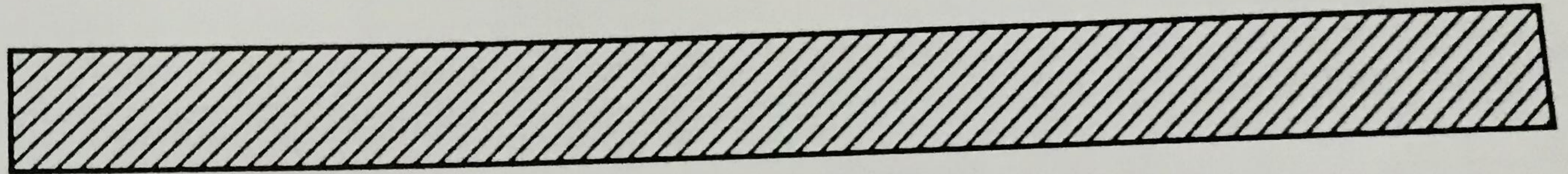
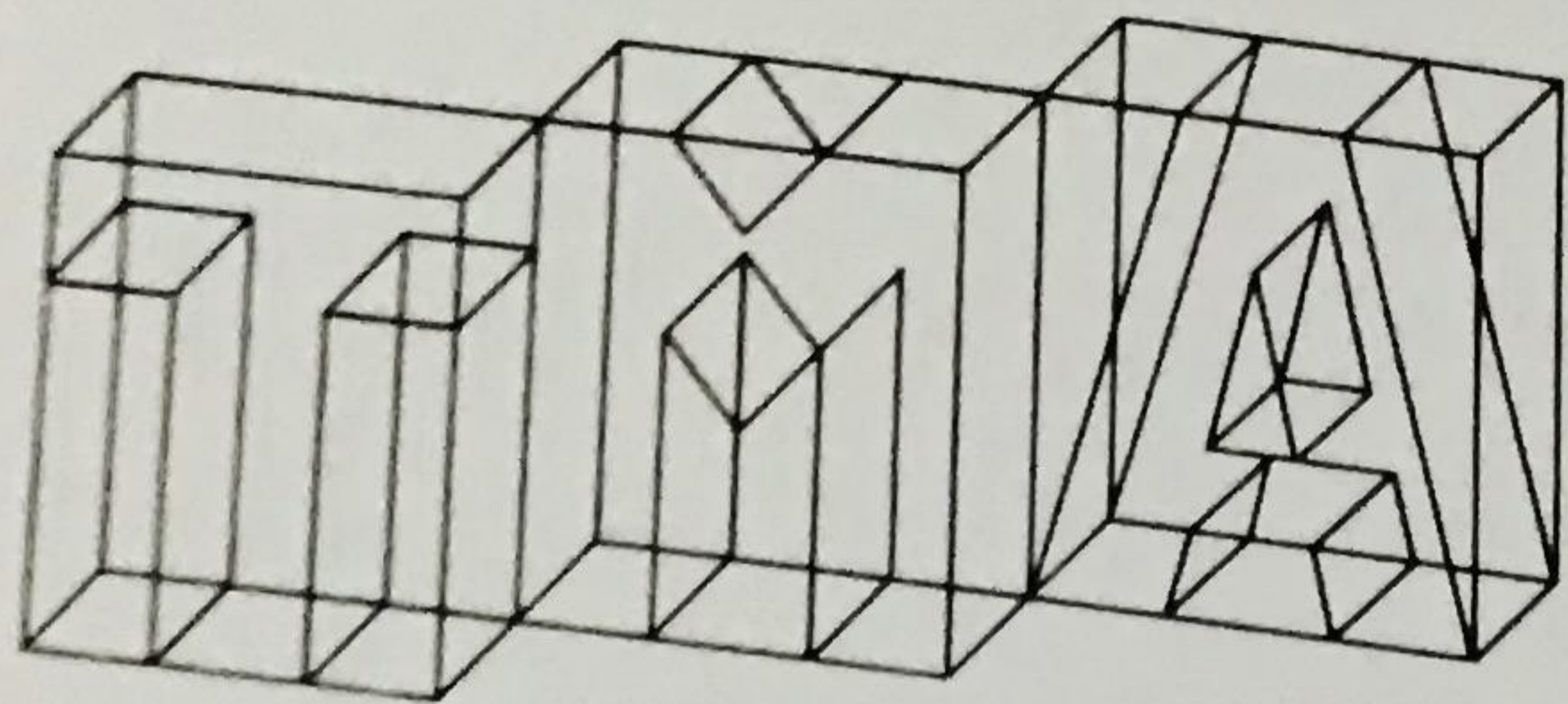
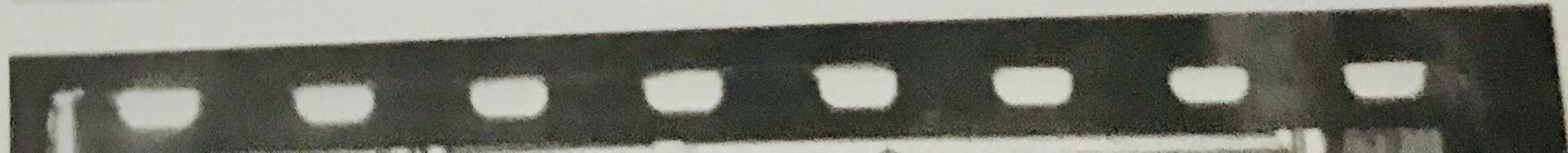


THE
TYLER
MUSEUM
OF ART

Review



Celia Alvarez Munoz
Painting from the Postales Series
See page 2



POSTALES Y SIN REMEDIO: A SERIES OF PAINTINGS AND AN INSTALLATION BY CELIA ALVAREZ MUNOZ

Continuing through Sunday, November 27, 1988
Organized by the Tyler Museum of Art

Celia Alvarez Munoz, a native of El Paso, lives in Arlington, Texas. She received a BA degree from the University of Texas at El Paso and, several years later, returned to school to complete an MFA degree from North Texas State University. Currently, she teaches art at the University of Texas at Arlington.

This year, Ms. Munoz's work is included in the "Texas Women Exhibition" at the National Museum of Women in Art in Washington, D.C., and in exhibitions at the Center for Book Arts in New York, the Long Beach Museum of Art in California, and DW Gallery in Dallas. Her art, completed in many forms including books, paintings, and installation works, is in many public and private collections including those of Atlantic Richfield Company, Harvard University, Frito-Lay, Inc., and Stanford University.

The following remarks by Ms. Munoz are excerpted from an August, 1988 interview with Ron Gleason.

"Although we moved a lot during my childhood, we always lived close to the Rio Grande river on the border between Mexico and Texas. There were many stories about happenings near the river, the struggles of illegals crossing, sometimes there were gunfights.

During the early 1940's, my father left for the war and so my mother worked and we lived with my grandmother. I had a very religious upbringing. I went to six elementary schools, some of them Catholic. My grandmother was very religious, very reverent. She believed that biting your fingernails was a sin—but she gave me unconditional love. My grandmother had eight children but only four lived. She gave us our family history and told us religious stories, stories of the saints and funny stories. She wrote poems about different members of the family and they were usually funny, too. Aunt Lulu was at home, though she worked occasionally, and she was very smooth, very glamorous, always buying things for us and for herself. She liked to draw and drew beautifully. Later, Mom and I moved but we lived in an area that included many other women whose husbands were away at war and we made our own, close community. My Mom had a lot of strength and like

my grandmother, was reverent. I always saw her as a very strong person. She was very stubborn, though, very blunt and outspoken.

Both sides of my family were very articulate but Dad's family was larger, more clannish and they were more humorous. They poked fun at each other constantly and enjoyed a sense of the absurd. Dad's side of the family had a lot of talent, too. I remember cousin Chony. He was a zoot-suiter and dressed immaculately—baggy gabardine pants and a top feather in his hat. He was a real romantic guy with a pencil-thin mustache. He hung around with a lot of celebrities from Mexico. He had his own broadcasting station that was heard in a small radius around the neighborhood and the celebrities would come and jam with him. They cut records and we would get to hear them.

Mom's side of the family was more intimate. They weren't loud and boisterous like Dad's family. That was the big difference between Mom and Dad. Mom often called him a ruffian. She held things more reverently and he was totally irreverent. It confused me for a long time until the absurdity became funny and we came to look forward to seeing those moments of tension between the two. Sometimes, we would make bets to see how those moments would end or how the situation would evolve.

During the 1950's, when I was ready to attend high school, the school system asked for volunteers to attend high schools outside our own district. It was an early form of busing. I volunteered to attend the high school in the north so I didn't attend the one that pertained to my neighborhood. The fact that I had jumped around to so many schools made me very adaptable. I didn't feel that there was any broken time if I did go and I kept friends in and out of the neighborhood.

It was a typical fifties high school experience: drug stores, drive-in movies, roller-skating car hops, lots of parties...house parties all over the city since I went to high school in the north and knew kids all over the city. I got around El Paso pretty well. It was a full high school experience.

I went regularly to Juarez to shop.

Mom always shopped on both sides of the border and so the duality started early, you know, where you are two things. Being aware of both worlds meant that I couldn't be just one person, just one thing. It made me feel more an observer than a participant, no matter what group I was with.

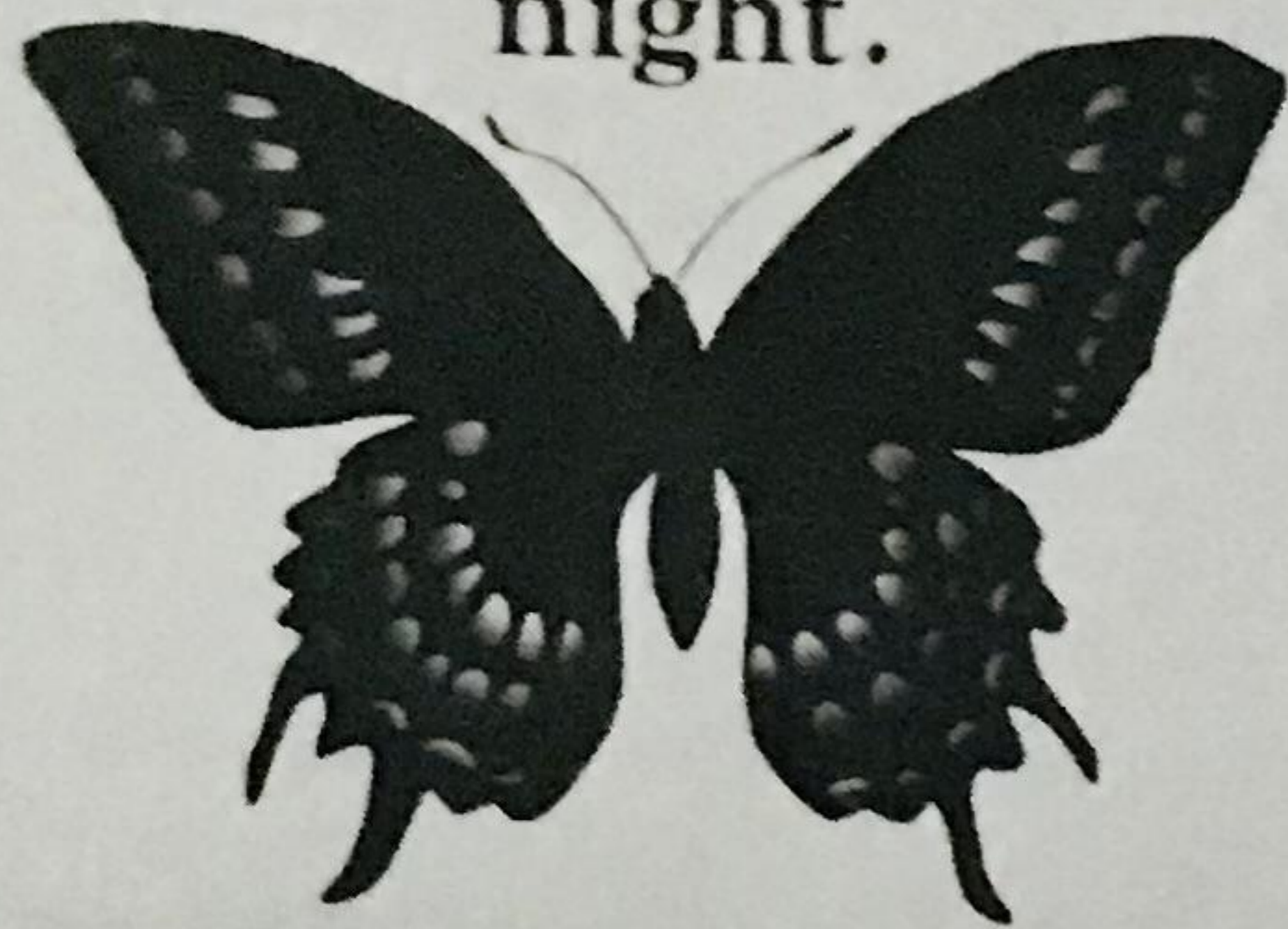
I started making art as early as I can remember. Aunt Lulu, who liked to draw, gave me drawing pencils and I started drawing. Then I started saving my allowance, every penny of it, so that I could buy art supplies—pencils and tablets—and I just drew endlessly. I was encouraged by my grandmother, too. She told me stories about her father, who was raised in a monastery by the priests and developed the skill to paint murals in the church.

My friends and I read a lot of comic books. We all had stacks of comic books and we would swap them... every Saturday we would go around and swap them. That was our entertainment. There was no television then, so that's what we would do. And we read. Mom was a real avid reader so there was always a library card to be used. She liked the classics and read a lot of them to me. I took language and dance classes but the art was more solitary. A couple of my friends drew but even when we worked together, it was a solitary experience for me and I liked that. In high school, I took some art classes but I never expected to go to college. I thought I was going to work and help the family the way everybody else did.

When I got out of high school, I realized that I wanted more. I didn't want to be part of the furniture in the office pool. I had been going to college part-time and had earned some credits but I knew that I would never get finished if I kept going part-time. I went to the Peyton Foundation. It was established by the Peyton (meat) Packing Plant to give grants for vocational training. I was their first college loan and it was terrific. They gave me a monthly stipend and I studied art. I experienced college life without having to worry about money and that was really fun.

I began by taking commercial art. Many of the classes were taught by men and women who worked in adver-

She even stayed
to play a game,
Los Encantdos, The
Enchanted,
with us on the holy
church grounds that
night.



tising agencies and I loved the brainstorming sessions. I took some fine art classes, too, and fell in love with that area of art. When I was able to go to school full-time, fine art became my area of study. During college, I continued to have two worlds: friends from the old neighborhood, and the new friends from college. Still the split, the duality. After I graduated, I went into teaching. The Peyton Foundation let me pay back my loan with a combination of artwork and money. It meant they took my choice of college study seriously and I appreciated that.

Like a conventional fifties girl, I married a year after finishing college. I continued to teach for four years and then we started our family. My husband, Andy Munoz, had a degree in civil engineering. After working several years for the Texas Highway Department, he accepted an offer to work for the federal government and we began to move around the country. We moved from El Paso to Albany, New York. Then we moved back to El Paso where I had a second child. Then we made other moves to Washington, D.C.; Vancouver, British Columbia; Portland, Oregon; and then back to Texas. It was a great experience. I worked at raising our kids but something was missing. I had a small relationship with art. I taught privately and piddled around. That's what it was, not anything serious. But I kept looking at art. When we were in New York, Washington, D.C., and Portland. I looked at art and there was a longing—I knew I had a deficiency. A year after we returned to Texas, I

decided to go back to graduate school. I'd waited until my children could operate a microwave and fend for themselves. We lived in a nice neighborhood in Arlington and after I'd made my decision it seemed that all the women here were returning to school. It just seemed that we all decided at the same time. All of our kids were about the same age. It made it easier. We looked after each other's children when we weren't in class.

I enrolled at North Texas State University, an hour's drive away. At first, I felt very much removed, an observer rather than a true participant. I made no bones about being competent, but I was eager to learn and soon responded to the challenge and stimulation of graduate school. Aside from the regular program of classes and studio work, we made visits to museums outside the city and I read extensively. I became very interested in conceptual, performance, and narrative art. During that time, Laurie Anderson came to the campus, performed, and visited with us about her work. I learned much from talking with Al Souza, though I never took his classes, and from Ashley Walker whose feminist thought became a strong influence on me.

In terms of making my own art, a very strange thing happened. I had always made art that made some reference to what I saw around me but I thought that as I learned more, I would make use of new content in my work. Instead, I made more liberal—and literal—use of my own background. I had written verse when I was in high school and wanted to use

writing in my work. I was just beginning to discover the narrative artists when I enrolled in a class taught by Vernon Fisher. At the time I didn't know that he used language in his art. I had just heard that he was a very strong teacher and thought that I should take a class from him. He challenged the organization and relationship of my words and the use of two languages. I had used both languages before but he demanded that I be very aware of how I used them together. At first, I resented that because I was trying to draw on my intuition and subconscious and his approach seemed to deny that possibility to me. With his advice, my works grew more fluid, more challenging.

That's when I started reading more, too. People pointed out to me that my work was, in some way, connected to the works of the South American writers: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Borges, and others. I read them and it was fertile ground for me. I began to understand and adapt to more contemporary thought and concerns. I became more interested in photography, plays, and rekindled my interest in film and other forms including television and popular culture. I like Martin Scorsese's films, Gunter Grass, Sam Shepard's work, a lot of the Mexican films—the more kitsch the better—and Mexican variety shows on television. When I was a kid, there were film versions of those shows shown in the theatres in El Paso and I like seeing them again, now.

I traveled with my husband, Andy, whenever I could and I would be sure to visit exhibitions, and meet artists whenever I could. I got in touch with other Hispanic artists. More recently, there have been several exhibitions of contemporary Hispanic art and I've been able to see them and meet many of the artists. One exhibition—"Chulas Fronteras"—organized by Benito Huerta from Houston, has become a pivotal, important show to me. Some of the shows were disappointing but all of that has led to some really good, important friendships among other Hispanic artists.

The "Postales" series I've created is from an old idea I've had and that I wanted to create for a grand scale. I've kept the idea tucked away for some time. The works demanded a large scale and the size of the galleries at the Tyler Museum of Art made that possible. The idea began during one of my visits back to El Paso. My family's absurd humor plays a role...it makes me a more objective observer of my culture. I began to delight in finding visual eccentricities in the neighborhoods and I started making photographs of them. At first, I made them only in El Paso but soon found

others to photograph in Dallas and Fort Worth. Now I find them wherever I go.

When people leave a place and move on, the physical and visual cultural systems they rely on are disrupted. I saw it first during the Johnson Administration when he returned ownership of the Chamizal to Mexico. All of the old neighborhoods were done away with because this big chunk of land was given back to Mexico. All the people living there had to move somewhere else and resettle. They moved to homes that were not like those they had left. I was interested in the things they did to make them their own...the visual and physical references they would provide themselves...the things they did to identify these homes as part of their culture. They would paint them wild, indigenous colors and would add paraphernalia in the front and back yards. I thought that was a wonderful thing. I made a small book with hand-tinted black and white photographs of those houses and they seemed a parallel to the souvenir postcards that people buy. Postales...postcards.

When I was asked to exhibit in Tyler, I thought of them. I've always wanted to make a statement of them that is more bravado, a celebration of this assimilation and reconstitution of culture. Some people might think these works irreverent but I think they're wonderfully irreverent. Being



able to laugh at oneself is important and I think I do that. I used the airbrush to paint because it's such a slick medium and can be used to romanticize an image, remove any imperfection. It's widely used in commercial art for that purpose. I wanted these paintings to be like Wrigley's gum commercials, Walt Disney movies, and Vargas girls that I grew up seeing.

I saw "Postales" as a giant book, yet the fine crafting that goes into making books was displaced. I put my efforts more into choosing the right components. The canvases are not stretched. I wanted some freedom, looseness in the presentation of these works. The books I make are meant to be presented in a certain, very controlled way. The "Postales" series doesn't demand that. It does, however, seem to demand connections between each

image, between the images and the story, and between the story panel and the illustrations I've added to them.

Most of my stories are about breaking the rules when the characters may — or may not — know what the rules are. The "Postales" story is about a little girl who did not fit in and who ultimately stood ground and retained her difference between something familiar and something not familiar. It is very much a strength, a deliberate strength. Even though she has worn an orange dress when white is required and everyone laughs at her, she remains. She's not overlooked but she is accepted. The street signs in the "Postales" series are a third element that allow me to poke fun of the play between the two languages. I use north and south in the signs to describe Spanish names spoken by English and vice versa. It shows the adaptation, adoption, and damage each makes on the other's language. I used insects and bugs on the text panels because they seem natural and logical expressions of the garden that is part of the story. The bugs give a closer sign of the garden and I like to look at them. There are other elements to consider if you're observant. There are no handles on the doors of the houses because I have a reverence for privacy. You can go only so far. And though I didn't add them, the roses all have thorns. Even in Tyler, no hay rosas sin espinas."