

Interview with Celeste De Luna

MAGDA GARCÍA

Celeste De Luna is a painter/printmaker from the Rio Grande Valley, Texas. She received her MFA from the University of Texas Pan American in 2008. She has shown artwork in group exhibitions since 2007 in the various cities in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, San Antonio, Houston, Austin, San Diego and Chicago. Additionally, De Luna's work has been part of nationally and internationally exhibited printmaking portfolio projects. De Luna continues to explore the geo-political aspects of post-911 militarization of her environment such as border walls, drones, checkpoints, and bridges. Other influences on De Luna's work are the writing and art of Gloria Anzaldúa, political graphic art, and the nature of evil. Her work is featured in *Entre Guadalupe y Malinche: Tejanas in Literature and Art* (2015).

Artist's Statement: My work is a tool to understand and deconstruct oppressive paradigms in my physical/spiritual/psychic environment. I explore the complexity of relationships of borderland people and landscape. Common themes in my work include migrant/border experiences of women, children, families, Texas landscape, the spiritual struggle of conflicting identities, and "survivor's

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guilt”. Common iconography frequently features razor wire, fences, bridges, and anchor babies. By mapping geopolitical aspects of my environment, I understand myself better. Post-911 militarization of my homeland has been the catalyst of *conocimiento* for me, a concept written about by Xicana lesbian thinker Gloria Anzaldúa. Sometimes, I use my imagination to create narratives in which I use my family and myself as characters. In this way, I explore the concept of “You are the other me.” By imagining myself as the other, my borderland narratives take on a personal and feminist viewpoint that contradicts superficial “border violence” stereotypes.

Magda: Thank you for agreeing to do the interview with me. I was really excited to see the *Taller de Permiso*.

Celeste: I’m glad you like it. We’ve came up with this idea of trying to help local entrepreneurs with being more integrated in the formal business economy in Brownsville [...] Because we’re seeing a lot of them who are doing garage sales in their home-based businesses. Just sort of absorbing city fines [...] You know, a lot of it has to do with class.

M: Definitely.

C: And the formal business economy is, you know, kind of like the people who’ve been around for a long time and they’re established in the community. And, you know, these small business people who are doing these garage sales are more recent immigrants a lot of the times. Maybe from a different class. And I think that division is something that we’re really hoping that we can fix. And because there’s just so much militarization and policing on the border, I really, we really, felt like we really need to give people permission to act. We started thinking. We started with how can we do this? How can we help people come up with this? And I felt like the idea of *bendición* was a good concept to put it in because it was a blessing and something spiritual which I really feel like *Las Imaginistas* are really kind of trying to embody in our work...how like when your mom before you leave the house you ask for permission. Or you ask for a *bendición*. [...] It’s just a really lovely sort of way to get permission and we thought, yeah, we can give permission to each other to do these things that we want to do, to dream, to act, to start a business, and that’s where we came up with the idea for it, the idea for *bendición*.

M: Yeah, that's really great, and I appreciate the different levels that you all mentioned, the permission to dream, to know, and to act.

C: The collective, *Las Imaginistas*, has just been a blessing to work with, an all women collective. I feel that I have never been in a situation where I feel my voice really matters and we're all equal. We're in this together and when I say something they listen and I never feel as I have in other work situations where my voice may not be as welcomed or not as valued. Every step of the way has been such a blessing.

M: That's really great, especially thinking along with these different forms of acting and giving people permission to act. Also thinking, as you mention, the different class layers in the valley of South Texas, which we tend to see as predominantly Mexican but there's so many divisions. Yeah, and it's so class-based and we tend to have what we term as "Mexican nationals," right [...] Who tend to be wealthier, and they're able to establish themselves formally a lot quicker, especially when thinking about having the freedom to move away from cartel violence [...] Having the freedom to do that. And I always try to get that across to people too. It's like, no, there are these really stark divisions here.

C: There are people who are more established and have money but maintain national connections, which takes money too [...] Because if you're poor and you've been fleeing violence and then you establish yourself in the valley, you're kind of stuck, that's it. You can't go back to the other side; you can't get out of the valley. So, you're kind of stuck and then the people with freedom, the freedom to move, you have money, you have resources, you know how to navigate the system. You might even know people who can help you [...] Take a shortcut with the consulate in Brownsville or whatever. You might be able to move your paperwork a little bit faster because of that, and so those people, they'll have resources, they have cars, they have money, they have papers [...] And they can move back and forth a lot easier and, you know, we have people who are a lot more middle class[...] Mexican-American people, which I think I'm sort of part of now [...] I kind of consider myself like sort of in that area [...] people who kind of, we've lived here in the valley, we've had family. My parents were a lot poorer than I am now. So I've been on that other side where it's really hard to do things.

M: Right, definitely. And, yeah, I think I'm occupying that space as well. So coming into that space of becoming middle-class. My parents, it really struck a chord with

me when you mentioned informal economies, because, I mean, we live out in a *colonia*, and we live there because that's where my parents were able to purchase land, to begin with... It was through informal economies, with my father trading different kinds of construction services with others, who would then come help us with installing tile. Some, of course, undocumented, or if they're documented but they don't have the city permits, right, to be doing these kinds of things [...] That's how our house got built. That's how we even managed to do that.

C: Well, I guess you didn't need all of those permits because *colonias* are outside of the system.

M: Definitely.

C: Which, I mean, it was good and it was bad, right? Because it made it possible for some people to afford things, but then the standard of living is very low sometimes [...] And then the cities would forget about them and perpetuate that system, you know. It would have been radical, if they would be like, oh, yeah, you can kind of live how you want, but they won't try to help you.

M: It's like, stay hidden.

C: Sure, yeah. My mom participated in those informal economies, you know, making tamales, selling them, doing little things here and there. A lot of people in Brownsville are doing that. They got their little business going, whether it be *Charro* Days dresses or *quince* dresses. Food economies, that's how a lot of people live [...] It's really just something that I think is fascinating. I think it will be really incredible to take all of that, those resources and value them and not see them as a deficit. Which I feel like maybe the formalized system kind of doesn't balance well, you know. Or the formalized system says, these vendors need this and they need that.

M: And in your video and written description you mention decolonizing the imagination. Which is great.

C: Decolonizing, I mean, it's a constant thing, right? Where you're constantly trying to figure out. Colonization can be so deeply ingrained and we want to decolonize the imagination and see what we can do to help people, not just ourselves. We don't have to

stay within this one system, there's more. And at least to be able to start those possibilities. Just the dreaming part, for some people, that's revolutionary. Like, wow, I could do this. Maybe I really could [...] And I mean really when you think about like some of the things that you've never done once you realize like, wow, I could really do that... I really, really could. I could make art [...] You know or I could write that Ph.D. paper [...] Or I could go to college [...] I could be independent, you know [...] I can take care of myself.

M: Yes [...] I'm sort of backtracking a little bit, but I know you mentioned, along the lines of gender, that now you feel you have a voice in this collective [...] Do you want to speak a little bit to that because, thinking about sexism, about all of these different intersectionalities, you said you feel as an equal in the collective with these other *mujeres*. And that sense of permitting, right? That sort of *permiso* that you're getting, right, to act too? [...]

C: And then also you know really being able to express my feelings with these women about what I think has made that easier. I think that when you feel safe, you can say the things you really wanna say or give voice to those crazy ideas. You know, it was great. And for me, brainstorming or thinking about creative ideas has always been a very free-flowing type of thing and usually, I do it alone. Um, writing, drawing, thinking, cleaning, things like that. Uh, but with Nansi and Christina it became a very open brainstorming type of, we're talking, we're brain —like you know, and I was like, I remember one day Christina was you know I had been throwing out some ideas and we all were throwing out ideas and things were going well but then one day I realized, oh, she's waiting for me to have an idea [...] Because I hadn't, because I mean for me it was more like we were just having a conversation and like the ideas were coming but then I became a lot more aware of, oh, we're actually brainstorming and she wants me to come up with some kind of something and um, I remember feeling a little self-conscious about that... Because, um, I had never been in a situation where people were like, yes, more, tell us more, give us more, right? It's more like where I've been in the situations where like [...] Hold your horses up, you know, lady. Calm down [...] And with Christina and Nansi, it wasn't like that. it was like, oh, let's go for the craziest most radical ideas that we can. And it was amazing, it was magic.

M: Yeah, I know, it's been great. I mean I know you had been working with Nansi before, with Nansi Guevara. And now to have this fruition, right, of this collective. And that is all about, and I don't even want to use the word empowering because

sometimes it sounds so white liberal, right? Because that's not what you're doing. You're doing something else, like the *bendición*, giving a *bendición* to others in the community as well. I think that's really profound.

C: I agree, I think, uh, just having within ourselves allows us to really be able to try to find a really authentic way to share that with others. I think that's what we really want.

M: Yeah, that's great. And so I want to ask you, in terms of Anzaldúa's influence, when did you first come across her work?

C: I actually read *Borderlands* really early. [...] somewhere in my undergrad years, but I wasn't ready for it. Like I read it, but it didn't, *no me pegó*. It didn't stick. And like I kind of, there was a seed there for me but I wasn't ready for it, and then, when I was back in graduate school, is when I went back to it. I was starting to look, think about like what was I gonna write about for a thesis and who could I use to help me support some of the things I was thinking about and that's when I sort of really, rediscovered her and, and then [...] the more of *Borderlands* I read the more I wanted. Wow, she's connected, you know, Anzaldúa's connected to some artists that I really like and admire like Santa Barraza and Liliana Wilson, and those two artists I love their work so much and I was like I want more of that [...] then I learned about this whole group of artists in Kingsville, Carmen Lomas Garza, Amado Peña, Santa and I thought, wow, there are some Chicano artists around who were doing artwork back then. So, the more I learned about Anzaldúa, the more I wanted to know and then I came across the society [Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa] and I want to say I came across it on a website or on the internet, something like that. And I was like, wow this seems really interesting and I went to one of the first conferences. I think it was the first conference.

M: Yeah, you've been there since the beginning.

C: Yeah, but then so, and I went not really knowing what I was looking at or what I was doing there or if I really belonged [...] I found a pocket of radical women, and I thought maybe I belonged there. But I wasn't sure [...] because I remember thinking to myself, wow, a lot of these women are queer, and I'm like I wonder if that means I'm queer. You know, or do I have to be queer to be here? You know, things like that, and then they were the most open, accepting people [...] And they thought my artwork, which at the time when I was an undergrad, like, my professors, God bless them, they

were good people, but they didn't understand what I was doing and they kind of tried to push me towards a more universal [...] what they thought of as more universal work [...] I didn't get that at the Society. I found women who were like really thinking in a completely different way that I had never seen before and that's when I think I became, started becoming more, as they say, more politicized [...] it really helped me find myself in a lot of ways, and, um, it kind of, it helped me heal, and see that other women were dealing with some of the same issues that I was. That I wasn't crazy ... You know, I wasn't crazy and feeling some of these things, you know, um, feeling silenced or not validated, or valued [...] And it was wonderful because the women there were valuing each other, were valuing each other, and giving each other a voice and a place to get all of that out. So, it became this little like, little anchor that I could kind of hold onto [...] And then, as I held on to that anchor it's almost like, it attracted more and I was able to recognize those, my tribe [...] and it's been amazing to be a part of it for so long. I feel so like, I'm so proud that I found and that I held on to it. You know, as a kid I think in high school I was always into these weird things, right. [...] my parents and a lot of people from school thought that I was weird or whatever. But you know, those weird things that I really liked, I mean they always ended up being something good [...] I wasn't playing around. Like it was authentic [...] if I held on to those things then they always turned into something good. And it was the same thing with the Anzaldúa conference and Anzaldúa herself, [...] it's never been, I was not wrong about pursuing something that I could tell right away that it meant something and was meaningful for me.

M: Yeah, thanks for sharing. And I love what you said, sort of this confirmation that we're not crazy, right? [...] for me, it really means very much that realization of okay whatever I'm experiencing in the domestic space, these sort of gender inequalities they are there [...]

C: Yeah, like in *Borderlands* where she talks about the harmful parts of our culture, because that's sometimes, it was very difficult for me to kind of reconcile [...] Because I was like, you know, how can I be, can I be a Chicana artist, do I want to be a Chicana artist at all? There's some things that really do, that I do not agree with about our culture, you know [...] Including sexism and homophobia, and, um, this terrible oppression that sometimes came from our own homes and families, you know [...] so trying to reconcile that, knowing, seeing, that Gloria struggled with the same thing. I mean that was just so comforting to me like, that I wasn't crazy, it was real, you know.

M: Right [...] And I know you've gotten into more recent work of hers, right? With *Luz en lo oscuro*, I know you did the mitote pillows, so I know you've gone into recently published work [...] What were your thoughts or thinking about this latest publication?

C: I'm still, you know, I've only read it probably twice and I feel like Anzaldúa's work it requires like reading it over and over [...] Even for me, I've gotta read it over and over, some things sink in, and some things I need time to sort, but I like the idea of the mitote. I was looking at things in the works that I sort of associated with her *glifos*, her drawings, I love those, those images because they're so, she's, she was thinking, she was using doodling and drawing as way of thinking and I really did that. I mean that was just, back then [...] You know, but, uh, that's so radical [...] to be able to do that and I really feel like drawing is just a form of thinking and observation. [...] I just wanted to take some of those, those things that I felt that I could illustrate. I don't think there is an actual *mitote*. I've never seen one, there might be in like in some of her archives, but some of the others ones that I did are actual *glifos*, so the *cenotes* one, and, the *raja* one, and there's a couple other ones [...] I went through the book at one point, just going through some of the *glifos*, and trying to come up with some that I felt were, would be visually compelling [...] the *mitote* one, in particular, I really like it because it kind of reduces that, you know, voice of chaos, into something small and tangible, and kind of like you can shrink to size, and kind of take control of it. And whenever I put them out people are like, oh, is this a stress pillow, and I'm like yeah, it sure is.

M: It is, yeah.

C: I thought that was really cute, everybody always wants to touch it, they're tangible [...] And then I did that *lotería* card image with her in the middle where I kind of just wanted to honor her *glifos* in that way as a visual artist... And [...] honor that, and show it in a nice grouping you know. I felt like the Gloria nerds would like that.

M: Now I thought it was really great, so, yes we did really like it. So, I know you mention reading *Borderlands*, and I think I've had other people express the same things to me, and I know I went through it as an undergrad I don't think I was ready for it either and I had to come back to, some years later. And I was just like okay I can now see what this is actually referring to and I think it was so close that I couldn't see it because I was so close.

C: I agree. I think I was at the same, the same thing happened to me. There was a little glimmer sort of, of recognition maybe, but then it was kind of like, maybe it was too much to deal with at the time when I was reading it.

M: So, *Borderlands* is 1987, and I know a lot of your artwork has to do with depictions of border crossing. You have the anchor baby piece and *Tu Cuerpo Es Una Frontera*. You have the buffalo soldier woodcut. What are some of the similarities and differences you see when it comes to South Texas and how it's represented in *Borderlands*? I guess in what ways do you think it's still the same? What has changed?

C: In imagery, or in South Texas in general?

M: In imagery but also thinking about South Texas in general. How is it still the same as Anzaldúa's depictions in *Borderlands* versus what you are experiencing now and visually representing now?

C: Well, I think it's more, it's very similar in that I want to say in a sort of cosmic way it's still *nepantla*. You know, it's always going to be that. It was that when Gloria was writing about it was that when I was a kid, and a teen, and it's still that now. Um, so it sort of has that perpetual quality of in-betweenness and contradictory sort of terms and there is a sort of surrealism that sort of exists in the valley that I don't think is, it's very different from other places [...] So, that I think is the same. Uh, but what I don't think is the same is I feel, um, sort of an international quality that doesn't feel just Mexican anymore in the valley. It feels something else, like something else. I'm not sure what it is [...] I think that we have a lot to do with the militarization on the border [...] that's very different. The valley has always felt [...] sort of like its own place, sort of closed off from the rest of Texas. So, that's the same, but which is strange because now we have like the border fence, and we have a lot more militarization so now it feels more international because of that. Which is really weird that we're like policed, but we're more international [...] that's just the feeling I get. We do probably have influxes of immigrants that are more diverse because we do have a lot of the Central Americans here now that we didn't have before and they're sort of trapped. You know, because of, um, they can't go back, they can't go forward. That might be adding to, um, but I think those are the main, those are the main differences in my opinion.

M: The recent times that I've been home within the last year or two, I'm noticing a lot of, um, I'm noticing a lot more Black people too. Yeah, like a bigger presence of the Black community in the valley that wasn't really there even when I was in high school. And so, I don't know, for me I was just thinking about, you know, what's happening Austin, San Antonio, gentrification, house prices, all of this. So, it's yeah, I do notice this sort of mix, bigger sort of difference, racial difference.

C: I want to say that I've seen a lot more, um, Blaxicans, you know. [...] A lot of Black and Mexican that you didn't see as much of before, where you were either Mexican or you were White. And now, I'm seeing a lot more mixed children, which is good [...] I'm guessing this is pure speculation on my part but with all the hurricanes that happened in Houston, you know, and pushing people back this way [...] And people going back and forth. I mean people go back and forth for work. Um, and family, and you know. Population changes.

M: Yeah, definitely. So, I know the Central American refugees, right, and this notion of sort of being stuck, right, because you don't want to go back into Mexico and you made it this far, but then you have the checkpoints, right? And then you have the really harsh conditions of the land and the climate [...] And I know that's something that's, seems to be really important in your work, the land itself and the role that it plays. I know last time I saw you, you were working on a piece that was a man's body. With all the *nopales* around it, so I wonder if you could say something about the land and your interest in it, and land as weaponized, right? Weaponized terrain.

C: Yeah, I read a lot, I had read Jason De Leon's book, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* [...] it's a really good book and he talks about prevention through deterrents and the formalized policies and when I read about it, I was just shocked. I couldn't believe it because, like you don't think it's that formalized and when you realize its natural policy that they're ushering people into, the harshest part of terrain. It just seems so obscene, [...] I don't know whether or not this is just something sort of, I grew up with. It was the idea of land as being something that nurtures you [...] Whether it's private property or whether it's the idea of indigenous peoples living on a land and it supporting them, and yeah, just the idea of using land in that way just seems so awful. I'm trying to create visual imagery out of concepts that are hard, and that can be really difficult to make visual images out of. [...] So how do you make an image out of prevention through deterrents...so my idea in that

one was to show a man's body connect it to land, which I've also done with women's bodies. And, um, using that as sort of a vehicle for, um, walking through a desert. What happens when you walk through a desert as a vulnerable person and you're actually, there's *nopales*, animals, heat, lack of water, all of those things affect people. [...] I could probably struggle with that one constantly for the rest of my career if I let it. Because I mean it's a really fascinating sort of idea [...] necro-citizen, I don't know if you've seen that one.

M: Yes, and, honestly, I loved the piece exactly because of what it's representing and all the eyes and all the surveillance cameras surrounding the skeleton [...] It was very visceral... So, you have earlier acrylic pieces, you have one actually of yourself holding your daughter as well as *Tu Cuerpo Es Una Frontera*, and I know you've mentioned that wood prints are more accessible because they're easier to circulate, but do you think there's an aesthetic difference there as well for you? Or for your process?

C: I think so, I think for me, like, being able to distill my images in, in a, um, in grays, I mean the illusion that is that it's in black and white, but really, it's shades of gray, which I think fits perfectly with the idea of the border as well. The illusion is, is that there's right and wrong and, you know, America and Mexico, and left and right, and that's really a bunch of nuanced situations, so that's one of the things where I feel like, I really feel like form and content sort of go together. Um, when talking about border issues, um, I think my work is really, I like to make really strong statements and I think that it goes well with graphic images. They're graphic images and I feel like if color detracts. There's so many choices in color, I love color in other people's work, but I felt like when I was able to distill my work and graphic images that really just, like it illuminated a lot of other stuff, you know. I think I'm a better woodcarver than I am a painter. I still like painting, and maybe I'll do more painting later, and I do still do some painting, but just mostly for myself. I also think that sort of growing up Catholic and this very strong sort of Catholic imagination, right, a lot of my images tend to sort of icons or to the icons, and, uh, I think that the black and white imagery, the graphic nature of the work just really makes that stand out.

M: Yeah, a piece that I actually really liked was the *Buffalo soldier* piece... I have this growing interest in really thinking, I mean really early on in our conversation we talked about Texas, I mean south Texas, the valley, we tend to really homogenize

it into, oh, it's just mostly Mexican or predominantly Mexican, but really thinking about Texas and its legacy in the south, yeah, and that *Buffalo Soldier* piece really cinched it for me.

C: I'm glad that you liked that. [...] that was an interesting piece to research and, um, just people to talk about it, uh, local people talk about it. I went to a lecture on it, I read about it, I looked at pictures, I looked at maps, and, you know, I tried to figure out, how could I depict this in a way that people would want to look at it? You know, I used my dad as sort of like a testing point and I was, I knew knowing the racism in our own culture. [...] ... I knew just creating an image of a Black person wouldn't cut it because [...] images are not valued [...] And I thought [...] if I use this strange image of depicting the literal buffalo soldier it would be a lot more, they couldn't help but look because it would be a little strange but literal and hopefully like an image that would honor the buffalo soldier's memory. Like that's what I really wanted something that honored but also was like also a quiet sort of protest about what had happened. It was an injustice what happened to them. And, um, you can still find people in Brownsville who are like, no, that's not what happened. It really could hurt somebody and they really did do this, and they really did do that. [...]

M: It's really interesting because you have Confederate monuments in south Texas, right? It was only until much more recently, that it spread from the actual U.S. South into Texas and into south Texas as well and the attention that these things are still standing somehow.

C: Right, and we have our own Confederate monument in Brownsville that people are trying to get taken down and you have people who want to keep it up and they're there defending it and they come from miles away [...] some of these people are not even from here. Elsewhere, Dallas just took down one and there's other cities in Texas that are taking down these monuments and it's kind of like in the valley it's just so much harder to push people towards what, towards these things because it's so conservative and so, um, you know, what's basic elsewhere isn't, you know, basic here.

People who are, who push it, push us into the future, and to those, hey, look everybody else is moving on, we need to move on too.

M: To wrap up, is there a particular piece in Anzaldúa's work that resonates with you presently? Or that you revisit?

C: I think “Taming a Wild Tongue” is always a classic for me because I think my tongue is pretty wild sometimes. And I can relate to that. And I really like, in *Light in the Dark*, her discussion of the process of creating and being resistant towards it and like all the things, and I mean I was like how does she know? [...] I mean to me this stuff, like she like describes it so well, and um, so I really appreciated that, like you know describing the resistance, realizing that it’s part of process and like working through it and then, um, knowing, like okay, I’m gonna get there too. I just have to kind of like stop struggling so hard and it’ll probably go faster [...] Those two pieces right now are my favorites.

M: Is there a particular imagery that you’re really drawn to? I know you talked about the *glifos*, and you’ve done *coatlicue* as well.

C: There’s a phrase in *Borderlands* and I’m trying to remember what chapter it is, but she talks about having the freedom to carve her own face and it’s just this great imagery of this idea of going into your body and taking your entrails out and making them into idols for yourself. [...] That would be the ultimate Anzaldúa image for me. Hopefully, someday, I’ll be able to do that. Something that would honor that or capture a little bit of that magic.