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The Demand Calls for It:

On Street Vendors, Food, and the Critical Intimacy of Audrey Rodríguez

BY ORLANDO OCHOA, JR

“Wait... / I am lit up on a shelf? / She’s not eating me, / She’s painting me / The demand calls for it.” In her poem “Exodus and Consumption,” Audrey Rodríguez traces a mango’s movement away from its Tapachulan soil. The fruit is “sun-kissed and watered” for five years, “thrown into a basket by tiny hands / Taken for a hot bath” before being sent to the US/Mexico border for agricultural inspection. “Kill the invasive Mexican fruit flies / The demand calls for it.”

In the last stanza, the mango arrives in the hands of a woman in a New York subway station peeling, slicing, and covering the fruit’s skin with *limón y picante*. “I am chosen, bought / Looks like my time has come / And I am ready.”

More than hearing a story of migration, globalization, and labor, the mango’s confusion over being regarded as an artistic subject invites us to consider the attention Rodríguez pays to food and the everyday life of street vendors in her artwork.

Audrey Rodríguez is a painter born and raised in Port Isabel, Texas, who now resides in New York. She is a recipient of the 2023 Chubb Post-Graduate Fellowship at the New York Academy of Art. Rodríguez’s solo show titled, “Taste of Home” was exhibited at McLennon Pen Co. Gallery in Austin, Texas, in 2023. Her piece *Corona Plaza* (2021) was on display at the Museum of the City of New York for “Food in New York: Bigger than the Plate,” an exhibit curated by Monxo López in 2022.

During our conversation in her studio at the New York Academy of Art, Rodríguez described the trajectory of her artistic journey as “finding a sense of home through



Audrey Rodríguez, *Corona Plaza*, 2021, oil on canvas, 26 x 24 in. Photo courtesy of artist.



Audrey Rodríguez, *Still Life with Churros on a Subway Platform*, 2022, oil on linen, 26 x 24 in. Photo courtesy of the artist.

food.”¹ Trained in the traditions of still life and 19th-century French realism, her practice encompasses drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, and poetry. She paints from the hundreds of photographs that she takes and compiles. Maquettes made with polymer clay, epoxy resin, styrene, and other materials function as sets from which to play with scale, color, and light.

“I take my time with lighting at the very beginning to capture that feeling,” explains Rodríguez. A tray sitting in her studio once held churros being sold by a woman in the subway. Rodríguez purchased both, and the smell of cinnamon sugar surrounded her while painting *Still Life with Churros*.

I heard a deep affinity for the everyday in Rodríguez’s words. She models what Queer

diaspora studies scholar Gayatri Gopinath terms a “Queer curatorial project,” one that “entails an obligation to ‘care for’ and ‘care about’” and that stretches the parameters of what still life can be.² The critical intimacy in Rodríguez’s pursuits make it clear that the subjects and objects in her works are treasured interlocutors. Her movement from Port Isabel, Texas, to New York shapes her pieces but does not bound them by geographic or cultural specificity; they are imbued with smells, tastes, sounds, and memories that activate feelings of joy, longing, and loss in a world disorganized by forced migration, displacement, and dispossession.

At the center of *Corona Plaza* stands a little girl wearing a red winter jacket. A pink mask covers her mouth, and her eyes meet ours.

Behind her are four street vendors, a table of *aguas frescas* and *elotes*. “Maybe I see a bit of myself in her. I’ve seen myself there. I’ve been you,” Rodríguez reflects. This moment of intimacy illuminates how her paintings display a record of ordinary life that sutures the personal and the collective. In *Corona Plaza*, I read a story of the uneven distribution of sickness and precarity, intensified by COVID-19; strategies of placemaking and labor rooted in shared survival; the many mothers with children by their side making a life in the subway. Rodríguez’s paintings account for a community who sustains life together and organizes against the entwined violence of policing, surveillance, destruction, and racial capitalism through protest, political education, and mutual aid.

What does it mean to regard the life of street vendors as a position from which to sense and say something about the world? To approach a mango as an aesthetic object that tells a story of migrancy and the insidious, white supremacist logics and practices of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Bracero Program, and Operation Gatekeeper? At the heart of Rodríguez's work is food and people who contend with cruel landscapes, subsist, and build beautiful lives despite them.³ Rodríguez teaches me that still life is a genre capable of portraying how histories of violence and a rehearsal for something and somewhere else unfold daily. "This is a subject that, for whatever reason, calls to me. It's something I have to paint." ▼

Notes:

1. Audrey Rodríguez, fine artist based in Brooklyn, New York, in discussion with Orlando Ochoa, *The New York Academy of Art*, May 2023.
2. Gopinath, Gayatri. 2018. *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 4.
3. See also Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Lorena Muñoz, "Selling nostalgia: The emotional labor of immigrant Latina vendors in Los Angeles," *Food and Foodways* 25 (4), 2017; Ashanté M. Reese and Joshua Sbicca, "Food and Carcerality: From confinement to abolition," *Food and Foodways* 30 (1–2), 2022.

Orlando Ochoa, Jr. is a PhD student in the Department of American Studies at New York University. He is broadly interested in border ecologies, racialized sexuality, grief, desire, and poetry. Orlando received his bachelor's degree in Women's & Gender Studies and African & African Diaspora Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. Orlando is currently a Graduate Assistant for The Latinx Project at New York University. He was born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. Photo courtesy of the author.



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