

My Ancestors Followed Me Here, 2020

Part of Bay Area Walls; © Erina Alejo

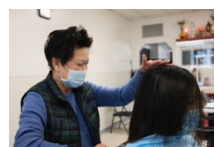
SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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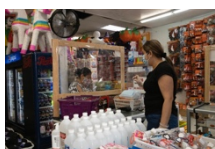
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JT Restaurant: Conversation with Tita Tess Diaz



Erina Alejo, *Tess of JT Restaurant preparing daily servings of home-style Filipino cuisine, 953 Mission Street, South of Market district*, from the series *My Ancestors Followed Me Here*, 2020; inkjet print; courtesy the artist; © Erina Alejo

Interview conducted by Erina Alejo, September 17, 2020. Part of Erina Alejo, *My Ancestors Followed Me Here*, created for *Bay Area Walls*, a commission series initiated by SFMOMA in 2020. This interview was transcribed by Erina Alejo and has been edited for clarity.

Artist note:

Tess Diaz, the youngest daughter of a family of nine children, comes from a lineage of merchants and livestock farmers from Laguna, Philippines. After a decade of working at the New Filipinas Restaurant, she took over its operations and renamed the business [JT Restaurant](#) after herself and her husband, Juan. Her brother Boying, previously managed the adjacent Manila Meat Market. Erina calls their elder Tess, “Tita,” which means auntie, but she is also lovingly known as “Tasing” (pronounced tah-seeng) to her community.

Tess Diaz: Noong unang dumating ako dito? February 8, 2001. I-start na ‘ko non! Pagdating ko!
When did I first arrive here? February 8, 2001. I started working right then!

Erina Alejo: Ah, talaga!? [Natawa]
Oh, what?! [Laughs.]

TD: Dumating ako nang umaga, 7:30 ng umaga. Dere-derestso ako! Nakabihis pa ako.
I arrived at 7:30 in the morning. Straight to work! I was still dressed from my flight.

EA: Dito po, sa New Filipinas?
Here, at New Filipinas?

TD: Dito, at tsaka sa store. Alam kong gumawa ng tocino, alam kong gumawa ng tapa, alam kong mag-barbeque, alam ko lahat yong ganon. Kaya niya ako kinuha. Here and at the store. I know how to make tocino, tapa, barbeque—everything. So my brother hired me.

EA: Puwede niyo pong ikuwento, lumipad kayo...
Can you tell the story? So you took your flight . . .

TD: Mm-hmm.
Mm-hmm.

EA: Tapos nung umagang nakarating kayo dito...
Then, that morning you arrived . . .

TD: Mm-hmm. Dere-deretso na ako
Mm-hmm. I started working right away.

EA: Wala kayong tulog...
No sleep . . .

TD: Wala! Excited ako e. Diba?
None! I was excited. Isn't that something?

EA: [Natawa]
[Laughs.]

TD asks her husband, Juan, to serve a customer who has ordered rice and longganisa. "Yes! Six dollars," she calls out. "Five dollars in total for the longganisa and the rice."

TD: See? Ano talaga ako sa trabaho. Noong araw na buhay ang tatay ko, hindi pa naman ako nakakauwi na ano noon. Dahil siyempre, kaliliitan ng mga bata. So, kailangan kong magtrabaho. Nagpunta sila dito noon.
See? I'm serious about working hard. When my dad was alive, I wasn't able to visit back home in the Philippines. My kids were still very young, and I needed to work. They visited me here.

EA: Yung magulang niyo pareho?
Both your parents?

TD: Mm-hmm. 2003. Pero four months lang sila. Doon umiyak ang tatay ko nung nakita niya ko kung paano ako magtrabaho. Alas kuwatro, gising na ako, nagtatrabaho na ako. Tapos natutulog ako, 11 o'clock. Minsan, pag may catering, o yung halimbawa, may Pistahan, ganyan, alas dos na ako nakakatulog, tapos 4 o'clock, gising na uli ako.

Doon umiyak ang tatay ko, na, sabi niya, “Hindi ko alam, ganyan ka pala magtrabaho, at—hindi ko alam na parang ipis ang tulog mo.

Doon ako-- hindi ko malilimutan yung mga sinabi niya ng tatay ko. Tapos e, nagluluto ako dito, ‘andon sila sa tindaan. Eleven o’clock ng gabi, lumabas ang tatay ko, eh, ano na siya noon, 80 something na, 84, ganyan. Sabi ko, “Bakit kayo nagpunta dito, madilim na!” “Eh anak kita e.” Di ba? Yun ang hindi ko malilimutan yung mga ganun. Kasi doon niya nakita kung paano ako magtrabaho.

Mm-hmm. In 2003. But only for four months. My dad cried when he saw how hard I worked. I’d be up at four in the morning, already working, then go to sleep at eleven o’clock. Sometimes, when we made food for catering, for the [Pistahan Parade and Festival](#) for instance, I’d go to sleep at 2 a.m. then awaken at 4 a.m. My dad wept, saying, “I didn’t know that you toiled this way. That you slept so little, like a roach.” I will never forget my dad’s words.

Afterwards, while I was cooking here, my parents stayed with my big brother Kuya Boying. One night my dad, already eighty-four years old then, came to see me. I said to him, “Why’d you come here? It’s already dark!” “Because you’re my child,” he replied. Isn’t that something? I won’t forget that. He was able to witness and experience my work ethic.

EA: Di ba po, nagsimula yung shelter-in-place natin nung Marso? Eh, kumusta po yun noong anim na buwan na mahigit.
How has it been since San Francisco’s shelter-in-place order started in March? It’s been over six months.

TD: Nung yung dalawang buwan na iyon, mahirap. Kasi talagang totalling nawala ang mga nagtatrabaho. Ang hotel, diba, nagsara. InterCon, malimit ako dyan nagki-cater. Hampton, nagsara. Dental Pacific, nawala lahat ang mga estudyante. Paisa-isa na lang ang dumadaan sa akin kasi hindi naman sila yung ang, ano nila, online. Tapos yung tech dito sa 965, nagsara din lahat yon! Naglipat sila. Kasi, work at home na. Nawala lahat. Pero sa tulong din ni Desi, every week meron akong order na worth \$400. Tapos, tinulungan din ako ng Bindlestiff. Umorder din sila. Pero, SOMCAN ang nagdedeliver. The first two months were difficult. Workers had completely disappeared. The hotels closed, including InterCon, a hotel I often did catering for. Hampton Inn closed. Dental Pacific’s students would only come one by one, because they did remote learning. Then the tech companies at 965 Mission closed their physical offices. Because it’s now work-from-home. Everything and everyone was gone. But with Desi’s ¹ help, I had orders worth \$400. Bindlestiff ² also helped by ordering food. SOMCAN ³ delivered those orders.

EA: Ah, iyon ba po yung Filipinos Feed the Frontlines ⁴?
Was that Filipinos Feed the Frontlines?

- TD: I think yon yon. Awa ng Dios maraming tumulong sa akin. Kaya sabi ko, kung hindi dahil sa kanila na ano, wala din ako, diba? Yung huli ng Bindlestiff, rice, daing na bangus na may tomato, so, 50, no-- 60 heads na ready to eat na. And then, ito, [nagpapakita ng litrato sa cell phone niya] beef kaldereta with rice. Ganyan din ang ginawa ko.
I think so. With God's mercy, so many people helped me. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be here. Bindlestiff's last order was rice with vinegared milkfish and tomato. They placed sixty ready-to-eat orders. And then, here [shows a photo from her phone of one of Bindlestiff's orders], beef stew with tomato sauce and rice. I cooked dishes like that, too.
- EA: Marami nang pilipino nung lumipat kayo dito.
There were already many Filipinos in the South of Market when you moved here.
- TD: Oo. Dati kasi diba ang Arkipelago 'an dito. Yung Manilatown.
Yes. Remember when Arkipelago Books ⁵ was here in the Mint Mall? And do you remember the Manilatown [Heritage Foundation] ⁶ being here, too?
- EA: Opo sa baba.
Yes, downstairs.
- TD: Mm-hmm. Kaya si Bill Sorro ⁷—love na love ako non. Pati ni Al Robles ⁸.
Mm-hmm. Bill Sorro adored me. And so did Al Robles.
- EA: Tsaka si Tito Al!
And Uncle Al!
- TD: Yeah! Pati si ano, Emil De Guzman ⁹! Ang tawag nila sa akin, si Tasing.
Yeah! And Emil De Guzman! They all called me Tasing.
- EA: Ano po ang hilig nila Tito Al, Tito--?
What did they all like to eat?
- TD: Pinakbet, pancit--basta ang mga ganyan. Tapos, alala ko pa noon. Ang Pasko ng SoMa, dito yan ginagawa.
Stewed vegetables with pork, pancit, foods like that. I remember that our SoMa Christmastime festivities also took place here.
- EA: Di ba sa baba po? Kasi dito, kumakanta kami...
Wasn't it downstairs? We sang carols there as children.
- TD: Dito ang pagkain, event sa baba, lahat yan!
The food was served here, at my restaurant, and all the events were downstairs!

EA: Ah, ganun pala!
Oh, that's right!

TD: Alam mo ba si Bill Sorro. Hindi ko malilimutan yan. Everytime na mag-aano ng ganyan, bibigyan ako ng extra \$50. Para sa akin. Lagi yan ganon. Kaya nung tribute niya sa Mission? 'Andon ako! Talagang, ano din ako doon. Kaya yung mga anak niya, kilala ako. Talaga kung saan ano, sama ako! Naka Hawaiian pa nga ang mga costume don. You know, I will never forget Bill Sorro. Every time he would order from me, he'd give me an extra fifty dollars. Just for me. It was always like that. So when his tribute in the Mission took place, after his passing, I was there. That's community. His children remember me, because whenever there was an event, I was there! I even wore a Hawaiian shirt in honor of Bill.

EA: Mahilig nga po si Tito Bill sa ganyan.
Uncle Bill did truly like Hawaiian shirts.

TD: Yeah! Andon ako, totoo. Si Emil De Guzman, ayan, "Si Tasing, si Tasing!"
Ganyan ang ano nila sa akin.
Yes, I was there. Emil De Guzman would be like, "It's Tasing! Here's Tasing!"
They referred to me in this way.

EA: Bakit po tawag sa inyo Tasing?
Why are you known as Tasing?

TD: Kasi gayon ang tawag ng nanay ko. Lahat kami may ~i-n-g: Boying, Tasing, Doding, Yaying-- lahat kami ganon.
Because my mom gave me that nickname. All my siblings and I have nicknames ending in "ing": Boying, Tasing, Doding, Yaying—we are called that.

Footnotes:

1. Desi Danganan is Executive Director of [Kultivate Labs](#), an economic development and arts nonprofit inspired by SOMA Pilipinas, San Francisco's Filipino Cultural Heritage District, founded in 2016.
2. Founded in San Francisco in 1989, [Bindlestiff Studio](#) is one of the only permanent, community-based performing arts venues in the nation showcasing emerging Filipino American and Pilipino artists.
3. The [South of Market Community Action Network \(SOMCAN\)](#) has been serving low-income immigrant youth and families in SoMa, Excelsior, and greater San Francisco since 2000, providing social services, community organizing, and community planning.
4. [Filipinos Feed the Frontlines](#) is an alliance of Filipino food businesses and allied organizations providing meals to essential workers. The initiative was created by the nonprofit Kultivate Labs to provide aid during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Filipina-women-founded and led [Arkipelago Books](#) has been a pillar of the SoMa community for over twenty years. It is one of the only two distributors of Filipino specialty books outside of the Philippines.
6. Founded in 1994, [Manilatown Heritage Foundation](#) promotes social and economic justice for Filipinos in the U.S. through preserving Filipino history, advocating for equal access to resources and opportunities, and advancing the arts and culture of the Filipino community.
7. Bill Sorro (1939–2007) was a lifelong activist and a human rights and housing advocate active in the struggle for the International Hotel (also known as the I-Hotel), which helped spark the housing movement in San Francisco in the late 1960s. The [Bill Sorro Housing Program \(BiSHoP\)](#), a nonprofit dedicated to providing access to affordable housing in the city, is named in his honor.
8. Al Robles (1930–2009) was a poet and community activist in San Francisco. He organized the I-Hotel struggle alongside Bill Sorro and was a prominent member of Kearny Street Workshop, an Asian Pacific American arts organization.
9. Emil De Guzman (b. 1947), a student leader of the Third World Strike that took place across college campuses in the Bay Area in 1969, worked closely with Bill Sorro and Al Robles in the long fight to achieve justice for the community affected by and the residents evicted from the I-Hotel, and in the founding of Manilatown Heritage Foundation.



Yan Yan Beauty Salon: Conversation with Anh Huynh

TOP



Erina Alejo, *Anh Huynh of Yan Yan Beauty Salon cutting artist and collaborator Vida Kuang's hair, 4619 Mission Street, Excelsior district, from the series My Ancestors Followed Me Here, 2020; inkjet print; courtesy the artist; © Erina Alejo*

Interview conducted by [Vida Kuang](#) on October 7, 2020. Part of Erina Alejo, *My Ancestors Followed Me Here*, created for *Bay Area Walls*, a commission series initiated by SFMOMA in 2020. This interview was transcribed by Vida Kuang and has been edited for clarity.

Artist note:

Artist and community organizer Vida and I combed through the Excelsior district for a shopkeeper open to being interviewed. Anh Huynh and her stylists at Yan Yan Beauty Salon had just reopened after San Francisco's first shelter-in-place mandate. Each time, Vida and I got haircuts from Anh and learned more about her story. It turns out that Anh knew my family's regular stylist, Kimberly, whose salon, a few blocks down, closed for good earlier in the pandemic. My brother and mom started getting haircuts from Yan Yan after that. The staff endured a second recent lockdown and has since reopened Yan Yan. We look forward to continue supporting their business.

Vida Kuang: 好似好多通常喺呢度做髮廊嘅係越南華僑，係咪呀？
I notice a lot of Chinese Vietnamese immigrants tend to work in beauty salons, is that right?

Anh Huynh: 係啱
I think so [chuckles].

VK: 咁點解有咁多越南華僑開髮廊啊？
Why do you think so many Chinese Vietnamese immigrants tend to open hair salons?

- AH: 你知嗎，我哋越南人多數肯做，肯捱。剪髮呀同做手甲呀。
You know, as Vietnamese people, many of us are willing to work, willing to endure, including doing jobs like hair, doing nails . . .
- VK: 做呢啲工你係咪嚟越南識或者嚟呢度學㗎？
Did you learn this work in Vietnam or here?
- AH: 唔係呀，係呢度開始㗎。嚟越南我哋多數做買賣。
No, I started when I came here. Back in Vietnam, we sold things in the market.
- VK: 你嚟越南嗰陣時呢，後生嗰陣時做咩工㗎？
What did you do in Vietnam when you were younger?
- AH: 我讀書囉，讀中文。嗰陣時生活好困難嘅。一家個個都要捱你知嗎。要出去賣嘢，個個都要做嘢㗎。我哋開舖頭賣麵，好似呢度大王開出嚟賣麵，賣大包，賣食咁樣囉。
I was in school and I studied Chinese. At the time, life was difficult. Life was . . . well, as a family, we all had to endure and struggle, you know. We all went out to sell things, we all worked to live. We opened a shop and sold noodles. Kind of like Good Orchard Bakery down the block here [in Excelsior]. We sold dai baos and noodles and other food.
- VK: 你自己有冇嚟嗰度做過工呀？
Did you work at the store too?
- AH: 冇，我嘅父母做，我哋嗰陣時要返學，到大個咗先幫手。
No, our parents worked the business. We helped, but were mostly in school. When we got older, we helped out more.
- VK: 我嚟呢度我係唐人埠長大。
You know, I grew up here in Chinatown.
- AH: 哦你呀，哈哈。你過嚟好耐呀？嚟香港或大陸過嚟呀？
Oh, aiiyyaa! [laughs]. Did you come here a long time ago? From Hong Kong?
- VK: 唔係，我嚟呢度出世。媽媽爸爸台山人，嚟中國台山來。
No, I grew up here. My parents are Toisanese. From Toisan, China.
- AH: 你媽媽幾好嗎？
Is your mom doing good?

- VK: 都ok啦，而家做照顧老人。佢哋以前開咗間舖頭係唐人埠。佢哋退咗休而家有開。做得好辛苦，我睇我爸爸媽媽嘅手都唔滑嘅。
She's okay. She's working as an in-home care provider for the elderly right now. When we were little, my parents opened up a small grocery store. It was really hard on them. They retired from it. I look at my parents' hands and they aren't smooth.
- AH: 好老了來美國，四十歲了。
[Laughs.] I came to the U.S. when I was pretty old, in my forties.
- VK: 你之前喺越南做乜嘢工呀？
Back in Vietnam, what kind of work did you do?
- AH: 我做酒店，打仗嗰陣時，好多美國人喺越南呀嘛。1966，62，63 嗰陣時。打仗好犀利呀你知嗎？
I worked at a hotel back home. At the time (in the early to mid-1960s), there were a lot of Americans coming to Vietnam because of the war. The war was going on and it was very intense, you know.
- VK: 嗰陣時呢係點樣㗎？
What was it like then?
- AH: 嘩1963年打仗好驚呀。打到走啊。
The year 1963 was very frightening. Warfare was loud and everyone wanted to leave.
- VK: 你當時係咪仲住喺胡志明城？
Were you still living in Ho Chi Minh City then?
- AH: 係呀，仲住喺胡志明，因為仲未解放㗎嘛。
Yeah, I was still there. The Liberation of Saigon hadn't happened yet.
- VK: 係唔係一路打仗你繼續喺酒店做工呀？
While the war was happening, were you still working at the hotel?
- AH: 最尾都有，1972年退曬返嚟呢度。我做執房。
I stopped working there after a while. Around 1972, the American troops began leaving and returning here.
- VK: 咁嗰陣時你一路執房，嗰度一路打仗？
Were you housekeeping while the war was happening?

AH: 一路執房一路打仗。不過佢哋打得很遠，唔係好近胡志明市。後尾喺 75 年佢哋走入去胡志明市，咁個個都走曬㗎。嗰陣時美國退曬我哋冇做呀。

Yes, I was working as a hotel housekeeper as the war was going on. But they were fighting close by until 1975, when they attacked Ho Chi Minh City. Then, everyone left. When the Americans left, we had to stop working.

VK: 你嗰陣時驚嗎？

Were you scared then?

AH: 嗰陣時細個唔驚㗎。乜都唔驚。

I was young then; I wasn't scared of anything [laughs].

VK: 乜都唔驚？

Not scared at all?

AH: 係呀細個唔驚。嗰陣時好後生呀嘛。廿零歲邊度驚呢。

Yeah, I was fearless when I was young. I was in my twenties and wasn't scared of the world.

VK: 你嬲唔嬲美國呀？

Were you ever angry at the U.S.?

AH: 唔係呀

No, not really.

VK: 我覺得如果係我呢我會好嬲，我會好嬲呢啲外國人侵入我個國家打我㗎。

I think if it were me, I'd be very angry at these foreigners for coming into my home, attacking my people.

AH: 冇辦法啦，呢啲係政府啲嘢係咪呀？

[Chuckles.] Well, what can you do? These matters are between governments, right?

VK: Mhmm . . .

AH: 以前細個好開心㗎，乜都唔識。

When I was younger, I was very happy. I didn't know anything. I was very carefree.

VK: 你可唔可以講多啲你細個嗰陣時點樣呀？我而家 29 歲，你 29 歲嗰陣時係點㗎？

Can you tell me more about when you were younger? I'm twenty-nine now. What was it like when you were twenty-nine?

- AH: 29歲我啱啱結婚。解放之後先結婚。
At twenty-nine, I was just married. I got married just after Liberation.
- VK: 你後生嗰陣時有乜嘢夢想呀？
When you were younger, what kinds of dreams did you have?
- AH: 有乜嘢夢想呀。一味返工。休息嗰陣時揸車同朋友去食野餐呀，游水呀。
嗰陣時後生好開心㗎。好似你咁而家後生幾開心。
When I was younger . . . I didn't have many dreams. I worked a lot. When we had time off, we rode on scooters and went out with friends to the night markets, or we went swimming. When I was younger, I was really happy. Like you right now—to be young and happy. Where did you go before the pandemic?
- VK: 你記得你第一個美國餐係乜嘢嗎？
Do you remember your first meal in the U.S.?
- AH: 初初我呢我食中國粉麵呀。嘩，有嘢㗎！淨係蔥咋，啲麵淨係蔥花㗎咋。
佢有乜味道添。淨係啲蝦米味。食到以為好好食。原來美國啲粉麵好難食。
食到返屋企打冷震。
When we first came, we got Chinese noodle soup. There wasn't anything in there!
Just—[laughs] just green onions! No real flavor, just dried shrimp flavor. When we first ate American noodles, we thought they weren't bad, but afterwards we were quivering from just the thought of it.
- VK: 哈哈！
[Laughs.]
- AH: 越南人呢肯做肯捱。又唔怕啦渣。自己做，自己開舖頭。我哋啲越南人多數會自己開舖頭。唔想幫人打工。自己搵錢。
Vietnamese people, we're willing to work, willing to endure. We don't mind getting down and dirty. We want to work for ourselves. I can have my own freedom when I open my own business. I work for no one else but myself.



Discount City: An Account by Lourdes Figueroa

TOP



Erina Alejo, *Prudencia Ayala* (pseudonym) on shift at Discount City, 2784–2786 Mission Street, Mission district, from the series *My Ancestors Followed Me Here*, 2020; inkjet print; courtesy the artist; © Erina Alejo

Participatory observational account by [Lourdes Figueroa](#), October 22, 2020. Part of Erina Alejo, *My Ancestors Followed Me Here*, created for *Bay Area Walls*, a commission series initiated by SFMOMA in 2020. This observational account was written by Lourdes Figueroa and has been edited for clarity.

Artist note:

As part of my commission, I wanted to interview essential workers in the Mission district, continuing the work my team and I have been doing in the Excelsior and South of Market. When looking for possible sites to photograph, artist and poet Lourdes Figueroa and I were immediately drawn to the assortment of piñatas lining the ceiling at the entrance to Discount City. I remembered that my mom used to buy our detergent from Discount City when we lived across the street from it in the late 1990s. Throughout our multiple visits to the store we met Mohammed, the owner; Prudencia Ayala (an alias referencing the late Afro-Salvadoran writer and activist) the cashier; and José, who stocked goods in the back. Prudencia declined an interview, which Lourdes and I respected as an ethnographic refusal. Instead, Lourdes wrote a bilingual account of our time at Discount City. A refusal is a method through which researchers and research participants collectively decide not to make certain information available. It is a form of decolonizing the research process by redirecting academic analysis and its historic harm and implications while centering the participants' right to self-representation.

Prudencia y Discount City: Una reflexión sobre la tardecita del 22 de octubre de 2020

Me está costando aceptar que octubre ya se acaba. El jueves pasado tuve mi cita con Erina en la tienda Discount City.

Es mediodía. El mundo gira. En la esquina se vende fruta. Prudencia me saluda al entrar a la tienda. Ella feliz en su trabajo. Feliz y ocupada en la caja. Le pregunto cómo está y qué tal todo. Me responde, “Dentro de lo que cabe... estoy bien. Aquí estamos.” Es cierto: aquí estamos, sobreviviendo. Yo, siendo la pensadora que soy, me quedo callada. Entonces, Prudencia para en medio de su trabajo en la caja y, volteando su rostro hacia mí, me pregunta cómo estoy yo. De repente entiendo a Prudencia: entiendo que le importan mucho los clientes que vienen seguido a la tienda. De repente entiendo, con la forma en la que me pregunta cómo estoy, que aquí estamos las dos, sobreviviendo, buscando lo humano en nosotras.

Ese día, Erina toma más fotos de Discount City. Ella camina entre los fondos de la tienda mientras yo me quedo en la entrada con Prudencia, platicando. Sí, el mundo sigue girando. Prudencia me habla sobre inmigración. Según ella, ya se están moviendo las cosas. Me dice que quiere ir a El Salvador a finales de enero, que su esposo lleva más de seis meses esperando su mica, que no se sabe qué está pasando en realidad. Muchos no han recibido noticia sobre su estado. “Estamos en limbo”, dice Prudencia.

Mohammed llega a la caja para ayudarlo. De repente entra un ciclo de personas: clientes comprando piñatas, dulces, detergente para lavar la ropa, jabón para lavar las manos, Coca-Cola, y más cositas. Mohammed y Prudencia trabajan en sincronía; tienen su ritmo. Su forma de ser con cada cliente es gentil y verdadera. Se ve que tienen respeto el uno por el otro, ese respeto que solo se gana tras trabajar juntos mucho tiempo. La verdad, parecen una familia trabajando en su negocio, los dos felices y a gusto en la mera obra de su trabajo.

Después de pasar una hora en la tienda, Erina y yo nos despedimos de Mohammed, Prudencia y José, el reponedor. Nos dio mucho gusto ver cómo trabajan en equipo y ver a la gente entrando y saliendo de la tienda. Nos fuimos en la mera hora de su lonche, ya casi a las dos de la tarde, afuera el día hermoso y fresco.

A pesar de nuestra despedida, y aunque mi trabajo con Erina haya terminado, espero regresar a la tienda. No sé, tal vez algún día. Me siento triste, pero estoy agradecida de que los trabajadores de Discount City hayan compartido un poco de ellos mismos conmigo, de que me hayan dado la oportunidad de conocer un poco de este rincón del mundo. Somos seres humanos buscando nuestro reflejo. Nos seguimos buscando durante esta pandemia, a pesar del dolor. Queremos mirarnos y poder sentir esperanza entre nosotras, escucharnos unas a otras en este mundo que gira y gira.

English Translation:

Prudencia and Discount City: A reflection on the afternoon of October 22, 2020

It's hard to believe we are at the end of October. Last Thursday I met Erina at Discount City.

It's noon. The world is turning. Fruit is being sold on the corner. Prudencia greets me as I walk into the store. She seems happy in her work. Happy and busy at the cash register. I ask her how she is and how it's all going. She replies, "All things considered . . . I'm fine. Here we are." It's true—here we are, surviving. Being the thinker that I am, I stay silent. Prudencia then stops working for a moment and, turning to face me, asks me how I am doing. Suddenly, I understand Prudencia; I realize how much she cares about her regular customers. Suddenly, the way in which she asks me how I'm doing makes me understand that we are both here, surviving, looking for the humanness within us.

That day Erina takes more photos of Discount City. She walks around the back of the store while I stay at the entrance with Prudencia, chatting. Yes, the world keeps on turning. Prudencia talks about immigration. She says things are starting to move along. She says she wants to go to El Salvador at the end of January, that her husband has been waiting for his Green Card for more than six months, that no one knows what is actually happening. Many people haven't received any news about their status. "We are in limbo," says Prudencia.

Mohammed comes to help Prudencia at the cash register. Suddenly, a flurry of people enters the store—customers buying piñatas, sweets, laundry detergent, hand soap, Coca-Cola, and other small things. Mohammed and Prudencia work in tandem; they have their own rhythm. Their way of treating each customer is gentle and honest. They clearly have respect for each another—the kind of respect that is only earned after working together for a long time. They look like a family working at their business, both of them happy and comfortable in their work.

After spending an hour in the store, Erina and I say goodbye to Mohammed, Prudencia, and José, the store's stockman. It was nice to see them working together and to see the people going into and out of the store. We leave right before their lunch hour, at about two in the afternoon. Outside, the day is beautiful and cool.

Even though we said our goodbyes and my work with Erina has come to an end, I hope to return to the store. I don't know, maybe one day. I feel sad, but I'm also grateful to the Discount City staff for sharing a little of themselves with me, for giving me the opportunity to get to know this corner of the world a little. We are human beings looking for our reflection. We are still trying to find ourselves during this pandemic, despite the pain. We want to look at each other and be able to feel hopeful together, to listen to each other in this world that turns and turns.



Mural of Ronnie Goodman at 1885 Mission: Conversation with Max Marttila

TOP



Erina Alejo, *Mural of Ronnie Goodman (1960–2020) by Max Marttila, 1885 Mission Street, Mission district, from the series My Ancestors Followed Me Here, 2020; inkjet print; courtesy the artist; © Erina Alejo*

Interview with [Max Marttila](#) conducted by Erina Alejo on October 25, 2020. Part of Erina Alejo, *My Ancestors Followed Me Here*, created for *Bay Area Walls*, a commission series initiated by SFMOMA in 2020. This phone conversation with Max Marttila was transcribed by Erina Alejo and has been edited for clarity.

Artist note:

The Mission district is respected as a historically Latinx and immigrant neighborhood and the anti-displacement and cultural preservation expression of its murals, local artists, and grassroots organizations. One of the people involved in this community effort is Max Marttila, whom I came across painting a crow on the facade of the newly opened SF Chickenbox, a fried chicken restaurant at 819 Valencia Street. Valencia Street, while subtly different in economy and demographic to its parallel counterpart, Mission Street, shares the artistic expression displayed on its walls by artists like Max. Max tells me about his recently finished mural of the late Ronnie Goodman (1960–2020) at 15th and Mission, the former site of Impact Hub SF. The community focused coworking company housed various local nonprofits until their eviction from the building in January 2020. I spoke to Max in October of 2020 to ask him about his experience with the mural, his friendship with Ronnie, and his life as an artist.

Honoring Ronnie Goodman

A group of artists and I were contacted by the owners of the building at 15th and Mission right around the time Ronnie had passed, to create a mural in his memory. It was the appropriate time and space for this mural of Ronnie to be painted and to be seen by a lot of people. The rest of the mural is pretty loose—I had eight friends do graffiti pieces around the portrait of Ronnie painted at the building's entrance. People came in and painted their letterings within a

day. We practiced social distancing, so everyone worked on different days. The mural took three days using spray paint. A brush process would have taken months.

Ronnie wasn't a graffiti artist, but he had love for all sorts of artistic crafts. His late son, Mire, was a graffiti writer. Ronnie was part of the Precita Eyes family. He painted with them before he was incarcerated at San Quentin and built relationships with everyone there throughout the ups and downs of his housing and studio situation. Precita Eyes helped sell prints of his and offered other forms of support when he needed it. Ronnie's work is very political. You ought to look at his work. There is so much being written about him nowadays, but to get to know him, you can simply start by getting to know his work.

He was a real friend of mine. We talked about art, music, regular life stuff, and painting techniques. When Ronnie was alive, he asked me if I would paint him, as part of a series of portraits of people I was working on. So, I took a bunch of photos of him. As Ronnie was a figurative painter, he was easy to use as a model and understood how different lighting would affect poses. I was lucky enough to have some original photos of him to reference. He was like, "I want to get painted in this hat." So I honored that request. He would come through in different outfits but was really feeling that old western outfit of the hat and red garment, like a Desperado kind of theme.

He'd tell me about growing up in the city. His experience was different. He had a lot to talk about: prison and his views on how the homeless should be taken care of in San Francisco. I was amazed by his resilience, his dedication to working, and how he was able to focus so much on working, even in his situation. Ronnie would show me work-in-progress pieces. I'd help him go through images on Google to find perfect references for an elephant. He was really consumed by his work. Despite living out on the street, all the tragedy he had been through, the death of his son, he could still focus on working, find ways to make money. He was a big inspiration.

Over time, people realized that he was one of the most important artists to come out of San Francisco. Ronnie was part of the Black community in San Francisco, whose population has dwindled over the years. He was a victim of the prison industrial complex. He's not the only one in the city who was doing invaluable work and was underserved. There are other cats, too. He represented a lot of people, cultures, and populations.

When Ronnie died, he was living two blocks away from where the mural we painted in his memory stands now, on 16th and Capp, where he had built his own studio and painted murals and smaller pieces. There is a mural of him there, too.

Life and Death of Murals

A lot of businesses have been boarded up since the pandemic began. Murals have become opportunities to activate these storefronts. Some murals are painted on the wooden panels that cover the storefront doors and windows. I'm not sure which murals will stay after the

businesses reopen. Our goal as muralists is usually to create work that lasts a long time. Yet there is also beauty in the work of temporary murals. The finite period also eases pressure on everyone, whether it's six months, two months, one month, or less. My preference is for murals to stay awhile, especially brush murals. Other murals that are more urban in style aren't meant to last as long, mostly due to the materials used. Not all murals need to last as long. The impact of their messages will have been felt regardless.

Part of my work with Precita Eyes is restoring murals. I've helped restore murals that are fifteen to twenty years old. This was my third time painting on the building at 1885 Mission. Precita Eyes has a good relationship with the building owner and Impact Hub, who rented space there. While I'm not sure what the owners' political views are, we have been able to explore different topics on their walls. The first mural we did depicted a [kneeling Colin Kaepernick](#) with an anti-gentrification Robin Hood theme. I painted it with Dyzer1, a well-known old school graffiti artist from the city, who I grew up looking up to. I directed the second mural project through Precita Eyes' Urban Youth Arts class, with assistance from Sami Schilf, Diego Irizarry, and Amber Ramirez. That forty-foot tall mural on the back side of the building is called [Innovative Resistance](#).

This new request for a mural honoring Ronnie was for the building's facade. Once the building is leased again, the murals might be power washed off. I have no idea how long it will be up, but I won't be super torn up when it is gone. I've done murals for ten years. I've painted at least two hundred murals. I'm committed and addicted to the work, like many artists. I'm always moving onto the next one, pushing it. I see the value in fighting to keep certain murals, but I also understand how a city like San Francisco changes. It's always changing.

The Impact of Murals

The strength in muralism as an art form is that it breaks down the hierarchy of the art world. You don't have to go a museum or gallery to see the art—you're already in it, out here in the streets. For the most part, murals are made for everyday people, especially communities from middle- and working-class backgrounds.

Nowadays, you can't really go to a gallery or museum unless you schedule an appointment. I take the COVID stuff seriously and understand that galleries need to take precautions. The pandemic is horrible, but separate from that, it's interesting to see how it's affecting the art world. Are galleries still going to be relevant? If you have to schedule an appointment, that's going to make galleries more exclusive and not accessible to the general public. It's all up in the air. As artists try to navigate all this ambiguity, muralism has adapted to this reality pretty well. Murals, for the most part, are outside, not indoors. Organizations and businesses have used mural commissions as a way to support artists and engage community.

Murals along Mission and Valencia Street

There's an obvious cultural difference between Valencia and Mission Street. On Valencia Street there are high-end boutique shops. Mission Street also has boutiques, but for the most part it serves the working class. The activity along Mission is different—it's like the Wild West. There is also a little bit of a class difference. Time and gentrification have shaped these parallel streets differently.

But it's not all black and white. There are trendy spots on Mission, too. And there's SF Chickenbox along Valencia, which brings various communities in the district together. If you were to walk down both streets and take a tally of everything, you'd notice that the murals on Mission are more traditional in style. Along both streets is a lot of urban style art. There's actually a lot of artists who have done murals on both streets, like [Chris Gazaleh](#) and me. There's political work and also non-political work that is made just for the sake of beauty. Clarion Alley connects Valencia and Mission streets. It is primarily rooted in political work and successfully balances content and form.

Learning from the Pandemic and Uprisings for Justice

We're still deep in the pandemic and have yet to come to the peak. Artists like myself are still trying to figure it out. Our effort to do so and to make murals at this time speaks to the community's resilience and strength. We have different experiences and comfort levels for how we share our practices and projects publicly and privately. I'm a social person, but I also like working in solitude. There are artists who are making public art during this time, people who feel this art needs to be experienced. One way of doing this is through muralism.

At this time, I'm staying committed to the work and focused on what's most important: the community connection fostered through art making. It's not about putting the work on Instagram and being congratulated. Instagram isn't the best place to discuss art. It brings forth a congratulatory atmosphere through public comments, but it's truly limited in what it can do as a community platform.

Art making, experiencing art, and engaging in dialogue are all different in person, in a studio, and out on a storefront wall. I hope for the larger art world and the local art community to be able to be in deeper discourse with one another. Throughout this pandemic, and after, I hope we can find ways to continue to engage in art and make connections.



Mural of Breonna Taylor and Eyad al-Hallaq at 537 Valencia: Conversation with Chris Gazaleh

TOP



Erina Alejo, *Mural of Breonna Taylor and Eyad al-Hallaq by Chris Gazaleh, 537 Valencia Street, Mission district, from the series My Ancestors Followed Me Here, 2020; inkjet print; courtesy the artist; © Erina Alejo*

Interview with [Chris Gazaleh](#) conducted by Erina Alejo on October 27, 2020. Part of Erina Alejo, *My Ancestors Followed Me Here*, created for *Bay Area Walls*, a commission series initiated by SFMOMA in 2020. This phone conversation with Chris Gazaleh was transcribed by Erina Alejo and has been edited for clarity.

Artist note:

Chris Gazaleh's murals of all scales and palettes can be felt and found throughout San Francisco, including along the Mission district's Mission and Valencia Streets. I learned more about Chris's practice through the photographs of his murals by community photographer Nick DeRenzi at an exhibition called *Whose Streets? Our Streets!*, which was organized by Nick and Harvey Lozada at [Evolved SF](#) in the Mission. The generous spirit and textures of his art allow the viewer an intimate window into his Palestinian roots and insight into the ongoing Palestinian struggle for liberation across the diaspora and the importance of cross-cultural solidarity work, especially in the context of living in the United States.

Mural of Breonna Taylor and Eyad al-Hallaq

Breonna Taylor, age twenty-six, a Black medical worker, was shot and killed by Louisville, Kentucky, police officers in her sleep. Palestinian Eyad al-Hallaq, thirty-two years old with autism, was shot and killed by Israeli police while he was en route to a community center. While in different parts of the world, Palestinians and Black people face the same genocidal tactics just for being who they are and because of where they live. Breonna and Eyad were killed like nothing. Obviously, these are two different places and situations, but the reason they

were killed is the same: they are people from certain areas, who live in certain areas, are of certain ethnicities—these things are very much aligned when you look at the histories and struggles of Palestinians and the Black community for freedom and justice.

I literally pulled up on that store wall and started painting the mural titled *Local to Global Resist Police Terror*. No one was gonna stop me. Within a couple of days, the woman who owned the building hit me up on Instagram and expressed appreciation for the art. I didn't know what the reaction was going to be. She was hella cool: she allowed it to stay up and let me ride with it. Thank the universe that it's still up to educate viewers.

I can't live another day without seeing this connection being made. Everyone wants to paint Black people all of a sudden, to co-opt their ongoing struggle for justice—it just becomes the trendy thing to do? No. We have to also dig deeper and think about the global interconnectedness of social justice work. Moreover, people are like, "Okay, I'm ready to go back to normal." No way. We need to rethink this way of thinking. The work keeps going after the hype. Eyad, thirty-two; Breonna twenty-six. Palestinian and Black people are targeted and policed.

Defaced Murals

I've been vocal about my stance on the oppression of Palestinian people, even before my mural on Breonna and Eyad. The mural is constantly defaced. There has been an anti-Palestinian vandal who has been defacing our community murals for the last ten years, including murals along Clarion Alley. A friend caught this person defacing one of my murals on 16th street and caught them on video. They had come right after I had left the wall.

The following instance happened when I painted on a storefront at 16th and Valencia, after it was defaced eleven times. One day, someone called the cops on me as I was fixing the mural. The cops told me they got a call of a hate crime—my mural. It was obvious the vandal had called on me to stop me from painting it. During the interrogation, the cops asked me if I had permission to paint here. I told them the new owner gave me permission and that I'm not doing anything wrong. Later that same day, I caught the former owner buffing out my mural. I approached him and asked him what he was doing. He replied that this was a Jewish business that had been there for twenty-five years and was under attack because of this mural. He felt like it had become a direct attack on him. I told him that I was the artist and that I hadn't even made the connection between the business being Jewish and the content of the mural. It is also beside the message of the mural. I then said I did not appreciate the fact that he had covered up my work countless times and had encouraged others to do so without talking to me about the mural. I questioned why he wanted to silence the Palestinian voice, asking him, "Isn't this hate? What you are doing?" He obviously didn't understand.

Things got heated, and the cops came back. Even though this former owner no longer owned the store, he still illegally had a key to it, and literally trespassed on the property. I was told by the new renter that he was no longer paying rent in the space. He vandalized my mural on a

wall he had no permission to paint on. The police let him walk away after he trespassed, and then asked me, “Do you have any other questions?” “No. Just get the hell out of here,” I replied. The cops didn’t care, and they should not have even been there. The cops didn’t do shit.

On Being a Palestinian American Artist

Sometimes I wonder, why aren’t there more Palestinian artists vocal about our struggle. We have so many resources here in America and can use our privileges to speak out. Perhaps there is fear about attracting trouble. I understand that it’s hard enough to even be an artist. But there is so much more potential for an artist’s practice when they connect things politically. Why are we afraid to incite trouble when it’s the truth? I’m thankful that I was raised to be truthful.

My dad raised us without that fear of identifying as Palestinian on a public level. He didn’t speak English until he was eight years old. He experienced racism and discrimination as an Arab kid growing up on the west side of Detroit in the ’60s and ’70s, which was a very racist and segregated time.

I’m thankful that my parents didn’t have that traditional outlook and say to me, “Just become a doctor.” They raised me like an American: get a job; take care of yourself. My parents divorced when I was five. I feel like they just got together to have my brother and me. Yet they sacrificed everything to put a roof over our heads, even after parting. My mom became a single mother who worked two to three jobs. My dad was a small business owner who especially struggled through this recession.

My parents understand that it’s not always about success and having the best of the best at the expense of our own happiness—that’s a misconception that immigrants have of living in America. To not look back where we came from, to grow pretentious and disconnected—it’s a big problem to think that’s what it takes to become “American.” I think our homelands are too important to trade in for assimilation. We have to keep our connection to these places throughout the generations. Here in the U.S., I have to use my privilege and speak out for our freedom.

The Role of Murals

During this time of quarantine and in general, murals educate and keep us connected to our surroundings—all the things that are happening around us that we may not pay attention to. Murals amplify voices and share our stances on various issues. It’s important for muralists and artists to contextualize what’s going on, and to offer our wisdom. Many of us are activists who have been organizing in the community for years. We aren’t just coming out of the blue. I particularly think of the work of [Cece Carpio](#) and the [Trust Your Struggle Collective](#). For artists like us, who have been doing this work, it’s really beautiful and invaluable for people to see through our murals that the constant struggle for justice is not just a moment, it’s a movement.

Of course, a lot of voices are still left out. Across the Bay, the voices of the unhoused community are constantly put on the backburner. Our society is so contradictory and hypocritical. We have to get past tokenizing our communities. For instance, we have the inclusivity of the All Black Lives Matter movement. I have to break it down in my own mind to truly reflect on all of the Black voices that are still missing. The more we speak out on these issues, the more they become part of the conversations that we're having in everyday moments. As for the Palestinian struggle for justice, our communities are still learning how to make deeper connections. No one really wants to tokenize my people and me—yet.



Ben Davis Sign at 2650 Mission: Conversation with George Harry Crampton Glassanos

TOP



Erina Alejo, *Former site of Arik Surplus Co., known for carrying Ben Davis work clothes, 2650 Mission Street, Mission district, from the series My Ancestors Followed Me Here, 2020; inkjet print; courtesy the artist; © Erina Alejo*

Interview with George Harry Crampton Glassanos conducted by Erina Alejo on November 8, 2020. Part of Erina Alejo, *My Ancestors Followed Me Here*, created for *Bay Area Walls*, a commission series initiated by SFMOMA in 2020. This in-person conversation with George Harry Crampton Glassanos was transcribed by Erina Alejo and has been edited for clarity.

Artist note:

Photographing the Ben Davis sign at 2650 Mission as part of my investigation of anti-displacement resistance along Mission Street prompted me to look into the sign's community history. Photographer homies [Nick DeRenzi](#) and [Harvey Lozada](#) reconnected me to muralist George Harry Crampton Glassanos, who was the latest community member to help restore the iconic neighborhood sign. I recall being mesmerized by his exhibition [Livin' for the City](#) with his father, George Crampton, at Acción Latina's Juan R. Fuentes Gallery in the summer of 2019.

One Sunday in November 2020, I met with George at 348 Precita Ave to see the newly completed [Community Spirit and Legacy of Precita Eyes](#) mural, which he participated in painting, along with more than twenty other artists. There, we ran into some of the other muralists: Susan Cervantes and Marina Perez-Wong and Elaine Chu of Twin Walls Mural Company. Afterward, George and I sat by Precita Park in his classic car—a 1973 Chevrolet Caprice—where he told me about his artistry, growing up in San Francisco, and his participation in one of many iterations of the community-driven and volunteer-led restoration of the iconic Ben Davis sign.

Restoration of the Ben Davis Sign

In September 2016, there was an electrical fire at Arik's that led to the store's indefinite closure. The sign started getting marked up after that. It started with a small graffiti, written with a Sharpie. Then the sign got hit hard with more tags.

If you're from SF, there is a good chance you know that these types of signs are sacred. The people who tagged on it didn't know the significance of the decades-old sign for the city. My friend [Charlie Ertola](#), who helped restore it with me, is part of the community of people who, throughout the years, helped bring the sign back to life. It was something Charlie and I did for the community—a rogue act. We did not want credit or recognition.

One morning, at 7 a.m., we went to the sign with a ladder and began painting. Charlie went to school for sign painting, so he did the lettering. Throughout the day, we worked to restore the sign to its full glory. Cars drove by, honking their horns in support. Passersby chatted with us. The neighborhood came alive. We put a photo of the finished sign on Instagram. The owner of Ben Davis saw it and contacted us to ask for our mailing addresses. Charlie and I received a box full of pants, painter's overalls, beanies, and shirts.

I've been wearing Ben Davis clothing since I was in middle school. One of my teachers at the San Francisco Waldorf school once cited four or five of my classmates and me for wearing Ben Davis shirts. The school called in all of our dads and talked to us. We were told not to wear Ben Davis because it was "street gang clothing." "What's the big deal? We wear this to work!" my dad replied. He is a jack-of-all-trades, like my classmates' fathers: carpenter, janitor, muffler guy, you name it.

I've always been a fan of the Ben Davis logo design. The gorilla has a smirk on his face. People have restored the sign at 2650 Mission many times over the years. I don't know who the original painter was, but the sign was probably first painted sometime in the 1960s or '70s. I think Ben Davis had a sign painter painting the logo across the city. When you texted me your photo of the sign in its current state, I remember replying, "Yes, a sad sight indeed." So many of San Francisco's signs, including the iconic Coca-Cola sign on Bryant Street in the SoMa, are disappearing. A forgotten period of sign painting slowly disappears.

Generations of Sign Painters

It's a struggle nowadays, because sign painters are being hired less and less. Yet there is something beautiful about a hand-painted sign. Whenever I see a hand-painted sign, I stop and get to know it and its painter. There's [Ernesto Paúl](#), who also goes by Cruising Coyote and is from Tijuana and San Diego, and then [John Seastrunk](#), who is part of a family R&B group. John paints half of the signs in the city and also paints shop windows for different holidays. He painted the back window of my car! While everyone was getting summer jobs at McDonald's, John put himself through college by painting and learning from trial and error. I consider myself more of a muralist than a sign painter. I hate using oil-based paint. It's messy and hard for me.

You have to have a certain level of respect for OGs and the work they're known for. Painting windows is John's thing. His work is known by many businesses, so I know to hold off from selling my labor to one of his spots. Although in some cases, a new place will open up, and I will approach them with my skills.

There is a whole new generation of precise sign painters. In comparison, the OGs are a little looser and more organic, embracing imperfections. There is also something beautiful about that.

[Lauren D'Amato](#) is the queen of signs. She is highly skilled in painting backwards on the glass. I've assisted her with a few, including some of the ones at La Reyna Bakery, owned by Luis "Louie" Gutiérrez and family. We do their banner for Día de los Muertos in my friend Wray Velez's garage every year!

Growing Up in the City

I grew up on 18th Street, between Mission and Valencia. Our landlord evicted everyone in the building through the Ellis Act around 1999 or 2000. My mom and dad got lucky with a new place. We were able to move to Folsom Street and continue to live in the Mission. I got more into painting and got opportunities to practice at local shops. I became friends with the people at City Smoke Shop on 18th and Mission and asked to paint on their walls. I painted a MUNI bus and a couple of lowriders on the wall and paid homage to old 99-cent stores and to 1930s and '40s art deco style. I also painted a girl walking down the street with storm clouds behind her. I included the hood in the mural for the younger generation and the kids from the Mission. The mural is still there. Throughout this process, I got into spray paint, then became more interested in brush. I feel like spray paint is solely for graffiti and vandalism, which I support, but I appreciate taking the time with a brush more.

It was cool, painting on that corner at City Smoke Shop. There was also a MUNI bus stop there. You meet so many people while painting. Sometime after finishing that mural, I was approached by [Max Marttila](#) to paint the big mural on 24th and Shotwell. I went to high school with one of the guys who was shot on that corner. We honored his life through the mural. The mural is called *Once Upon a Time in the Mission*. I like painting murals and jumping on projects, like the murals by my friends [Lucía Gonzalez-Ippolito](#) and [Mario Cid](#). Mario recently painted the big mural on the wall of the Walgreen's at 24th and Mission. I helped paint the roses. Lucia's is on 24th and Capp and is about police violence in our community.

I love and devote my time to old music, old cars, old buildings, and San Francisco history. My friends tell me I'm thirty-one going on seventy-one.

I now have a flip phone. I don't have a computer or television. I grew up without a TV, because my mom and dad raised us that way. I grew up reading comics. I do have Netflix, though. Yes, that's a photo of my cat on my phone's home screen. I had a mouse problem, so I adopted him.

He's an outdoor cat. I got a bell for him to wear. He brought a groundhog inside one time and I had to trap it with a cigar box!

Sometimes it's frustrating to deal with technology and shit, like Venmo. While it's hard for me to keep up with that foolishness, and I feel like I miss out on some business opportunities, I feel satisfied with being able to have what I have. I used to have Instagram. I was making a lot of art on it, making money through commissions. It's frustrating that I lost that clientele when I stopped using it, but I wasn't making art for myself while I was on it. I talked to my dad about it and had a realization. The platform also started numbing me to violence, like when images of my friend Sean Monterrosa's death were being circulated on the app. I hate seeing that type of shit. I hated being there every day, wasting time. His family continues to seek justice and [organize](#) through the platform. Sean was a good friend of mine. He ended up with my first car, a 1974 Dodge Dart!

On Photography, Archives, and Murals

I have to give credit to the photographers who are preserving the work we do. They are the ones who really see us. Nick DeRenzi will come to a car show, and I'll see go him go through two or three rolls. He keeps a binder of negatives from many community events and actions. Film photography has come back through people like Nick, Harvey Lozada, Natalie Alemán, and Emmanuel Blackwell.

It's about keeping good memory and taking notes in many forms. My friend Wray Velez, an artist and DJ, carried around a tape recorder. In the '80s they threw a party at Diamond Heights and recorded a cassette, "Los Tiny Winos," where these guys talked in between songs—a cool way to preserve history.

One way to archive images: get hard copies of your photos, even ones from digital files, and make photo albums. I have a shoebox full of negatives. Each roll of film is so much history and memory. A roll that's been sitting around for ten years might contain photos of people who have since passed away, buildings that have been torn down.

A lot of people I know who have been displaced say, "Oh, you know, San Francisco is not what it used to be!" I hate hearing that. You can think that way, but you can also take action to preserve our history and culture. My friends and I do that. It feels great to just be yourself and do what you do. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. There's still some originality here. It's important to hold onto that.



TOP

