

MujerArtes Clay Cooperative: Continuing Culture and Heritage Through Clay

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Abstract:

The West Side Community of San Antonio, Texas, faces encroaching gentrification that threatens residents with displacement and disbursement of families. The Esperanza Center for Peace and Justice offers events and community programs that inform, educate, and empower the community to advocate for themselves and continue cultural traditions. The MujerArtes Clay Cooperative is one of the programs through which women of the community learn ceramics and other art forms that tell the stories of the women, community, and culture of the West Side. The Cooperative empowers immigrant and marginalized women through this creative outlet that provides materials, education, and opportunities to show their artwork.

The Westside of San Antonio emerged in response to systemic segregation, as Mexican Americans were pushed out of the city into areas separate from the white population. In the 1800s, as white settlers moved into the area, Mexican American landowners lost wealth and property. By the early 20th century, the Westside grew quickly as Mexican immigrants fleeing the Mexican Revolution joined the already established Mexican American community. In the 1930s, banks “redlined” the Mexican American and Black communities, which made it hard for them to obtain mortgages to purchase or build homes. The San Antonio Housing Authority constructed public housing to accommodate the increasing population, though the area was provided with minimal infrastructure and public services. Despite these hardships, residents built a strong, self-reliant community rooted in mutual support and cultural resilience.

“Growing up in the West Side during the 50s in an area known as Saca Tripa: It was great... We had like the extended family. My parents knew everybody in the neighborhood. You would be outside all the time. You knew every person. You knew they would look out for you and get after you... I did not know I was poor then though... You were among *familia*, and by *familia* I don’t mean your blood relatives. The united people and the way they are lent to that security.”

— *Enedina Casarez Vasquez*, 2003 (Marquez, 2007)

By the 1960s, the Westside community began to organize and advocate for their civil rights, contributing to the momentum of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. That legacy of resistance continues today as residents confront new threats to their homes and identity, including gentrification, displacement, and deportation.

Out of this spirit of activism and commitment to social justice, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center was founded in 1987. Guided by a mission to serve as a space for diverse subcommunities and political causes, the Esperanza seeks to “preserve and promote artistic and cultural expression” within San Antonio’s Westside and beyond (DeTurk, 9). The organization facilitates community awareness and engagement, as well as historical preservation through artistic programs and events such as exhibitions, concerts, workshops, and oral history projects. One of its

long-running initiatives, the MujerArtes Clay Cooperative, exemplifies how the Esperanza supports cultural expression and artistic empowerment within the local community.

Established in 1995, the MujerArtes Clay Cooperative is housed within the cultural hub of Rinconcito de Esperanza. The cooperative offers a collaborative and educational space where women from the community create ceramic artwork that reflects their lived experiences, honors the cultural history of San Antonio's Westside, and celebrates Mexican American identities. Members engage in teaching, learning, and artistic production, using clay as a medium to express personal and collective narratives. By empowering women to articulate their histories and cultural perspectives through art, MujerArtes has become a vital part of the Westside's cultural landscape.

Working in tandem with the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, MujerArtes promotes cultural preservation and community-based arts activism. In the face of ongoing threats such as gentrification, displacement, and systemic inequality, the cooperative plays a critical role in sustaining community memory and heritage. With many members having participated for over a decade or more, engaging and mentoring the next generation of women artists remains a key priority for the cooperative's continued impact.

Created by and for women from San Antonio's Westside, MujerArtes operates as a true cooperative, in which members manage and operate the collective themselves. Interviews with Esperanza Peace and Justice Center director Graciela Sánchez and members of MujerArtes highlight the cooperative's cultural and social significance. As the only all-women, women-managed clay cooperative in the United States, MujerArtes stands apart. Other clay collectives tend to be co-ed, male-owned, or affiliated with academic institutions, making MujerArtes a unique and vital space in both the local and national art landscapes.

The cooperative brings women together across differences in background and personal history, united by shared cultural identity and heritage. Though they join the studio for various

reasons, whether seeking healing, empowerment, or artistic growth, they collaborate in learning and creating to tell stories from the Westside and the broader Chicana/Mexicana experience.

As MujerArtes celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2025, it maintains a core group of longtime members while also welcoming new participants. Members receive hands-on training and act as both students and teachers, participating in workshops at the MujerArtes studio and other locations, such as New Mexico. The cooperative holds annual exhibitions at its studio and at the Esperanza gallery, taking part in community events such as Día de los Muertos and Mercado de Paz. Their work has been featured regionally and internationally, including California and Mexico. Blending traditional Mexican and Chicano motifs, their ceramics continue the legacy of cultural storytelling and historic preservation through art.

The exhibition, *Árboles de Vida del Westside* (September - November 2023), featured ceramic trees created at the cooperative studio.

“Árboles de Vida del Westside represents stories of our people and reaffirms that our culture is important. For us, the women of MujerArtes Clay Cooperative, the Trees of Life from the Westside represent anecdotes about our people, our traditions, our artists, our activists and our celebrations. The trees of life show the everyday life of the neighborhood and remind us of special places and family moments. These árboles reaffirm that our culture is more alive than ever before with deep and strong roots.”
(esperanzacenter.org)

The trees on display at the MujerArtes Studio showcase the distinct styles and cultural expressions of each artist. Varying in sizes, each tree is intricately detailed. The clay trees are brightly painted with acrylic paint and adorned with handmade clay elements such as flowers, leaves, birds, and figures. Some reflect biblical narratives such as the Nativity or the Virgin of Guadalupe. Others display landmarks or memories of the Westside Community.



MujerArtes *Árboles de la Vida*
Photos courtesy of Rebecca Bricker.

The *árbol de la vida* (Tree of Life) has origins in traditional Mexican ceramics that date back to pre-Columbian times. During colonization, Spanish priests sought to convert Indigenous populations by eradicating imagery of pre-Columbian deities and replacing them with Christian iconography. (AMOCA) From this fusion of Mesoamerican ceramic traditions and Spanish Catholic influence, the *árbol de la vida* emerged as a visual tool utilized for educational and conversion purposes. Elaborate in design, these trees were used to convey Christian narratives, as “paintings and visual arts played a vital role in the conversion project as friars realized the power that images held to communicate ideas that eluded verbal description or were enhanced by visual expression.” (Mulryan, 40)

The art form is most associated with three regions in Mexico: Izúcar de Matamoros, Acatlán de Osorio, and Metepec. Within these communities, the tradition has been passed down through

generations of artisan families, though recognition has often been given to the men while women were largely relegated to supporting roles. (Mulryan, 64). One of the most influential artists of this tradition, Herón Martínez of Acatlán de Osorio, gained international recognition for incorporating scenes of daily life alongside religious narratives in a whimsical, expressive style. His work was featured prominently during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, which helped bring international attention to the *árbol de la vida*.

Over time, the trees have evolved to include folkloric and cultural themes depicting everyday life, and festivals in addition to religious motifs and icons (Catholicism, the Virgin Mary or La Virgen de Guadalupe). Veronica Castillo, one of MujerArtes' coordinators, is from Izúcar de Matamoros. She shared the tradition of the trees of life. The women called Veronica's father and asked permission to use the *arbol de vida* when they first incorporated this imagery into their work. MujerArtes continues this tradition through their *Árboles de Vida del Westside*, infusing each piece with personal narratives and the cultural heritage of San Antonio's Westside community.

The *Nichos y Dichos* exhibit (September–October 2024) celebrates two intertwined Mexican traditions: nichos (devotional niches) and dichos (proverbs or sayings). Nichos are small, portable, handcrafted boxes used in Mexican Catholic devotion, taken from the iconography of European Catholicism. Typically made from found objects, nichos often feature images of saints and other sacred figures. However, Michael Riley argues that “nichos exist as a popular cultural expression” in contemporary Chicano art. (Riley, 214) Dichos are wisdom sayings that “reveal beliefs and values shared by most individuals in the community, based on past experience and social history” (Espinoza-Herold, 264). For *MujerArtes*, these two traditions converge in *Nichos y Dichos*, where artists craft nichos out of clay, integrating visual symbolism and text to represent each dicho. The resulting pieces are vibrantly painted and intricately detailed, offering layered representations of cultural identity, spirituality, and collective memory.



MujerArtes Nichos y Dichos
Photo courtesy of Rebecca Bricker.

Every exhibit brings awareness to community issues and celebrates the history of the Westside community. Poverty, gentrification, and housing displacement are a few of the issues the people face. Despite the efforts to push people out of the area, some people fight for their culture and identity to remain strong and celebrated. MujerArtes works to continue the concepts of identity, memory, and cultural heritage within the community.

Michelle Bastian discusses community in terms of time and space. Time as a social construct places limitations on society and people groups. Communities usually hold to a framework of linear time that dictates how society operates. This framework leads to categories that simultaneously restrict people and communities from being more than one thing. In this, she explains that social constructs like time create avenues for historical detachment. In other words, the more time passes after a certain event or period, the more we collectively detach ourselves from it. “These techniques of temporal distancing thus limit who is considered to be coeval with a particular group and consequently limit how the community may be constituted.” (Bastian, 161) Changes and processes such as gentrification and displacement lead to temporal distancing and altering of the community dynamics thus leading to a type of forgetting of what was in the past.

This is why it is important for organizations like the Esperanza and its programs to keep social justice and cultural heritage awareness at the forefront. Society's reliance on linear time divides its attention to a limited number of focal points. Bastian looks to Gloria Anzaldúa's ideas on how time can be more than linear. Contradictions of time can coexist where society can be historical as well as present. She explains that Anzaldúa "affirms and recognises...contradictory historical trajectories simultaneously." (Bastian, 158) Using this framework, looking at the artwork of MujerArtes and the telling of histories and experiences is allowing time to be more than linear, to exist simultaneously.

Simultaneity allows for differences to coexist at the same time and space. The cooperative brings together women who share culture and community while honoring the uniqueness of their individual experiences and backgrounds. It creates a space where each woman can express her personal story through her work, while also collaboratively reflecting the collective narrative of their community and the broader Mexican American experience. This simultaneity is reflected in their exhibitions, where artworks often share common themes or designs, yet each piece also showcases the distinct style and authorship of each artist.

In speaking with the artists, they pride themselves in creating their art exclusively by their own hands. They do not use tools to help them mass-produce their work. It is important to them that their art is unique and specific to them as artists and to the Westside community. They know that art is one of the modes through which the community continues to retain its cultural identity. They feel that the relationship between the community and MujerArtes is important for the present as well as the future.

When asked what they value most about the cooperative, the resounding answer is belonging to the community and learning skills that empower their creativity and agency. For them, the cooperative is a space where individuals with diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and ideas come together

with a shared purpose as artists committed to cultural expression and social justice. They find strength in their differences, united by a common goal to create meaningful art. They also appreciate the opportunities the cooperative provides to learn from one another, gain new skills, and gain empowerment through collective growth and support. They value a space that allows them to express their creativity.

MujerArtes Clay Cooperative is more than a clay cooperative, it is a living archive of cultural memory, resistance, and empowerment located in San Antonio's Westside. Through its collaborative model, the cooperative challenges historical erasure and resists the forces of gentrification and systemic marginalization. Its members, many of whom have been part of the collective for years, use clay not only as a medium of artistic expression but as a tool for storytelling, healing, and reclaiming space.

By honoring the lived experiences of Chicana and Mexican American women, MujerArtes offers a counter-narrative to dominant histories and affirms the importance of place, identity, and cultural continuity. In doing so, it fulfills the mission of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center: to preserve and promote cultural expression as a form of resistance and transformation. As MujerArtes celebrates its 30th anniversary, its work remains important through creating space for belonging, shaping a collective future, and ensuring that the stories of the Westside continue to be told, in clay and in community.

Artists of MujerArtes

Yesenia Ramos, 20, joined *MujerArtes* in July 2024 as its youngest and newest member. An aspiring tattoo artist, she brings her drawing skills into clay work, fusing her personal style with the cooperative's traditions. She values the mentorship from more experienced members and appreciates the support *MujerArtes* and Esperanza provide her family, both financially and emotionally. She hopes to inspire younger women to join the cooperative, continuing its legacy of empowerment and cultural preservation.



Yesenia Ramos artworks left to right: ink on paper drawing, Frida Kahlo ceramic tile, ceramic bowl in process; photos courtesy of Rebecca Bricker.

Adriana Netro joined in February 2017 while grieving the loss of her partner. She found healing through the cooperative's creative environment, which fosters both independent exploration and shared learning. Through her work in clay, she expresses her emotions and ideas, while also gaining technical skills that she now applies to her personal projects. For her, *MujerArtes* is a space of healing, connection, and community engagement.



Adriana Netro works on a cactus candle holder. Photo courtesy of Rebecca Bricker.

Ana Uviedo, the longest-standing member, has been part of *MujerArtes* since 2004. Known for her distinctive style and narrative-driven clay pieces, she takes pride in her contributions to collaborative projects like the large *Árbol de la Vida* in San Antonio, where she recreated her grandmother's store. She continues to expand her skills through workshops, including in New Mexico.



Ana Uviedo displays some of her work: ceramic roses, ceramic tile for the *Loteria* series, in-process Lady of Guadalupe. Photos courtesy of Rebecca Bricker.

Rosa Vega, current coordinator of the cooperative, has been with *MujerArtes* since 2011 and stepped into her leadership role in 2018. She sees the cooperative as essential for preserving cultural history for future generations. Committed to her role, she ensures the smooth operation of the studio and supports its mission of community-based arts activism.



Rosa Vega in the *MujerArtes* studio, Frida Kahlo ceramic tile by Rosa Vega. Photos courtesy of Rebecca Bricker



Juana Hilda Ruiz joined in 2010 and will mark her 15th year with the cooperative in 2025. Introduced by a friend, she remains dedicated to the group and values its impact on the Westside community. She enjoys creating art that resonates with others and feels the cooperative plays a crucial role in uplifting the neighborhood.

Mary Agnes Rodriguez, an established San Antonio artist known for murals and paintings, joined *MujerArtes* in 2018. Through her art, she advocates for social justice, tells the stories of the Westside, and raises awareness of local issues. Her work within the cooperative deepens her commitment to activism through cultural expression.



Mary Agnes Rodriguez works on a graphic design for Esperanza Peace and Justice Center.
Photo courtesy of Rebecca Bricker.

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