

New Jersey City University

Presents

# ***LENTE LATINE / LATIN LENS***

Curated by Natali Bravo-Barbee



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Since 1968, each year from September 15 to October 15 has been celebrated as National Hispanic Heritage Month. It is important not only in South America but also throughout the world in countries where the connections have been imprinted by history or where a significant population of Latin communities reside; the United States is a great example that includes both.

In 2023, the exhibition “*Latin American Artists: Dreams and Possibilities*” was held between September 13 and November 15. This year the NJCU Art Gallery didn't miss it out either and exhibited a set of collective works by 13 contemporary photographers from the East Coast that explore the essence of Latin culture and diaspora, considering many personal experiences.



[https://www.instagram.com/lente\\_latine/](https://www.instagram.com/lente_latine/)

The inauguration of the exhibition was on September 24 from 4-7 p.m. At the entrance, Central American snacks and beverages were welcoming visitors while the featured photographers gave a talk about their work and the process. It began with the talk of the exhibition curator, Natali Bravo-Barbee. She welcomed everyone and introduced the participating artists one by one; each one gave a short talk explaining their work and the important data of their artistic career, with a clear connection and relationships with Latin society.

It was very interesting to hear the personal experiences and a point of view about the Latin heritage from people directly connected with it and who have been connected for generations through their families, so at the end of the speech I couldn't miss the opportunity to talk personally and interview the artists. I invite you to read those interviews attached below:

## **Natali Bravo-Barbee — @barbee\_bravo**

*–Good afternoon, Natali. This is your first time curating an exhibition, right?*

Natali: Yes, for a show like that. I had already done an independent publication, and I had also worked behind the scenes with other curators, but this is the first time that I took all the information and put it in a show.

*–There was already an exhibition at NJCU last year during National Hispanic Heritage Month in which you participated as a photographer. How does it feel now to participate for the first time in something bigger as curator of the exhibition?*

Natali: It's exciting; it's really a dream to make it real, but it's also taking the information I have as a photographer, putting it, and organizing it in a way that helps to understand how I see photography personally. So I don't have a job here, but through how I have put all these photographers together and connected it, you can see how I see the photography.

*–Is that why your work has not been published because you wanted to focus on your work as a curator?*

Natali: Yes, someone also once told me that it's bad vibes to put yourself in a show when you're a curator.

*–Who told you this? Were there many people?*

Natali: A few people I admire who are artists. I asked them if they publish their work in their show, and they told me that I shouldn't do that, so I said, OK, but how can I make my hand visible without putting my work on it? So the only photo of me is my self-portrait with my son's camera, which shows that I am also a photographer. So I put the photos of all the artists with their cameras in hand because that was something important to me, but the only photo of me here is very small in the brochure.

*–Did you put the other artists with a handheld camera because you hold your son's handheld camera in your self-portrait? Is it a special memory of yours?*

Natali: No, this is not the reason. It's because when I see photo exhibitions, the photographer is not usually shown. For years I have been thinking about how I would do a show, and the first thing would be to have a photo of the artists because photographers don't show themselves much. By nature, we are very hidden and always behind the camera. Also, when I look at a photo, as a photographer, I always wonder if the camera was digital or analog. So, that's why I based the photos on the artists' biographies.

*–Thank you very much; that is very interesting. I saw on your Instagram that you have many works in blue color. Does that have anything to do with the Argentine flag?*

Natalia: Sure, it's the main reason. When I learned the printing process, I fell in love and decided that in this way I am going to express the colors of my country, but with my photographer's language.

*–The last question: I understand that you want to focus on the fact that Latin history is written in blood. Is it your intention to capture it because you don't want this part of the history of Latin people to be forgotten, or did it also affect your family ancestors personally?*

Natali: It is to remember that we still have the blood and are still part of our ancestors. So, to revive that idea that this is what we have within us, and this keeps us more unified because Latinos are very diverse... and this is what unites us.



STORIES & INSIGHTS

## Meet Natali Bravo-Barbee



[https://www.instagram.com/barbee\\_bravo/](https://www.instagram.com/barbee_bravo/)

Once again, I want to emphasize that Natali is the curator of this exhibition, and it is her first time but very successful in this complex work—being a curator. It was very curious to see how the main blue color of her work is related to the flag of her country of origin, Argentina. But as she said, initially the blue color was due to the imprint process, called cyanotype. It is a monochrome photographic procedure that makes a negative copy of the original photo in a Prussian blue color. In this way she connects her favorite technique as a photographer and her Argentine roots, not evident at first glance without first getting to know her as a Latin person.

She also very accurately noticed and defined the psychological traits of photographers. They exhibit and show a lot of what they see, be it photo sessions of other people or objects, anything, but they are not very fond of showing themselves. I've never thought about this before.

**Cesar Melgar — @supapoupon**

*–Good afternoon. Cesar, Originally, you are from Peru and Colombia; since what age have you lived in Newark?*

Cesar: All my life, I was born here.

*–You are inspired by topics such as politics, history, and the Latino community. What political issues specifically interest you the most: immigration, government, financial issues?*

Cesar: Financial, economic issue. In 1967 there was a very big protest in the city where I grew up (Newark), many businesses were burned, and the result of that is that many of them closed and many people left the city, leaving it to rot...

*–All or almost all of your works are in black and white; in them are empty abandoned places, scenes with no people. I understand that with this you wanted to show the economic situation in Newark: crisis and abandonment of the city.*

Cesar: Yes, in my work the period when the money has returned to the city is also present; now there is more interest in Newark because life in New York is very expensive, so there are people moving again.

*–So the second part of your work talks about immigration, when people return to Newark. And speaking of history, this exhibition opens with the assertion that Latin history is written in blood. In your work, do you have any intention of capturing the Latino community or history, or do you only talk about Newark and the United States?*

Cesar: I think that when you talk about life in this city, you automatically include Latino life, because many of the people who live and work here are Latino.

*–Yes, I understand. Thank you so much!*





<https://www.instagram.com/supapoupon/>

Cesar's work considers the socio-economic issues of the Latino community living on the east coast. The crisis seems to be associated with the black and white colors and the absence of people with the abandoning of the city in search of a better life elsewhere.

The crisis he talked about is called the Newark riots, when in 1967 an armed conflict caused by the constant repression of the black population by the police in the streets of Newark, New Jersey, occurred and led to 26 deaths, hundreds of serious injuries, and the city's buildings being damaged and burned after this rapid and massive depopulation happened in Newark. Hence the Newark factories, deindustrialization, and suburbanization landscapes are present in his photography.

**Jacqueline Herranz Brooks — @camioneera**

*–Good afternoon; you are from Cuba. Until what age did you live there?*

Jacqueline: I was born there, and I came to NYC when I was already 31 years old. So I lived almost all my life in Cuba until 1999, when I came here.

*–Just a year ago, you participated in the panel discussion “Latin American Art and Politics,” which also happened at NJCU Art Gallery during the National Spanish Heritage Month. What are the fields that interest you the most: Cuban politics, the relationship between Latin America and the US, immigration, the Latin community in general, the crisis, or the dictatorship of Cuba, if that is what you can call it?*

Jacqueline: In my personal opinion, I believe that at this point it can be called that. I am very interested in the dynamics of the foreign affairs of the United States because it affected me in Cuba and it still affects me here, which is why I always think that this connection with land policies changes people's lives. For example, I studied photography in La Havana; I graduated in 1989. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, so the photography material that came from democratic Germany to Cuba stopped its exportation, so I graduated from photography school, but I had no materials at all; it was very expensive, so I couldn't be a photographer. I ended up writing and living in the US.

*–Right now your mother lives in Cuba. When you go to visit her, have you ever suffered discrimination on the US or Cuba border?*

Jacqueline: I go regularly every year. At the United States border, I have never had problems, but when I go to Cuba, there have been discrimination problems because when I arrive from the US to the Cuban border, there is always a suspicion that you could be a disruptive element that goes to bring the enmity.

*–You are also a writer. Do you have any written work on this topic that you want to mention?*

Herranz Brooks, J., (2011). *Mujeres sin Trama (Spanish Edition)*.

Herranz Brooks, J., (2003). *Escenas para turistas (Spanish Edition)*.

Herranz Brooks, J., (2020). *Contested Territory. Poesía Repatriada*.

*–When the COVID-19 pandemic began, you had the chance to work at home, and you started making postcards to be able to communicate with your relatives in this way by including texts to photos or photos to texts. What is more important, and what comes first? I guess the text as you are a writer.*

Jacqueline: Actually it is not, the photo comes first, a visualization of an image, and what closes a project is the text. In my country there are many people who cannot read or who cannot write, and therefore they do not have access to writings, and that is what I constantly think about as to how else people can communicate in addition to reading and how else you can learn.

–You took the photos with the iPhone 9 camera; why didn't you use the common camera?

Jacqueline: *It's interesting because I really didn't think I was going to take any photos in the park when I went there. So the only thing I had was the phone; I didn't have the camera. That day I was feeling emotionally unstable, and then I realized that walking in the park was like a ritual that relaxes me. Before, I was focused rather on urban landscapes as I worked on trucks, so nature for me is very unusual. Nature photography has a strong impact on Latin Americans because landscape photography is really what was South America without population—that image of a virgin land before the colonizers came. So the idea of landscape photography always seemed to me a bit rejected, but this virgin land was here in the US too.*



<https://www.instagram.com/camioneera/>

It is generally believed that the descendants of the Latins had lived in isolation until the arrival of Europeans from Norway in the 10th century and the discovery of America in 1492 by Christopher Columbus under the protection, support, and financial sponsorship of the Spanish crown, kings Isabel I and Fernando II de Castilla and Aragon, who authorized him to organize a voyage and explore a new land, which we know today as America. Since then, constant exploitation of the land has started. Latin America is a newly developed continent compared to Europe, so that further highlights its connection with nature. In Latin America, veneration for Mother Earth has a strong impact on the people and deep roots dating back to the indigenous Inca, Mayan, and Aztec cultures. So the reason why Jacqueline talks about the importance of nature for the Latino population is very appropriate for this gallery.

Everyone knows that since the Cold War began, relations between the United States and Cuba have been and still remain tense. Since Jacqueline lived there until she was 31, she can tell a lot from personal experience.



## Gabriel García Roman — @gbrlgrcrmn

*–You are from Mexico but grew up in Chicago, and at the age of 22, you moved to New York. Was that because there is more demand for art in New York than in Chicago?*

Gabriel: I actually was not an artist when I moved to New York; I started my career as a photographer only after some years living here. But apart from photography, I also do sculpture and design.

*–I saw on your Instagram that almost all of your work has Latin inspiration; even though you grew up in the United States, you still have a strong relationship with Mexico.*

Gabriel: Yes, it's because my parents never learned to speak English despite living in the US, so I grew up with Spanish music, television, and conversations, so this connection is never removed.

*–You are a member of the Latin Association of Arts and Culture, since what year?*

Gabriel: 2016

*–Your work is the largest in the exhibition. You made a portrait of your father, who, by the way, looks a lot like you. You say you examine the politics of identity, your father photography which is in this exhibition, also seems a bit delusional to me, as if there are 2 or 3 identities there, as you have put together a mosaic collage of different photographs into one. Is a politics of identity theme presented there?*

Gabriel: Most of my art work deals with themes of identity; I have done many photographs of QTPoC queer icons. But in this particular work, it is not figured out. It is in memory of my father who has been very important to me.

*–Your father died when you were working on a photo shoot; this gives even more strength to the message that photography is a tremendous way of capturing moments and keeping them alive.*

Gabriel: I had never thought about that, but it's true. I always remember this: when I knew he passed away, I was doing my job, and here he is presented in a photo.

*–In this exhibition, you are not the only one who presented a work of your father; Josephina Moran and Orestes Gonzales also presented a photo of their mothers. Was that the intention of any collective message?*

Gabriel: Well, we didn't intend to convey a collective message. I think it's because in the Latino community families are also usually larger; they give a lot of importance to the relationship with parents, although they can also be more complicated.

*–It's very interesting that without talking about it, you, Josephina, and Orestes took photos of your parents. This means that family is very important in the Latin community, especially the mother and father. You also put gold paint on the frame; I know that you made that frame. Is that because you have experience in ceramics and sculpture?*

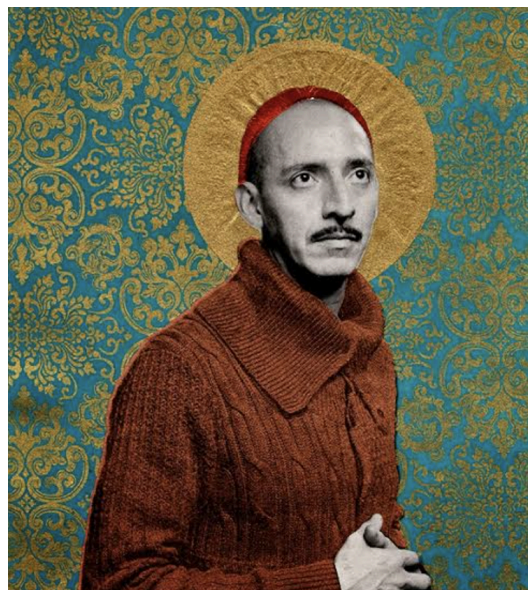
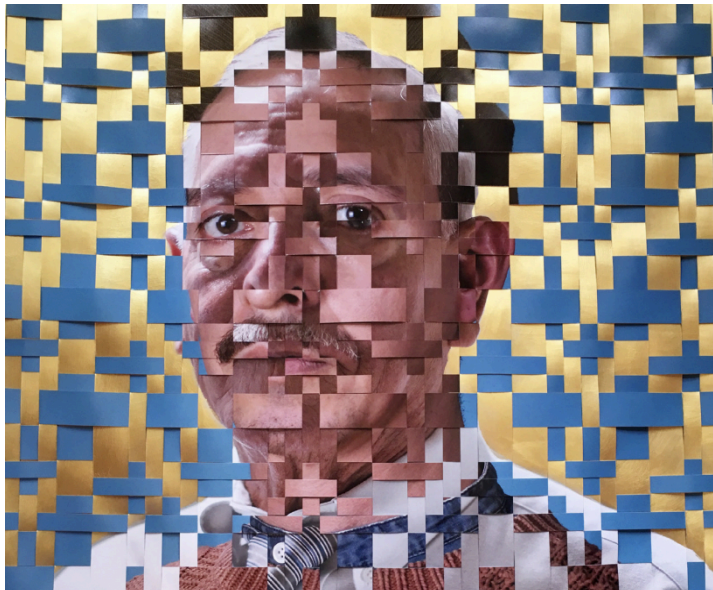
Gabriel: Apart from that, I have experience making frames for my art works. I use wood that I have recycled, and instead of throwing it away, I reuse it.

*–Do you usually work with recycled materials?*

Gabriel: A lot of my work is recycled; that is what my dad used to do: recycle metal or other materials from broken furniture and appliances to make money by selling it.

*–I understand that your father did it for financial reasons, but do you want to support eco-activism?*

Gabriel: For multiple reasons, but mainly because I grew up with a father who didn't throw anything away and used and reused everything; for him it was because of financial problems, but for me this remains as a pattern and links me with him.



<https://www.instagram.com/gbrlgrcmn/>

Gabriel's work and personal artistic career are one of the most complex for me among the photographers participating in this exhibition. He deals with many difficult and complicated issues today, such as identity politics. The term "identity politics" gained traction in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s to designate art that deals with issues of identity (especially race, gender, and sexuality). QTPOC/QTWOC: An abbreviation for Queer & Trans People of Color and Queer & Trans Women of Color. Gabriel has his own website where there is a special section for his works called Queer Icons where he represents images of different queer people with a limbo behind their head as if referring to a Christian saint. The paradox is that in Christianity, LGBTQ is still considered a sin in most cases.

Another very important topic that he deals with is the topic of relationships between children and Latino parents. My best friend is from Colombia, and I have always been surprised by the strong bond she has with her mother. Talking to Gabriel, I understood that it is a collective thing that the Latino community has. In 2016, Gabriel held an exhibition in memory of his father called *To My Father* at the Gallery Aferro in Newark, which once again reinforced the strong bond he had with his father. I find his works to be very profound, and the topics are widely expanded.