

SI SE PUEDE

By

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Si Se Puede

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To my sisters Kasey, Jennifer, and Emily Grace, for being my support and my reason to live out Si Se Puede and to my parents and grandparents for giving me a strong foundation to build upon.

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ABSTRACT

Si Se Puede (Yes We Can) is a thesis exhibition that displays my use of art in contemporary culture coming from a background rooted in *Curandera* practices and Catholic Santeria and the passing on of stories and traditions. A variety of materials are at play in support of formal elements of drawing, painting, as well as three-dimensional objects. In the work, questions of tradition, collecting, journaling and using art as spiritual healing coexist. Text and visual imagery support the idea that my work is a record of my experiences and beliefs.

VITA

Amanda Arredondo was born on August 28th, 1991 in Austin, Texas. She is the daughter of Julia Arredondo and Armando Arredondo. She graduated from Del Rio High School in 2008. She later obtained her Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2014 from Texas State University.

In 2014 Amanda was awarded with a Graduate Assistantship from Texas Christian University in the area of studio art. While working towards her Master of Fine Arts degree with concentration in Painting, she worked with the Galleries at TCU and performed as a teaching assistant in Advanced Painting and 2-D Design.

The exhibition, *Si Se Puede*, addresses the notion that a person's spirit leads them to make art. My exhibition adds to the conversation about spirituality in art. It also offers insight to the way artists use spirituality to articulate ideas. The work in this exhibition draws from my experience with storytelling, collecting, and notions of time. *Si Se Puede* contained both objects and paintings. I set up the gallery to create a front entrance room and a larger grand room. The objects and paintings featured images of animals, portraiture, and places that held great meaning to me.

As a child I always felt different, as I was not interested in the same activities or subjects as my peers. When I spoke up I was either not acknowledged or people gave me a look of confusion, wondering why I was interested in things like death or one's spirit. I spent my money on books about magic and spells. I felt that there was an alternative world within our world. So I searched for an outlet. I had my mom take me to an after school art program in old San Felipe, Del Rio called the Casa De La Cultura, The House of Culture. Women who had migrated from Mexico primarily ran The Casa as a way to give back to the community's children. They spoke of their fight to get to America and how we should take any opportunity possible to better ourselves.

The Casa is where I learned the identity of Frida Kahlo, who became my first role model. I temporarily stole the 2002 film *Frida*, from the Casa and took it home with me one night. Thanks to the film I learned of her passion and fight. I was inspired by her commitment to family and loved ones. She stuck up for what she believed in and got involved.

In the *Diary of Frida Kahlo*¹ she speaks of her loneliness as she suffers through her anxiety and depression as well as her persistence to keep pushing through and making art.

¹ Carlos Fuentes, *Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self Portrait* (New York: New York, Abradale) 1998

Kahlo's diary² contained drawings from Pre-Columbian Mexican culture, to Aztec symbols as well as Nahuatl words to Communism. Frida's work is very autobiographical and I respond to her use of symbolism.

The women in my life were huge influences and offered a cultural connection rooted in spirituality and tradition. My grandma Francis was the first woman to introduce me to things like Catholic Santeria or a *curandera* (a witch doctor). This sort of upbringing has taught me to always look out for any serendipitous or coincidental connections in the world. I became more aware of relationships between my family and friends that had died and the connections I was building with the one's still living. Symbols, spirits and magic were a part of my everyday routine.

The works included in *Si Se Puede* started out with objects that I call *Spells*³. The structure of the *Spells* came from the artist Joseph Cornell⁴ who was a collector. Cornell created collages and assemblages that are now referred to as his *Boxes*⁵. As in Cornell's work I curated materials and placed them together to create a new larger meaning. The symbolism and significance behind the materials came from *curandera*⁶ practices just like

² Fuentes, *Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self Portrait*

³ "Spell," Merriam Webster Dictionary, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spell>.

⁴ "Joseph Cornell," Joan Sommers and Ascha Drake, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.josephcornellbox.com/lifeart.htm>.

⁵ Mair Kimberly, "Objects of my Affection: Joseph Cornell and the Corporeal Aesthetics of Assemblage," *Third Text* Vol 21 (November 2007): 707-718.

⁶ Amerson Roxanne, "Reflections on a Conversation With a Curandera," *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* Vol 4 (October 2008): 384-387.

artist Eva Castellanoz⁷ a traditional *curandera* artist. Castellanoz uses Catholic images as well as those of animals, plants, and other aspects of the natural world. Like Castellanoz I forge new meaning onto the objects from contrasting semantic places. I then placed the objects in small medicine jars made of white glass and cork tops⁸. The spells varied in shape and size, based on their individual meanings. I then grouped the spells of different lengths onto white shelves that held anywhere from four to ten bottles at a time. The spells took up a three hundred foot wall and were arranged in chronological order.

I began the series on the first day of my final semester of graduate school and ended it on the day of my show. I titled the project *87 Days of Spells*. These objects became symbols that were beacons and reminders for me to feel or recall certain emotions or events.

For example, one jar contained a dried-out snake that hung over a bed of pink Himalayan Salt. The tail of the snake was suspended over the salt bed by a copper string sewn into the cork top. Himalayan Salt⁹ is known best for detoxing and balancing the body's PH levels. Copper¹⁰ benefits by helping the blood circulate more freely through the body. The snake is a symbol of nourishment. According to my father, he practiced an old ritual of lying a snake's dead body over the fence of his property as an offering to the gods and in return it would rain and nourish his crops. This combination was my spell for nourishing my thoughts and to rid my mind of any toxic energy that might interrupt my art practice. These objects became more than just assemblages but held real power that could help change and benefit my surroundings.

⁷ Joanne Mulcahy, "The Root and the Flower," *Journal of American Folklore* Vol 118 (Winter 2005): 45-53.

⁸ Kimberly, "Objects of my Affection: Joseph Cornell and the Corporeal Aesthetics of Assemblage," 707-718.

⁹ "Himalayan Salt" Global Healing Center, last modified July 31, 2014, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.globalhealingcenter.com/natural-health/himalayan-crystal-salt-benefits/>

¹⁰ "Copper" Medical News Today, last modified February 4, 2016, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/288165.php>.

The final spell was placed in the entrance of the gallery. This spell was made between my sisters and myself. After I hung my exhibition I swept up all the dust from the floor. I placed the dust on a piece of canvas in the middle of the gallery. I also added a glass jar, small pieces of copper and rose petals. At once we all said a prayer and took turns stomping on the canvas. I then placed the remnants of the dust and broken glass in a final pyramide shaped jar. This spell was the first of its kind. It was a collaboration that was meant to unite us in our future endeavors and keep our souls together and safe no matter the distance between us.

Other artists, such as Hannah Wilke, used notions of storytelling and symbolism in their work. Wilke was a leader of the feminist art movement in the 1970's. She used her body, objects and paintings to take a stance on female objectification. However, it was Wilke's work that explored the connection between herself and her late mother¹¹ that I respond to the most. Wilke's *Seura Chaya #1* (1978-1989¹² a Gelatin silver print and watercolor on paper), features an image of Wilke after doctors diagnosed her with lymphoma.¹³ She no longer depicts herself nude, but is still extremely vulnerable because of her illness. This piece makes a direct connection between Wilke and her mother, who also passed away from cancer.

In this work, Wilke faces the camera and has a closed, but endearing smile. Her hair has fallen out due to radiation, so she wears a slouchy beanie to keep her head warm. Her body is covered in a large garment that hangs off her shoulders. The photograph is then placed on watercolor paper. With loose brush strokes, and a palette of light greens and pinks she paints four depictions of Seura birds underneath the photographed self-portrait. Each watercolor portrait depicts the bird she adopted following the death of mother. She named the bird “ ‘chaya,’ the

¹¹ Joanna Frueh, “Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective,” (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 176.

¹² Victoria Gastiez, “Hannah Wilke: American, 1940-1993” *The Jewish Museum* (September 1991): 7.

¹³ Gastiez, “Hannah Wilke: American, 1940-1993” 7.

Hebrew word for ‘animal’ as well as her mother’s middle name.”¹⁴ This series of images was dedicated to her mother and they were some of Wilke’s latest works.¹⁵ I connect with Wilke’s use of symbolism and portraiture to make a connection between herself and her mother. In my practice I would consider this sort of action as an *ofrenda*, or offering, to the dead. Wilke’s work was not only a collage but an offering to her mother’s spirit. I believe her mother was able to feel Wilke’s longing for her companionship.

The foyer area of my exhibition featured a self-portrait and two smaller paintings as well as the final spell from the *87 Days of Spells*. The rest of the exhibition spread out into a larger room that held the *87 Days of Spells*, *The Letter Series* (a series of 16”x15” paintings) and two large portraits. Small 8”x10” paintings were evenly distributed above the wall of spells. The imagery in the 8”x10” pieces helped to provide intimate depictions of the objects within the spells. Such works allowed for a break within the series of objects. The next series was called *The Letter Series* 16”x15” paintings were arranged directly across the room facing the *87 Days of Spells*. I arranged these works to create a dialogue between the series of objects and the portraits. The series consisted of graphite, watercolor pencil and oil on canvas. Often painted loosely, these rendered images of objects of the natural world, portraiture, and places that held great meaning to me. The idea of Alchemy¹⁶ is important when describing these paintings. Alchemy is a way of thinking about art when one can recognize that the universe works to give you what you ask for. I started the medium sized series with a piece called *Carta Al Universo* (*Letter to the Universe*). I wrote a letter on the raw canvas before I

¹⁴ Gastiez, “Hannah Wilke: American, 1940-1993” 7.

¹⁵ Gastiez, “Hannah Wilke: American, 1940-1993” 7.

¹⁶ Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1998)

I admitted to Universe any weakness or vulnerability that I might have been feeling. I asked for good energy for the rest of the pieces to come. I then painted on top of the letter. I allowed the brush strokes and the marks of graphite to remain visible on the surface. The background was washes of white and light pink and the actual rock forms were variations of pine green. The paint thickened and thinned on the surface allowing for the graphite marks to stay present. The image was of rocks set up to read like a letter but instead of words I replaced the text with rocks. I did this in efforts to better communicate with the Universe by using imagery of it's own natural material.

The next piece was titled *Letra De Pasado (Letter to the one's who have passed)*. I wrote directly to the women in my life that had come before me. I told them of all the future plans I had and asked for them to send me signs along the way to keep my attitude positive. This piece was made of graphite, watercolor, pencil, tracing paper and oil on canvas. The bottom half of the painting was a smooth slick surface where I had adhered ripped tracing paper. This allowed for me to create what mimicked a horizon line. I drew a small portrait of my grandmother on the top center of the canvas. Directly underneath her were three rows of letters. I painted the surface of the canvas with a thick white layer of paint scraped into the surface with a pencil to write the text of the letters. This made the text more difficult to make out, but the notion of a letter is there. I drew small green rocks within the structure of the letters to reference the Universe. This made a connection between myself, my grandmother and the Universe. I felt I was able to create a platform for our spirits to communicate.

The final series of painting were three large portraits which took up the two remaining walls. Two 27x35 inch paintings on one wall and one 32x42 inch painting on the opposite wall.

These pieces were the most about the subject of painting. I truly allowed for the drawing to become just as important as the paint. I did not attempt to cover any marks or smooth out any brush strokes. The background was painted with clear gesso and which let the raw canvas show. The portraits were of myself, my dog and my rooster. I was using images of myself and the lives I look after as sort of guardians of the paintings and spells.

At the end of the whole exhibition I had included at least one aspect of all the most important things in my life, and I felt I had created one large blessing. It is important for me to merge my art practice and spirituality to help ease my any anxiety I may come across. I feel a great sense of calm after I have created a spell or painting that address something of great significance such as my future plans or my family or friends. I would describe my practice as spiritual as well as my greatest means of documentation. I would like to create spells for the world. Si Se Puede was my attempt to do so.

Plates



Plate 1: *87 Days of Spells*



Plate 2: Back Wall

Crockett, Oil and Graphite on Canvas, 27"x 35"

Guapo, Oil and Graphite on Canvas, 27"x 35



Plate 3: Entrance Wall

Concha, Oil on Canvas, 24"x24"

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