

The Art of Maria Tomasula

The Art of Maria Tomasula:

Embodiment and Splendor

By

Soo Y. Kang

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I first encountered the paintings of Maria Tomasula in an exhibition in 1999. I was captivated by their flawless glossy surface of brilliant colors and precise minute details as well as the intriguing symbolic use of flowers in the still lifes. I periodically searched for other works by the artist on the internet over the next years, and, by 2015, I have examined enough of her works to discern certain patterns and recurring subjects of interest. At that point, I decided to go beyond being a mere connoisseur of her works and take up her case as a scholarly project. I first presented a talk on her art in the Fall of 2015 and wrote my first article that was published in 2018. I also met the artist, whom I found to be highly intelligent and articulate. And as her students would corroborate, she also proved to be gracious, kind, and considerate. Over the years, we met in Chicago, South Bend, East Chicago, and Hammond. She introduced me to her husband, children, and parents, who all have been warm and inviting.

Every time I present her works in a conference, I find the audience equally mesmerized by her works of art. Someone asked, “why don’t we know about her” and another suggested that I write a book about her. I took up that suggestion and finally completed a monography on the artist. My objective is to bring to light and enhance the understanding of the workings, processes, and depth of the still lifes of the artist. The ultimate purpose of this project, however, is indeed to make this wonderful artist and her amazing art works known to the artistic community as well as the general public.

Maria Tomasula has graciously provided all the high resolution photographs of her works for this publication. Chicago State University allowed me a number of resources to complete this manuscript: the first draft of this book was completed during my sabbatical in 2019 and the CTRE (Center of Teaching and Research Excellence) grants funded my participation in conferences where I presented my initial ideas about the art works and received helpful feedback. I am most grateful to my chair Prof. Kay Dawson, who for seventeen years has provided numerous departmental funding and many accommodations for me to be able to conduct all the researches including this project.

INTRODUCTION

Maria Tomasula (b. 1958), a prominent Mexican American painter and Professor of Art at the University of Notre Dame, has been producing still life paintings for three decades.¹ Her still lifes are typically composed of vivid colors, fastidiously realistic details, unusual juxtapositions and assemblages of objects starkly lit against a dark backdrop. Moreover, the painstakingly applied multiple layers of paint build a smooth and glossy surface that provokes a sensual appeal. To put it simply, her works are singularly mesmerizing.

The dramatic tenor of her paintings aligns her art with the contemporary trend of Neo-Baroque, which came to the fore in the late twentieth century and characterizes a sizable portion of Latinx art since the 1990s. Although she is of Mexican descent, her art does not look anything like the well-publicized “Latino Neobaroque,” which usually manifests as overwrought compositions filled with ubiquitous popular or folk elements.² In fact, Tomasula’s art seems antithetical to the kitsch-inspired “rasquachismo,”³ which not only deals with quotidian subjects and mass culture, but also is showcased in a coarse, unrefined manner. Tomasula’s work is crisp, pristine, and highly polished. And there are no stereotypical Hispanic images in her work. Her immaculate delineations of flowers

¹ See catalogues of solo exhibitions: *Maria Tomasula: Accretion*, essay “Fire and Ice” by James Yood, Chicago: Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, 2000; *Maria Tomasula: Second Nature*, essay by Douglas Maxwell, New York: Forum Gallery, 2003; *Maria Tomasula: Vast*, Los Angeles: Forum Gallery, 2004; *Maria Tomasula: Meridian*, essay by John Brunetti, Chicago: Zolla/Lieberman, 2005; *Maria Tomasula: All the Breath We Can Hold*, essay “Maria Tomasula’s Art of Immanence” by Soo Kang, New York: Forum Gallery, 2018.

² See Elizabeth Armstrong and Victor Zamudio-Taylor, *Ultrabaroque. Aspects of Post Latin American Art*, exh. cat. (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000); Monika Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas. Alternative Modernities in Literature, Visual Art, and Film* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

³ Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility,” in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*, eds. Richard Castillo, Teresa McKenna and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, 1990), 155–162.

actually recall the seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes. Her technique evokes the Flemish masters of the past who exercised countless tiny oil brush marks of intense hues and shines to wooden panels to create tactile illusions to all the objects. Her focus on flowers and insects also distinguishes her work from the dominant figural trends of Mexican American art that narrate and illustrate the lives of the people.⁴

Despite the apparent divergence from her contemporaries in terms of subject and execution, Tomasula's still life paintings, nevertheless, are thoroughly ethnic in foundation and formation. Growing up in the Latino community of East Chicago, Indiana, she was surrounded by images of Mexican American heritage, including Chavez, Zapata, the Mexican Revolution, and the Aztec calendar. She explained, "It all had to do with forming a conception of yourself as a presence in the cosmos, with the history of a suffering people."⁵ Foremost, she was influenced by her Catholic upbringing and spiritual milieu. She declared, "I came to consciousness in a world of extended families, a place full of a multitude of saints, spirits and forces; we talked to, and ritually remembered, the dead, as an extension of our love for them. There was God and La Virgen de Guadalupe, and so many others, unseen but ever present."⁶ These "unseen" presences were abundantly evoked through art works that are found in homes, but most conspicuously featured in the Spanish-speaking Mexican American churches that her family attended. The sculptures and paintings of "Spanish Baroque stuff" in these Catholic churches were the first and most crucial impact on the artist, forming the bedrock of her entire oeuvre.

⁴ For an overview of Mexican American art, see John Beardsley and Jane Livingston, *Hispanic Art in the U.S. Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*, exh. cat. (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1987); Castillo, McKenna and Yarbrow-Bejarano, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*; Gary Keller, ed., *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art: Artists, Works, Culture and Education*, 2 vols. (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 2002); Gary Keller and Amy Phillips, eds., *Triumph of Our Communities. Four Decades of Mexican American Art* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 2005).

⁵ Maria Tomasula and Julie Farstad, "Word for Word: Artists and Their Influences Trade Tape," *Mouthtomouth* (Fall 2002). <http://mouthtomouthmag.com>.

⁶ Maria Tomasula, "More than a Feeling: Painting with a Distributed Sense of Agency," a paper delivered on November 14, 2017, as part of the Latino Studies Seminar series at the Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame, n.p. See here, Appendix.

As a child during mass, she would focus on what these “powerful” and “amazing” art works had to say more than the homily.⁷ Despite her education and training in college and graduate school that equipped her with the knowledge of European art history and led her to contemporary practices, the artist never veered from the church art of her past that left an indelible mark in her youthful memory. Two seminal lessons were culled from these church decorations that form the foundation of her paintings: embodiment and splendor. From a young age, she comprehended that art represents more than itself: it points to a “presence,” a force beyond the immediate that carries an unspoken power. She also appreciated the sheer extravagance of works that directly communicated that presence: “The visual rhetoric of sumptuousness is so powerful and the tradition of opulence in those churches made me understand the link between luxuriousness and transcendence.”⁸ The spiritual was relayed through the very material substance of the works, to which she physically reacted through her senses. It is the very sensation that she tries to invoke through her mesmerizing works, offering a similar aesthetic experience to her viewers.

Tomasula, however, creates art not solely to embody a force and create sensational effects. She expresses her ultimate goal in this statement:

In my paintings, I try to give visual form to, basically, a feeling, a complex assemblage of often elusive qualities that have to do with a sense of being, of what it’s like to exist as an embodied entity constituted by a particular sense of self...and, what that’s like for me, comes from a set of experiences that are historically situated because they involve having encountered, over a lifetime, a series of different ideas that produce different kinds of subjects, the thinking, feeling entities that we are.⁹

Her still lifes are rich in content, derived from her sense of being that emerged from years of experiences and is grounded in a multitude of ideas. The paintings symbolically relay profound messages about suffering, bondage, creation, connectivity, and transformation related to the ontological essence of being that the artist seeks to convey. Behind the sumptuous presentation lies a depth of iconography, which, however, has not been accounted for in previous writings on her art.

⁷ Tomasula, “Word for Word.”

⁸ Tomasula, “More than a Feeling,” Appendix.

⁹ Ibid.

This book proposes to unravel the various levels of meaning embedded in the paintings by examining the life and thoughts of the artist. It canvasses all the significant components that have shaped or are pertinent to the artist's sense of being and her art. It delves into the ethnic, religious, cultural, art historical, philosophical, feminist, and intellectual sources that instigated and transformed the psychological disposition and deep reflections of the artist that are manifested in her art. Her Mexican heritage and Catholic upbringing, though not immediately apparent in her paintings, are undoubtedly the most crucial factors in her art. Her thorough training in, and adoption and reformulation of the European still life tradition are noteworthy. Her feminist stance and philosophical leanings, fostered by copious reading, are materialized through her visual representations. Tomasula's ideas are directly communicated through the material presence of the panel and the paints. The visual product is not a vehicle, but an immediate material embodiment of her thinking. The very materiality of the painting is crucial to the artist, who later found her views echoed in the philosophical treatise of New Materialism.

This book is the first comprehensive monograph on Tomasula to introduce her lifework of still life paintings in chronological order, but also approaches them thematically. This study also adds to the increasing number of recent publications on Mexican American art which has received critical attention only in the last thirty years. The majority of the books and exhibitions on Latino art have focused primarily on works that deal with political issues and mass culture that are represented in a figurative manner, assumed to be the prevalent norm of Latinx art. Moreover, the handful of monographs on Latina artists that have been published in recent years all foreground artists of the West and the Southwest. Diverging from these conventions, Tomasula is a Midwestern artist who has been producing still lifes in the last three decades that are rendered in an illusionistic style that rivals the European oil panel tradition in detail as well as technique. This book highlights the achievements of a unique Mexican American woman artist, who has consistently drawn inspiration from her Mexican Catholic upbringing, but creates symbolic paintings that ultimately encompass subjects beyond her racial and cultural origins, interjecting prominent intellectual discourses of the day through her carefully devised assemblages and arrangements of still life objects.

Her case also exemplifies the existence of vibrant and diverse Latinx art in the Midwest, which has received scant scholarly attention.¹⁰

Recently, two major publications on Latino art—*Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?* of 2012 and *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* of 2013—have highlighted the need to embrace more diverse trends in Latinx art, acknowledging particularly the complexity of the Mexican American experience which merges divergent cultural and ideological perspectives from Latin America, North America, and Europe in wildly varied ways for different and unique individuals.¹¹ The most recent Getty Center initiative, “Pacific Standard Time —LA/LA (Latin American and Latino art)” of 2017/2018, attempted to meet this objective by showcasing a panoply of styles from figurative to conceptual in more than seventy cultural institutions across Southern California. This publication contributes to this current, presently gravitating toward diversity and inclusivity within the study of Latinx art as well as toward establishing “a more expansive narrative of American art,” as called for by the preeminent Latino scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto.¹²

The book starts with a biographical account of the artist, followed by a chronological summary of her oeuvre in the same chapter to provide a comprehensive overview of her life and art as a basis for more detailed

¹⁰ Dylan Miner addresses this lacuna in “Straddling *la otra frontera*: Inserting MiChicana/o Visual Culture into Chicana/o Art History,” *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 1 (Spring 2008): 89-122, reprinted in *Chicano and Chicana Art. A Critical Anthology*, eds. Jennifer González et al., (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 374-393. There are currently only three books on Latino artists in the Midwest; these are on Carlos Cortéz, José González, and Marcos Raya. As documented by Olga Herrera in *Toward the Preservation of a Heritage: Latin American and Latino Art in the Midwestern United States* (Notre Dame: Institute of Latino Studies, 2008), there is no shortage of artists in this region.

¹¹ Mari Ramirez, Hector Olea and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Carmen Ramos, ed., *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art*, exh. cat. (Washington: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2013). The 2008-2010 exhibition titled “Phantom Sightings: Art after Chicano Art” featured many installations and conceptual works that seem indistinguishable from those of non-Latino artists. Thereby, the art critic Ken Johnson questions the continuation of “identity-based show,” in his article titled “They’re Chicanos and Artists. But Is Their Art Chicano?” *The New York Times*, April 9, 2010, under “Art Review: ‘Phantom Sightings’.”

¹² Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “Imagining a More Expansive Narrative of American Art,” *American Art*, vol. 19 (Fall 2005): 9-15.

analyses of her works in the subsequent chapters. Tomasula underwent the typical Mexican American experience that is aptly characterized by Roberto Goizueta as follows: “whether vis-à-vis one’s family, one’s barrio, one’s ancestors, or God, the Mexican American always exists in relationship.”¹³ The worldview and values concerning family, community, life, and spirits that she grew up with were thoroughly challenged when she entered college in Chicago. Those years away from the enclaves of her youth were marked by financial, emotional, and mental struggles, whilst she endeavored to discover her identity as an artist, wife, and mother. Only after her graduation, however, was she able to reconcile the two worlds and also find her voice through the genre of emblematic still life. The evolution from figurative to simple arrangement of still life objects and then gradually denser compositions over the years can be traced through four phases of development. The core technical and stylistic ingredients that emerge and result in the scintillating appearance of her works are investigated. Lastly, recurring emblems and notable series of art works are highlighted in reference to the overarching themes and contents that are prevalent throughout the entire collection.

The succeeding chapters tackle her works from a topical standpoint, dissecting the permeating conceptual flow and analyzing individual significations that undergird sets of art works with distinctive subject matter. Identical paintings, however, lend to a number of salient themes, hence they are discussed in multiple chapters. Chapter Two focuses on the formidable influence of Mexican Catholicism on Tomasula’s life and art. Her religious upbringing and art works she encountered in churches and homes are probed to uncover the Mexican Catholic sources that shaped and came to inhabit her images of flowers, insects, animals, bones, and organs. Sculptural and pictorial delineations of saints in martyrdom typically found in Mexican Catholic churches and certain votive images popularized by Spanish holy cards are compared to her paintings to unveil the origins of the prominent motifs in the still lifes. Also examined are Mexican religious observances and popular Mexican American customs that are relevant to her art. The artist honors her heritage through her employment of the church and vernacular religious sources, but she also intricately transforms them into disguised symbols and representations that speak to her own interests and interpretations of issues pertaining to suffering, death, life, and embodiment.

¹³ Roberto Goizueta, “The Symbolic World of Mexican American Religion,” in *Horizons of the Sacred. Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism*, eds. Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 121.

Chapter Three traces the next major influence, European still life practices, which directed her toward a visual language that she could then make into her own. The connection to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baroque Dutch and Spanish art is inescapable, finding affinity in the use of tenebrism and focus on meticulous tactile details. Her paintings are compared to the seminal still life paintings of the past to reveal the appropriation of conventional motifs and ideas as well as to illuminate the alterations that the artist made in order to recreate the artistic subject. The artist's borrowing of Caravaggism, however, is not anachronistic, as it aligns her art with the contemporary trend of Neo-Baroque.

This chapter concludes by reviewing the infusion of the European still life customs in her art against the Mexican religious influences discussed in Chapter Two, to divulge the confluence that occurs in her art, leading ultimately to the creation of syncretic art. Syncretism, a concept derived from social and religious studies, is applied to her art to substantiate its full and synchronous allegiance to both of her cultural legacies. This discussion corroborates the uniqueness of Tomasula's art, which distinguishes it from those Mexican American images that conspicuously quote indigenous artifacts and monuments as well as from cultural hybrid art, which blends different cultural traits piecemeal.

Despite being grounded in established traditions, the artist developed her own symbolism in her depictions of organic subjects. Chapter Four deals with an assortment of metaphorical works that have personal and political meanings to the artist, drawing from her testimonies and interviews. This chapter also explores the writings of two philosophers, Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, whom the artist extensively read and some of whose ideas she adopted. Their thoughts on nature are of particular interest here, as they are reflected in her art. To draw parallels between the texts and art, selected writings by Spinoza and Deleuze are analyzed as well. The common denominator between the two thinkers is the concept of immanence, as opposed to transcendence, a belief in the divine, the being, and the universal force in the very material reality of the world. Tomasula professed to adhere to this ideal, which is relayed through the sense of inherent spirituality or indwelling force evoked in her works. Spinoza's monist claim of nature being equal to God, Deleuze's univocal understanding of nature as self-creating, and other relevant expositions on nature are discussed to explain the innate immanent force in nature that is apparent in her art.

Chapter Five: “Embedded Feminism” unravels the gendered dimension of Tomasula’s art. Chicana art, as demonstrated in recent exhibitions and publications, is well known for the political and feminist statements communicated through the inventive appropriation of popular religious images such as the Virgin of Guadalupe. Although more discreetly through symbolic means, Tomasula’s still lifes find convergence with the works of prominent Chicana artists in the use of religious motifs to speak of woman’s suffering, freedom, space, and desire. Tomasula’s tortured flowers, which reference the saints, also simultaneously allude to woman’s suffering. Such juxtaposition is in line with the blatant transposition of woman’s image onto the Passion scene of Christ by a number of Chicana artists. Her altar-inspired paintings, like the altar-based assemblages by other Latina artists, connote the matriarchal tradition of female private devotion. To further elucidate the feminist dimension, two theoretical sources outside of Chicana studies are also considered in relation to Tomasula’s art. New Materialist feminists’ ownership of nature, specifically Stacy Alaimo’s redefinition of nature as an “undomesticated” free realm apart from the patriarchal world, is examined to address the overall feminist dynamics of Tomasula’s still life. Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytical theory of the “abjection” is utilized to decode the specific affect items of bones, skulls, and hearts that ultimately point to the mother and woman. These visual, symbolic, and theoretical explorations validate the feminist facet that is integral to these works that simultaneously transmit multiple meanings.

New Materialism is further investigated in the last chapter beyond its relevance to feminism, because Tomasula postulates her adherence to its ideas as the preeminent driving force behind her recent works. This twenty-first century philosophical movement advocates the posthuman, anti-anthropocentric, non-binary stance that emphasizes the nonseparability of all forms of matter. Already equipped with firm belief in embodiment and connectivity, owing to her Catholic and Mexican American background, the artist readily embraced the New Materialist ontological position that has bearing on all aspects of life and society. Subsequently, the New Materialist neologisms of natureculture, thing-power, intra-action, and holo-biant, as expounded by Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and Donna Haraway, are all applicable to the works of Tomasula. Two general concepts, however, unite all of these terms and constitute the groundwork of Tomasula’s recent practice. These are “entanglement,” which sees a connection among all classifications of existence—human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate—and “becoming,” which believes in the continual evolution of all substances. Such erasures of boundaries, intra-

action, and transformation of forms are evident especially in the late works, where organic and non-organic materials are increasingly integrated, intertwined, and appear to be in the midst of merging into new configurations. This aligns with the central New Materialist belief in the active “performative” nature of all material agents participating in the formation of new creations, as visually illustrated in Tomasula’s still lifes.

Tomasula’s still lifes, therefore, are not merely captivating, amusing renderings of realistic flowers, insects, fruits, bones, and organs. This analytical thematic approach uncovers the multilayered depth of her iconography. Her sensational paintings project a presence and are the embodiment of profound thoughts and sentiments that are founded on various strands of history and complex ongoing developments. In sum, Tomasula’s art visually bedazzles, yet it also intrigues the intellect.

CHAPTER ONE

CHRONOLOGY OF LIFE AND ART

Maria Tomasula resolutely opposes modern American adherence to individualism.¹ She supports instead the belief in the connectivity of all forms of existence. She sees human relations in particular as an absolute necessity in creating a healthy wholeness as the basis of individual identity. Such conviction in interconnectedness stems from her upbringing as a Mexican American, derived from an ethnic heritage that is firmly rooted in family and community.²

Maria Carolina Garcia was born in 1958 in East Chicago, Indiana to a traditional Mexican American family. Among all her relatives, she was most influenced by her maternal grandmother, Maria del Refugio, who loved her and her siblings unconditionally. Her grandmother came from a well-to-do family with her father serving as a paymaster in the Mexican army. Due to their privileged status, when the Mexican Revolution erupted, they fled to the United States and spent their savings to make ends meet. Maria's maternal grandmother was not particularly interested in matrimony, but she wanted to have children, so she married Regino Anguiano with whom she had a daughter and a son. Maria remembers seeing her abuelita quite often during the week as well as on Sundays, when they attended a Mexican American church in East Chicago together. She does not recall her own mother as being particularly religious, attending church only because her grandmother could not drive and

¹ Maria Tomasula, "More than a Feeling: Painting with a Distributed Sense of Agency," a paper delivered on November 14, 2017, as part of the Latino Studies Seminar series at the Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame, n.p. See Appendix.

² Roberto Goizueta indeed remarks that for Mexican Americans, "community is the very source of personal identity. Individuals are not the building blocks of community; community is, instead, the foundation of individual personhood." In "The Symbolic World of Mexican American Religion," *Horizons of the Sacred. Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism*, ed. Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebel-Estrella (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 122.

needed a ride. Even though abuelita saw her grandchildren several times a week, she always screamed with joy every time she greeted them. Her love for them was profuse and overflowing, as clearly felt by the children. She was also “extremely religious,” always setting aside extended time to pray daily before her private altar in her bedroom.³ On the altar, she had installed candles, flowers, objects of personal significance, a religious print, and a statue of St. Martin de Porres, the Peruvian patron saint of mixed-raced people and innkeepers, shown frequently with a broom in his hand and in the company of animals.⁴ Her husband was not religious, but a striving, hard-working man. He grew up in a poor family of sixteen or seventeen children in Colima, Mexico and when his father became abusive after the death of his wife, Regino ran away to the U.S. He ended up at Jane Addams Hull House in Chicago and worked diligently to make a living doing various jobs, landing on driving a truck and eventually owning a restaurant and boarding house called El Farolito in East Chicago. Maria’s mother, Ester, grew up in a loving home, and in return also treated her own kids with affection and care.



Figure 1-1 Photo of Maria’s maternal grandparents, Regino and Maria del Refugio Anguiano on the left, and paternal grandmother Carolina Garcia on the right, 1980s

³ Maria Tomasula, interview by the author on September 29, 2017, audio.

⁴ St. Martin de Porres is depicted dark-skinned, since he was of Spanish and African-Native American descent. Along with his service to the poor and the sick, he daily attended to the cleaning chores at his monastery. This housekeeping reference earned him his title as the patron saint of innkeepers. One of the reasons why Maria’s grandmother focused on and prayed to him was because her husband ran a boarding house.



Figure 1-2 Maria Garcia at her First Holy Communion, 1966

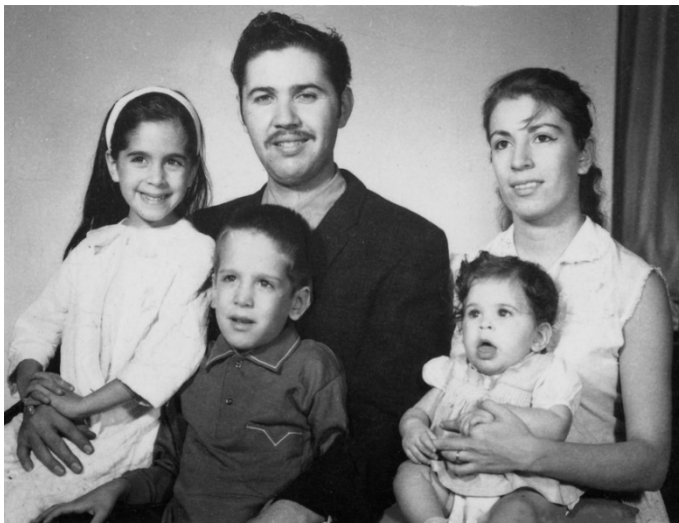


Figure 1-3 Raymundo and Ester Garcia with their children, Maria, Ray and Lilia, 1965

Maria's father, Jesus Raymundo Garcia, left his hometown of Anahuac in Nuevo Leon, Mexico in 1956. Employment opportunities led him to East Chicago, where he eventually settled at Inland Steel as a crane operator from 1963 to 1974. East Chicago, which is located on the coastline of Lake Michigan in Indiana and close to Illinois, was a vibrant industrial town, boasting a reputation as the steel capital of the world in the early to mid-twentieth century. Immigrants from Eastern Europe first flocked there to work for the railways and mills. During World War I, both US Steel and Inland Steel actively recruited laborers from other states as well as temporary workers from Mexico. Although many foreign laborers were sent back following a backlash against immigrants, some were able to obtain green cards and remain permanently. As a result, East Chicago became a multinational city of diversity, with immigrants from thirty-six countries. It consistently sustained a 50% Hispanic population, of which Mexicans comprised the majority.⁵ Maria remembers her milieu surrounded by images of Chavez, Zapata, and Aztec warriors and temples pasted all over the Mexican American neighborhood.⁶ Every home also displayed pictures and sculptures of Mexican heritage as well as Catholic saints, since almost all Mexican immigrants were Catholics at the time.⁷ These popular images possessed critical instrumental value, according to Maria, as they "seemed to broadcast the community's shared history while imaging our common aspirations. All that art generated a sort of invisible cohesive force that made me feel connected to the community."⁸

Raymundo Garcia married Ester Anguiano in 1958; they had Maria the same year, followed shortly by her brother Raymundo Jr., and a sister Maria Lilia six years later. In addition to his shiftwork at Inland Steel, he also worked as a photographer for weddings and other milestone events. Maria remembers his darkroom and her fascination with the process

⁵ Julian Samora and Richard Lamanna's *Mexican-Americans in a Midwest Metropolis: A Study of East Chicago* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967) is the most comprehensive study of the Latinos in East Chicago. See also Rubén Martínez, ed., *Latinos in the Midwest* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011); Omar Valerio-Jiménez, Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez and Claire Fox, eds., *The Latina/o Midwest Reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

⁶ Maria Tomasula and Julie Farstad, "Word for Word: Artists and Their Influences Trade Tape," *Mouthtomouth* (Fall 2002). <http://mouthtomouthmag.com>.

⁷ See Jay Dolan and Gilberto Hinojosa, eds., *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estralla, *Horizons of the Sacred*.

⁸ Tomasula, "More than a Feeling," Appendix.

through which captured images emerged through the chemical applications. Annually, her father had two weeks off and he used the opportunity to take his family to his parents in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. Every year, from 1963 to 1974, the family drove through the South to get to the country. Strangely, Mexico seemed more familiar to her than the white Southern states of America. Nuevo Laredo, she confessed, felt similar to her surroundings in East Chicago with the sounds of Spanish and images of Mexican historical figures and Catholic saints everywhere. It was when they drove through Arkansas that she felt like she had entered a foreign country with people of different life styles.⁹

Of the visits to Nuevo Laredo, Maria recalls her grandparents' convenience store, which sold everything from food and stationery to tools as well as playing with the neighborhood kids. She remembers playing *La Llorona*, "the Weeping Woman," a children's game based on a well-known folk tale figure who drowned her children and eternally cries as a ghost seeking her offspring. For the children, this tragic figure was a source of fear. Maria's trips to Mexico ended in 1974 when her father used his savings to open a restaurant called *El Taco Real* in Hammond, Indiana, well aware of the decline in the manufacturing commissions at the mills, all of which eventually waned.

Maria's paternal grandmother Carolina Garcia, now a widow, lived with her family at intervals and helped out at the restaurant from 1974 to 1990. Mexicans traditionally observed rituals to welcome their dead relatives into their homes and Maria's family likewise always commemorated the dead by observing feast days in their honor. The presence of the dead became a daily affair, as Carolina believed she could communicate with her dead husband and would frequently talk to him as if he were in the house. This was not considered extraordinary, but an accepted practice in the family, in her formative years.

Other than the presence of the otherworldly, Maria's youth was fairly ordinary with no major life-changing upheavals. She attended schools, where she excelled academically. Above all, she loved to draw. Despite periodic displacements—moving from one apartment to another in East Chicago, Gary, and finally Hammond, where her parents bought a house and settled—, she always felt secure due to the strong bonding and support from her parents and grandparents. Of her entire experience growing up in these working-class districts, the most formidable influence came from

⁹ Tomasula, interview.

church. Most Mexicans were already Catholics before immigration, but their church life became ever more paramount in the U.S., as they found assistance and solace among fellow Spanish-speaking congregants.¹⁰ Almost three-quarters of Mexican Americans consistently have professed to be Roman Catholics, so that “being Mexican American and being Catholic are often seen as synonymous.”¹¹ Like almost all of her Mexican American neighbors, Maria attended local Spanish-speaking churches in East Chicago and Hammond that catered to the ethnic population. She participated in the mass regularly, and underwent catechism and confirmation.

The most memorable aspect of the Mexican Catholic churches for her was the religious images and decorations. The art works were not necessarily originals or considered of high caliber, but Maria experienced them as spectacular.¹² She reminisced: “Latino Catholicism is an overwhelming sensory experience. Everything is richly decorated. The ornamentation is excessive. Every surface is covered. Walls have bas reliefs and murals. Candles throw shadows upward. Surfaces are covered in cloths and velvets. It is heightened sensory experience tied in with the spiritual.”¹³ During service, she was mesmerized by and more preoccupied with what the aesthetic handiwork was communicating than with the priest’s homily. She, in fact, noticed an ironic contradiction between the two: “Basically, we would get variations on the same theme: ‘try not to indulge in your sense, try not to give in to your bodily influences, try to restrain.’ Whereas the images were saying the exact opposite—they were just wild! They were distinctly unrestrained in every way: in what they depicted, in the bravura of the brushwork, in the amount of ornamentation on every conceivable surface.”¹⁴

Another jarring irony was notably apparent in the images of saints. Although captured in rapturous scenes of spiritual ecstasy, the religious

¹⁰ Felipe Hinojosa writes, “in the unfamiliar surroundings of the Midwest, church services provided a much needed sense of community and a place for Latina/os to ask God’s continued protection.” In “Religious Migrants: The Latina/o Mennonite Quest for Community and Civil Rights,” *The Latina/o Midwest Reader*, eds. Valerio-Jiménez, Vaquera-Vásquez and Fox, 214.

¹¹ Gastón Espinosa and Mario Garcia, *Mexican American Religions. Spirituality, Activism, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 381.

¹² Tomasula, “Word for Word.”

¹³ Jim Houghton, “Tomasula: Exotic works that often puzzle,” *The South Bend Tribune*, July 2, 1998, E6.

¹⁴ Tomasula, “Word for Word.”