586d923626#:~:text=Artists%20have%20long%20been%20fascinated,otherwise%20lie%20out%20of%20sight>.

Sarah Newman, MA. "Authenticity: The Deep Hurt of Hiding Your True Self." Psych Central, June 25, 2015. <https://psychcentral.com/blog/authenticity-the-deep-hurt-of-hiding-your-true-self#4>.



Diane Arbus *Topless dancer in her dressing room, San Francisco, Cal., 1968.* 1968



Genesis Báez *Otra Vida, Otra Vez*. 2011

Documentation *Can you see me?*, 2024 Engraved & Cracked mirrors

















