

Borderline

Susana Cortez

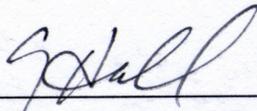
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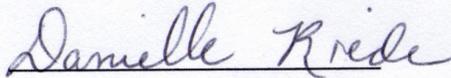
Borderline

by
Susana Cortez
Master of Fine Arts

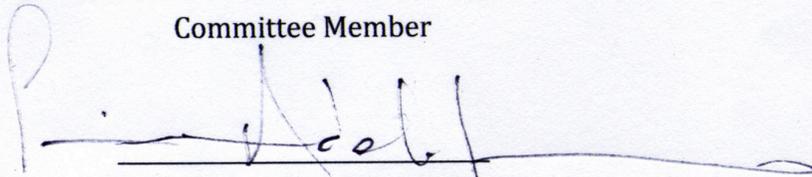
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Art Statement

My work is a manifestation of emotions concerning personal, social, and political issues that influence the way I perceive life. I manifest my emotions towards these issues in a spontaneous way, through the exploration and interaction with different mediums. I often use temporary materials such as dirt, paper, plaster, and clay slip. These materials assist me in imprinting the work of my hands, the struggle, and the trace of my creative process.

I think of my art as “*a total work of art*” which I define as the creation of art through *informe*. This refers to the process without a process, which happens when spontaneity expresses itself and critical thinking blurs. Creating “*a total work of art*” refers to creation by means of complete intuition; a creation by which I express my feelings without consciously controlling the outcome. In “*a total work of art*”, there is more than an object, there is an expression; it is a total manifestation of thoughts and feelings.

My current work reflects my interests in my hometown, my culture, and my roots. I am currently working on a series titled “*Caminos Diferentes / Different Paths*”, a project that raises awareness about different paths in life, starting with my personal experience but moving towards sharing other people’s experiences. My work has an emphasis on raising awareness on how social stratification dictates how we live and perceive life. Dirt is currently my main medium. Dirt has become a representation of low social economic status.

What dictates the direction of my work?

My roots and the changes in my life have an immense impact on how I use art. I was born in Mexico in a small village where we had to collect water from a pond, where my house was build out of rocks and mud, and where the road used to be a trail. That suddenly changed on July 22nd, 2002 when my family and I immigrated to the United States. Here, I was in a new place, with a new culture and a new language. I was afraid of everything. I went through a couple years of adjustments. My goal was to fit into the dominant culture in the American society. For five years, I ignored who I was - until, I came across the artist Janine Antoni.

When I encounter Janine Antoni's work, I was questioning my identity. I remember watching her video interview on Art 21. At some point in the video, she said "*Sometimes I sit in front of the mirror and I ask myself. Is this who I am? Is this who I really am?*" At that moment I began to think about my identity, and especially my ethnicity. I was trying so hard to be part of the dominant culture that I was ignoring my roots. I was ashamed of being Mexican, due to the increasing violence and the negative connotations associated with Mexico. When I heard Antoni's words, I had flashbacks of my childhood. I thought of myself in a different way; I wanted to start accepting myself, and that is when my interest in creating art about Mexico started.

I noticed how the news was dominated by reports about the increasing violence in Mexico. I wanted to do something to raise awareness about those particular issues, especially among the non-Hispanic communities. I decided to create art concerning political and social issues because, by creating this kind of work, I allowed myself to question my identity. I

went back to my roots to find out how I could use art to inform people and cross borderlines between cultures at the same time.

One of the first pieces that reflects my interest in the violence in Mexico is titled *“Inseguridad” (Insecurity)*. The creation of *“Inseguridad” (Insecurity)* started by covering the corner of my studio, including the floor, with brown paper. I used expanding foam to draw and express myself freely, but within a couple minutes, I began to write the most common words that I encounter when reading articles about Mexico. Words such as; ALTO (stop), GUERRA SIN FIN (war without end) and NO MAS (no more). Then, I mixed ink, water, and clay slip and started to express my emotions. I attacked the paper by throwing clay on it, expressing my emotions - mostly anger- towards Mexico. Simultaneously, I was creating marks all over the floor by stepping on red ink, black ink, and clay. To complete the piece I grabbed a couple pieces of white fabric and adhered them to the brown paper using the same clay slip.

“Inseguridad” (Insecurity)



Susana Cortez
“Inseguridad” (Insecurity)
Paper, ink, expanding foam,
fabric and clay slip
16'x8'x7'
2012

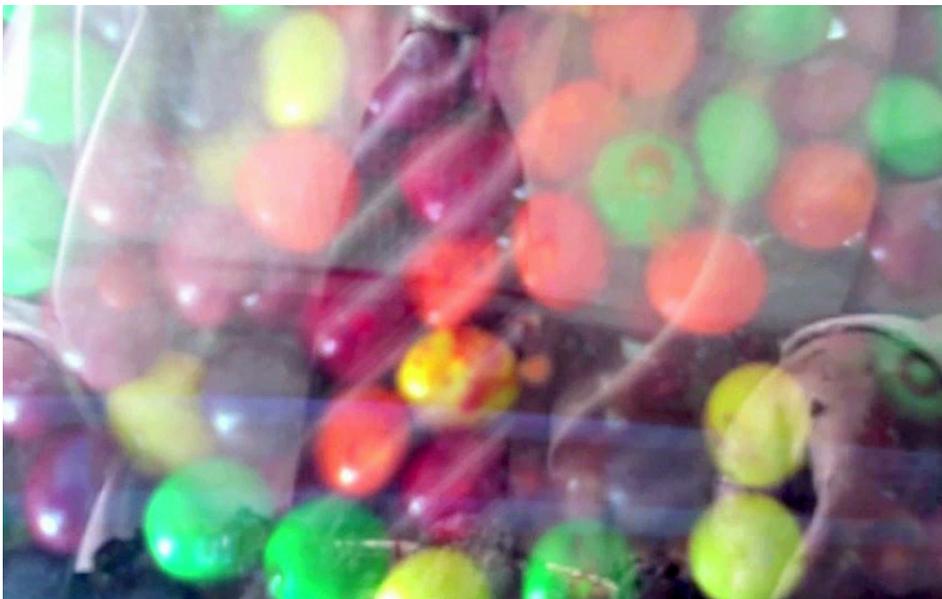
“Inseguridad” (Insecurity) is the first piece that I consider *“a total work of art”* because I was fully expressing my thoughts and feelings about a particular issue; in this case the violence in Mexico and my impotence to help or change it.

Creating art about Mexico was the beginning of the development of my practice. Finding myself, knowing who I am and where I come from, are important elements that allow me to see, perceive, and experience life in a particular way. Creating work about Mexico was just the beginning. After creating a couple pieces about the violence in Mexico, I began to think about ways to go deeper into my work, getting more personal and allowing others to perceive my work in a sincere way by opening the doors to my life.

To get more comfortable with myself, I decided to go back to performance and social actions as a way to get rid of my fear - fear of being me. The first piece of this series was *“Rainbow Party meets the Artist II.”* This piece was inspired by the Vienna Actionists, especially by Otto Muehl, known as an extreme authoritarianism. Otto Muehl expressed himself against institutionalized systems without fear. He challenged his audience. He went beyond the limit, beyond what is accepted by society, social systems, and institutions. Something, I highly admire. The idea behind *“Rainbow Party meets the Artist II”* was to push myself to the limit, to get rid of fear.

The piece began as a collaboration with the artist Dani Galietti, who was a graduate student at the University of California, Davis. The collaboration consisted of placing *Skittles* on a piece of glass with a camera under it where we record and chew *Skittles* for an hour. Simultaneously, we were Skyping each other. We titled the piece *“Rainbow Party”* and decided to give each other the rights to do with it whatever we wanted. I wanted to push myself even further so I decided to create another video titled *“Artist”*. At that time, I had

doubts about being an artist and what it really meant to be an artist. I decided to make myself (as the artist) do things that would somehow degrade me. I placed myself in front of the camera with several items that represent either pleasure or disgust on the table. Items such as sugar, water, liquid chocolate, raw pork and bull feces. Then, I proceeded to express my feelings of anger towards social constructs by putting on a suit (representing a civilized human) and performing a series of uncivilized actions in front of the camera.



Susana Cortez
*“Rainbow Party
meets the Artist
II”*
Stills from video
2012

I wash my hands on a plate, added sugar to the water, and drank it. I rubbed the liquid chocolate, sugar, and bull feces on the raw piece of pork and then bit into it. To finalize the piece, I decided to overlap both videos, playing with the idea of pleasure and disgust.

The second piece of this series is another video. I wanted to place myself outside a comfortable setting. In addition, I was thinking about us as human beings. Who are we? What makes us humans? Is it the way we behave, the way we dress, the way we communicate?

In this video, I dress up in a suit and crawl on the ground, behaving like an animal. I titled the piece “*HUMAN*”. This piece has multiple layers of interpretations. In a broader aspect, it refers to human behavior. By juxtaposing qualities of a civilized human and an animal, I challenge the viewer to think and question my actions. Why am I in suit? Why am I crawling on the ground?

Often we think of ourselves as highly civilized people, but sometimes our actions say something different. Some of those actions make us more animal than human; actions such as degrading other human beings. However, this piece also suggests illegal immigration mainly suggested by the road/border that divides the image. Illegal immigrants have to dehumanize themselves by hiding and behaving a certain way in order to cross the border in a search for a better future.



Susana Cortez
“*HUMAN*”
Video
2012

After feeling more comfortable with performance, I decided to address personal issues by placing myself out in the public space, allowing viewers to interact with me. The first piece of this series is called “*Hug this Alien*”. This piece developed into multiple projects. For the first one I printed 50 flyers of a self-portrait illustrating me wearing a

Mexican sombrero with thumbs up, a smile, and the words *HUG THIS ALIEN*. I posted all the flyers throughout downtown Indianapolis. Later, I decided to print it on a T-shirt, wear it, and ask people for hugs in Chicago, Illinois.



Susana Cortez
"Hug this Alien"
Flyers throughout downtown Indianapolis, IN
2012

"Hug this Alien" is the first piece where I addressed a personal issue, which is presenting myself as an *"Alien,"* or foreigner. By asking for a hug, I am asking for acceptance in a funny way, due to the double meaning that the term Alien carries, but making a subtle statement about bureaucracy at the same time.

After *"Hug this Alien"*, I began to think about how to get even more personal in my work. I was already touching the surface of personal issues that are political at the same time, but I was not quite there yet. I wanted to go deeper, to really expose myself to others. At this point, I found myself researching and looking back at my hometown, the place where I was born. This was scary territory, as I had to accept that place and see beyond how others might judge it. When I think of home, I think of a small village. I think of dirt, I think of my house made out of mud, I think of the broken dreams of most of the teenagers who cannot see a

future beyond marriage. However, here I was in the United States, in Indianapolis, Indiana, surrounded by people who are not as approachable as those in my hometown.

I began to think about how social interactions have drastically changed over the years; how they relate to place and the social stratification of that place. Most of the time we think that keeping things to ourselves is the best way of living, but this leads us to alienation, to the point of not being able to approach people who ride the same bus, or who happen to walk next to us. We judge people based on appearances and on our own perceptions. This is due to social power created by social stratification.

Moving from one place to another introduced me to a new culture. This changed my perspective of life. Thinking, observing, and being part of the two cultures led me to think of dirt and use it as a representation of low social economic status. Dirt is everywhere. Nonetheless, we ignore it and reject it just as we do with people with lower social power. But, dirt is also universal. No matter where we were born and no matter what our social class, race, ethnicity, gender, skin color, etcetera, every human being has a connection to dirt. By using dirt as my medium, I force humans to interact with and confront dirt. It gives me that opportunity to challenge humans in public spaces.

We are all equal, but due to the systems in society, due to the way civilizations have established power throughout history (social stratification), we separate ourselves and see each other as different. Power changes the way we live and the way we feel about each other. With my work, I often give up my power and present myself as vulnerable to my audience. By doing so, I am able to observe how humans' power dynamics change. I make them aware of themselves and their surroundings by using empathy. Empathy brings everyone's social power to the same level, allowing everyone to experience the piece in a similar way.

The first body of work that addresses social power is the series “*Dirting*”, especially the performance piece “*Dirting I*”. For this piece, I covered myself with dirt and walked throughout downtown Indianapolis for about an hour. People noticed me. They were worried about me. Some asked me if I needed help, others wanted to know why I was covered in dirt. I immediately became visible to every human being who came across my path. If I was not covered in dirt, they would ignore my presence, but since I was covered in dirt - something unusual, or something they just never think of - I became the center of attention. More than grabbing attention, I changed their daily routine. They talked to each other about me, asking and questioning me. They took pictures and probably shared them in the social media. Some laughed, and some just did not know how to react. The fact that they noticed me and I made them think of something outside their routine completes the piece.

By covering myself with dirt, I erased all the stereotypes and labels that are often attached to me. I erased my gender and my ethnicity. I became just a human, or maybe even an object. The conversations I had with people started with dirt, but quickly became conversations about life.

Conversation Number 2

(Guy number 2, followed me after overhearing a conversation about dirt with guy number 1)

Guy 2: *So tell me more about why are you really doing this?*

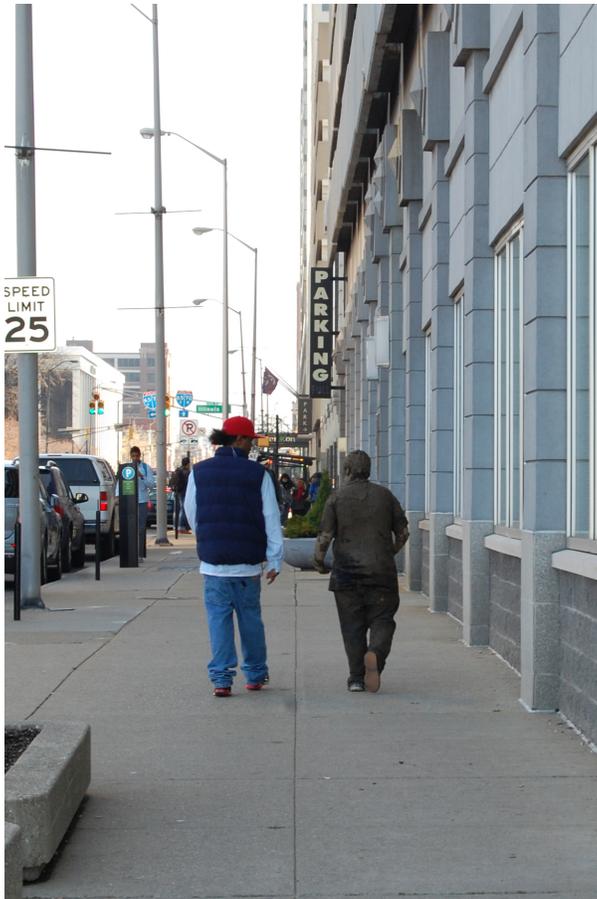
Me: *I just want to make people aware of dirt.*

Guy 2: *But, why covering yourself in it? Aren't there other ways to get the same message across?*

Me: *Yes, but do you think people would notice me if I was not covered in Dirt?*

Guy2: *Oh so, you are using the shock thing. I get it.*

Then we had a conversation about life, humans, and social interaction. He wished me luck, crossed the street, and according to a friend who was across the street filming me, she overheard him talk to other guys at a bus stop saying "Man, that girl over there covered in dirt is talking deep shit."



*Susana Cortez
Dirting I
Performance
Photo courtesy of Rita York
2012*

Conversation Number 5

(Guy number 5, approached me as I was crossing the street)

Guy 5: *What is going on?*

Me: *What do you think of dirt?*

Guy 5: *Dirt is good man, I like dirt.*

Me: *why do you like dirt? What dirt means to you?*

Guy 5: *Dirt is money.*

Me: *Dirt is money? That's a unique answer. Why is dirt money?*

Guy 5: *I work for a company digging dirt, so when I think of dirt I think of money. I see dirt and it reminds me of my weekly check. But, now I am having a hard time getting to work because it is on the south side and I have to take the bus. I have to take three buses to get there. I have to take the bus now because I got a D.U.I. So never get a DUI it sucks.*



*Susana Cortez
Dirting I
Performance
Photo courtesy of Rita York
2012*

This performance opened up my eyes to see the power of art. Through performance I am searching for something in public spaces - something that is waiting for me to act and create an interaction or a reaction.

"Dirting I," the performance, was the beginning of a series of works using dirt. I started by covering myself with dirt, covering other things with dirt, and creating dirt installations. The first installation is *"Dirting II"*. The idea behind this installation is to make viewers aware of dirt by completely immersing them in it, providing a different perception of dirt by using visual aesthetics.



Susana Cortez
"Dirting II"
Dirt
2013



“Caminos Diferentes / Different Paths” is a series of videos that were taken here in the Unites States and in Mexico. The idea behind these videos is to show different paths in life. Human beings inherit life qualities dictated by the social stratification of their geographic location, which affects the way they develop and perceive life. Through this series, I aim to show different perceptions on life. Every video in this series has the same title because it is the same video, but taken from different perspectives. Visually, they are different but they all address the same issue; issue of different challenges, different things people have to face day to day, and challenges that people have to overcome in life.



Susana Cortez
“Caminos Diferentes/ Different Path”
La loma, Moroleon, Guanajuato, Mexico
Stills from videos
2013

“PON LOS PIES SOBRE LA TIERRA / PUT YOUR FEET ON THE GROUND”

For my M.F.A thesis installation I merged two series, “Dirting” and “*Caminos Diferentes/Different Paths*”. I selected two videos from the series “*Caminos Diferentes/Different Paths*”. The first video is a small clip of my life in Mexico. The video was taken in March 2013, when I visited my hometown for two weeks after seven years of living in the United States without visiting. The viewer experiences the walk to my grandmother’s house, the place where I lived until I was five years old.

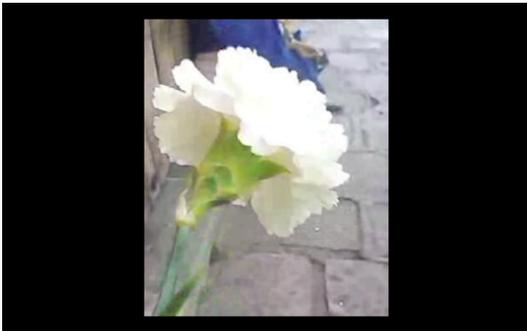
The second video that I selected was also taken in Mexico, in the capital of my state (Guanajuato, Guanajuato). As I was walking one morning in Guanajuato, a pre-colonial town, I began to think about all the women, kids, and elderly on the streets who were begging for money. I began to think about their future, especially the future of those kids. Will they ever move on? Is there going to be a chance for them to live a better life? Will they ever get an education?

I began to think about how selfish we are sometimes. Here, in the United States we worry about not having an iPhone, not having a computer, not having a truck, etcetera. These are all materialistic objects, when many people all around the world struggle for food or for a



place to sleep. I wanted to make a gesture that perhaps will make a small difference in the life of one of those children. I bought a white carnation from a small flower stand at the bus stop, Then, I walked throughout the town holding the flower in my hands. I gave the flower to the first little girl in my path who was on the street begging for money with her mother. As I approach her, I kneeled in front of her, and

gave her the flower. The mother shyly thanked me and I continued on my path. The white carnation is a symbol of pureness and luck. For me, more than that, it was a symbol of hope; a hope for a better future for her. With that small gesture, I was giving hope to the little girl and to her mother.

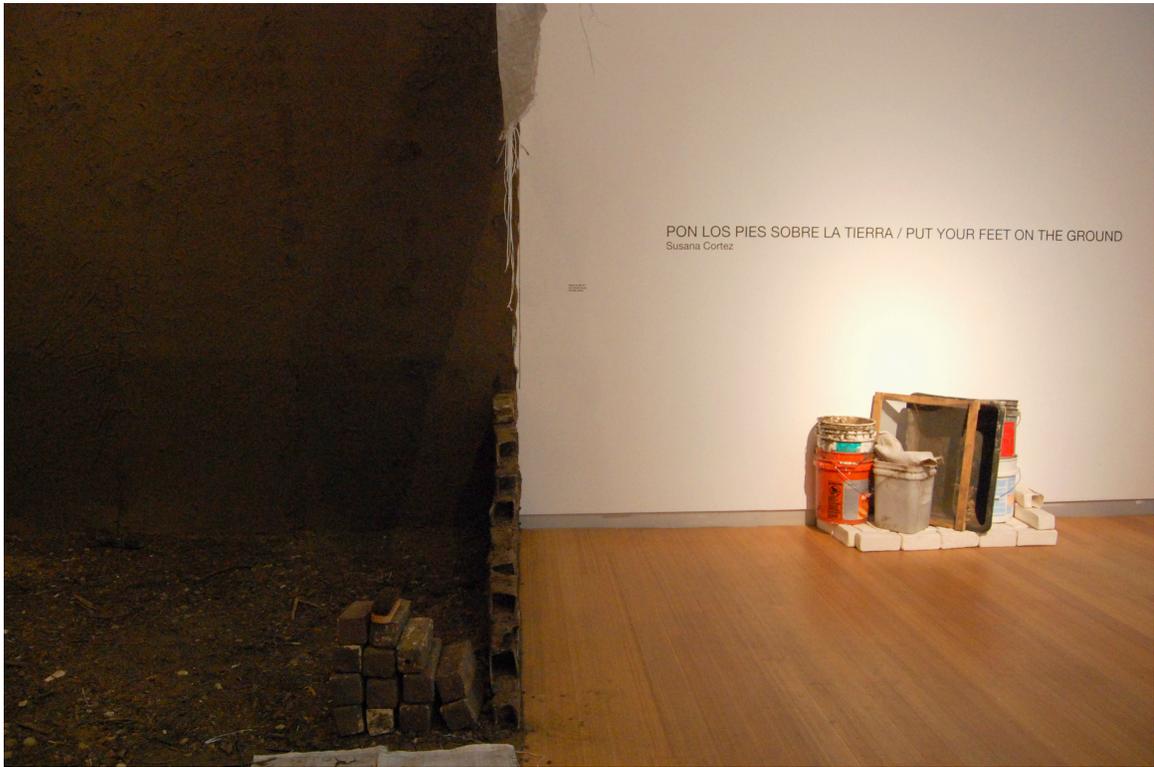


Susana Cortez
"Caminos Diferentes/ Different Paths"
Social Action
2013

By merging the two series *"Dirting"* and *"Caminos Diferentes / Different Paths"* in *"PON LOS PIES SOBRE LA TIERRA / PUT YOUR FEET ON THE GROUND,"* I am able to fully express different thoughts and feelings in the same space. On one hand, I am opening my personal life to strangers by allowing them into my life. Beyond that, I am making them aware of different living styles. Most people might think that dirt houses are part of the past, but it is the reality of many people in the world. By covering the walls and floor of the gallery (a white cube) with dirt, I am raising awareness about the different social economic statuses and juxtaposing two different perceptions of life.

The half wall made out of bricks that divides the gallery from the installation is a metaphor for a border. The viewer decides to enter the space or not, to be an outsider or insider, to look at the space from the outside, to ignore it, or be part of it. The title is another metaphor. *“PON LOS PIES SOBRE LA TIERRA / PUT YOUR FEET ON THE GROUND”* is literally asking the viewer to step on the ground, to step on the dirty side of the gallery. At the same time, it is asking them to be aware of their surrounding environment and people - to step away from just one perception of life and experience living in different ways by placing themselves in other people’s shoes.







Susana Cortez
*“PON LOS PIES SOBRE LA TIERRA/
PUT YOUR FEET ON THE GROUND”*
Dirt installation with projections
20' X 12' X 16'
2013

The main idea behind *“PON LOS PIES SOBRE LA TIERRA / PUT YOUR FEET ON THE GROUND”* was to break through the idea of a gallery scene. Throughout history, the gallery has always been known as a prestigious space. By covering it with dirt, I am making visitors of the gallery see beyond the classic idea of art. I am creating an experience, a confrontation in the space. During the opening, my installation created a noticeable visual impact as well as a tension between the gallery visitors. Most visitors were not sure if they could enter the space; a hesitation created by what we know about art in a gallery setting (for instance, not touching the art).

Beyond that, I wanted people to think about the difference between the gallery and the mud house. The main differences between the two have to do with social status and

power. By placing the mud house inside the white cube (gallery), I am giving power to it. I am elevating the power of the mud house because beyond a space there is a certain level of respect created, something that mud houses often lack in the world.

The installation by itself was lacking something; the tension among the viewers was perhaps too much, which is why, after the opening, I revisited the space. First, I invited people into the gallery to have lunch together in the center of the installation, sitting on the mud benches, eating on a table made with the mud bricks, and just having a casual conversation. Then, I projected my videos in different places in the installation; activating the space differently by adding history, identity and a memory to the space.

By bringing people into the space and having lunch in the installation, the piece was activated, but once I started working with the projections, the space immediately became mine. The projection, in a way, represented me in the space.







*Susana Cortez
"PON LOS
PIES SOBRE
LA TIERRA/
PUT YOUT
FEET ON
THE
GROUND"
Dirt
installation
with
projections
20' X 12' X
16'
2013*

“PON LOS PIES SOBRE LA TIERRA/PUT YOUR FEET ON THE GROUND” made me aware of how I can move from one culture to another, teaching and sharing different views of life. In the last two years at Herron School of Art and Design I learned that the most important element of my work is to inform and to connect people to the present, to their surrounding environment, to their community, to life.

My work tackles universal issues that humans face daily for instance –fear, fear of being themselves, fear of behaving or acting a certain way. In my work, I challenge myself to overcome these fears, to inform viewers, to make them aware of the issues we usually ignore because they do not personally affect us or because we do not want to deal with them. I use empathy and social interactions to achieve this goal. Social interactions are a big part in my work because they create reflective opportunities that have the power to make people more aware of themselves and others. Power can be dictated by social stratification and can control how we see and perceive life. The social interaction that my work creates makes viewers aware of the social powers we each possess. These interactions are truthful and spontaneous. They are created by complete intuition; they are “a total work of art”, a total manifestation of thoughts and feelings.

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