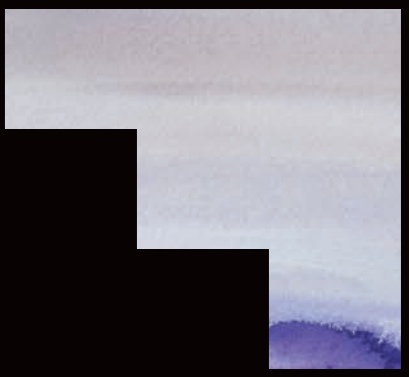
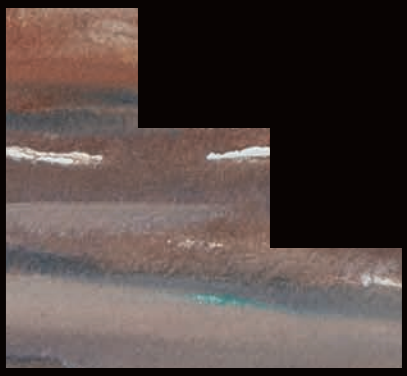
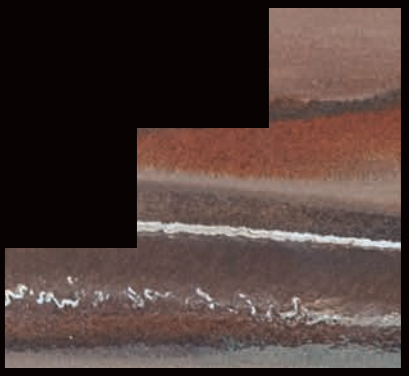
SU ARTE, SU VIDA



2024 Kresge Eminent Artist

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION





NORA CHAPA MENDOZA

SU ARTE, SU VIDA

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SU ARTE, SU VIDA NORA CHAPA MENDOZA

2024 Kresge Eminent Artist

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

Nichole Christian
Creative Director,
Editor, and Lead Writer

Art Direction
and Graphic Design
by I-R-I-S

The annual Kresge Eminent Artist Award salutes an exceptional artist in the visual, performing or literary arts for lifelong professional achievements to metropolitan Detroit's cultural community.

Nora Chapa Mendoza is the 2024 Kresge Eminent Artist.

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Rip Rapson,
President and CEO,
The Kresge Foundation

Here in metro Detroit, we count on beginning our new years under a blanket of blah; we expect days on end of cloud cover and greyed light filtering through.

One of the rites of January that we do look forward to is the announcement of the year's Kresge Eminent Artist. It is then that our partners at Kresge Arts in Detroit roll out the name of one exemplary artist to be honored for a lifetime of achievement and contribution to the region's cultural community.

We began with — just to arbitrarily tick off the first five — visual artist Charles McGee, playwright Bill Harris, musician Marcus Belgrave, impresario David DiChiera and poet Naomi Long Madgett, all of them giants. And the anticipation each January is who will be the next beat extending that drum roll of greatness.

As our 16th Kresge Eminent Artist, Nora Chapa Mendoza brought a blast of much needed light to this year's dull winter — literally and figuratively. On the one hand she brought us bold, bright swaths of color in some of her most abstract work; even viewing them on a computer screen, one imagines the added impact of canvases of several feet in both height and width.

On the other hand, there are the most literal pieces that bring us celebrations of and reflections on her life and culture as a Chicana, born and raised in the U.S. Southwest and tied to her experiences and the shared struggles with those whose paths have overlapped with hers.

And in between, where much of her work lies, are sometimes vertiginous blends of the abstract and the figurative, not to mention the realistic and the surrealistic, such as her assemblages of sculptural elements in the bodies of painted violins and other string instruments.

While we name just one Eminent Artist each year, we see this as a celebration of something greater. The same can be said when we name just 25 Kresge Artist Fellows this year, and just 10 Gilda Awardees.

Collectively they should remind us that our community has an abundance of talents who bring us innumerable benefits. They remind us of myriad ways we can build on the cultural and artistic foundations of the past. They demonstrate the power of creativity in forging a future in the face of life's complexity and challenges.

This section functions as a biographical primer with some autobiographical elements included courtesy of Nora's writings found at the Smithsonian.


MIDAS

ARTIST STATEMENT

Nora Chapa Mendoza

"With all of this work, I hope to serve as a good role model, to share my wisdom, to build confidence through our diverse differences and similarities, to reaffirm our identity and attention to human rights and justice, to reduce racism by bringing about a better understanding among all human beings, reduce oppression among all minority groups, the most oppressed everywhere, from Mexico to the U.S.; to heal the pain of the past and bring about pride in ourselves as women, as Hispanics, to change attitudes from negative to positive, to help hold onto our culture."

—Nora Chapa Mendoza, 2024

Nora Chapa Mendoza works in her home studio, circa 1978.

A BRUSH WITH WINGS

Nichole M. Christian

Nora Chapa Mendoza works in her home studio in 2024.

The new year, 2024, is only days old. The ground in Detroit is snow-covered and the wind is January-bitter. No breeze. Stiff bite. This is a morning wintry enough to second-guess any movement. Yet, to Nora Chapa Mendoza the conditions outside are of no concern. "I don't really let too much stop me." The day has begun much like it usually has for five decades, with Nora up just after the sun, moving from bedroom and bathroom down to the kitchen for a requisite bite, then straight into the studio.

That the space, a converted garage attached to her cottage-style home, is uninsulated seems also of no concern to Nora. "I'm very disciplined." Everything she needs — purpose, passion, inner fire — is in abundant supply. "When I come in here," she says, "it's this little world I enter, just me, the paint and the canvas. No thought in mind. Hours later, there I am bent over the floor doing some kind of art." But this morning, Nora has put down her brushes to open the doors of her happy space and the chapters of her life to a team of visitors with cameras and questions intent on celebrating the largest triumph of her career.

This is not a moment 92-year-old Nora Chapa Mendoza ever imagined and certainly not during what could arguably be her twilight. "Maybe I have another three or five years; who knows?" At the moment, what is inarguable is that Nora is the 2024 Kresge Eminent Artist, winner of Detroit's largest and most coveted annual art prize. "It's not even a dream come true because I never dreamt it," she explains. "I still don't believe it's happening." Weeks will pass before the public learns of the selection, time enough for a still-stunned Nora to begin delighting in the immenseness of the honor. "I don't think I understand it all, you know, why me," Nora says. "All I've done is just live a day at a time doing what I love. But the recognition, being seen for who you are is pretty special. "

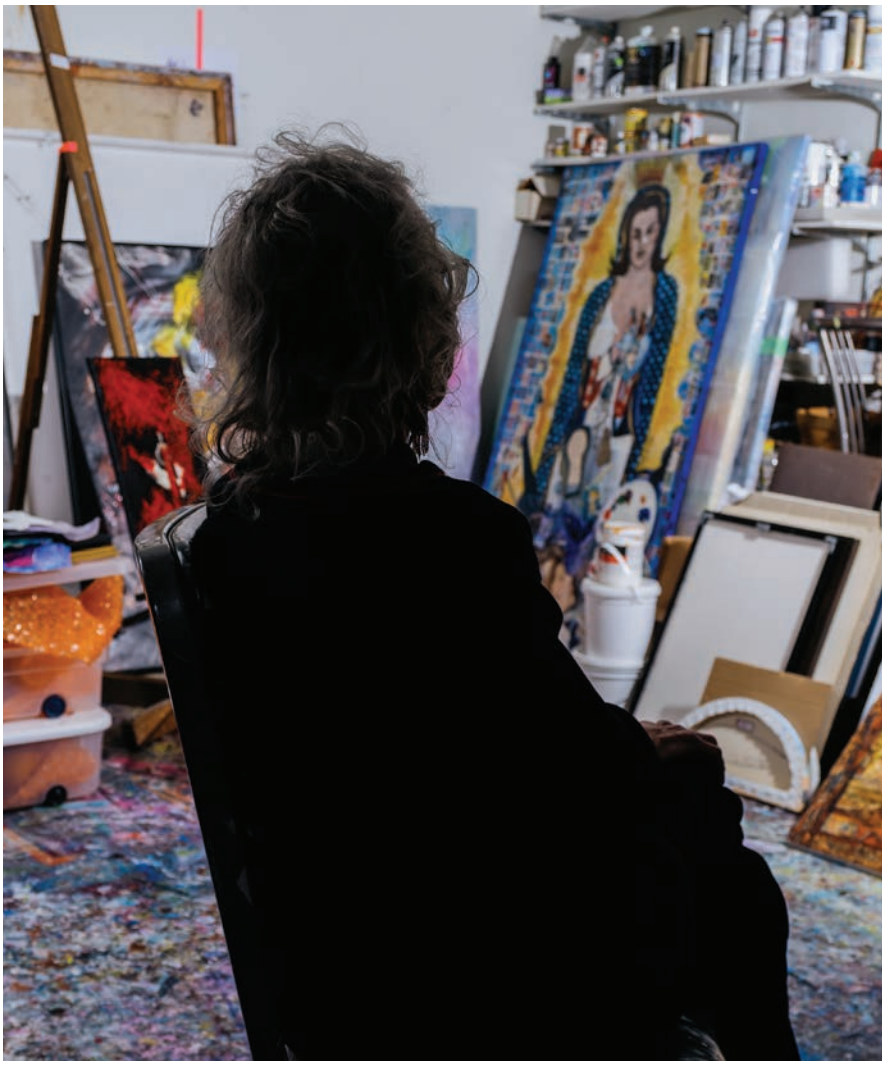
Since 2008, the Kresge Eminent Artist Award has recognized the singular creativity and lifetime cultural impact of some of the region's most dedicated and distinguished artists. On the day Nora learned she had been chosen, she was dubious. "I thought it was a scam," she says, her voice trailing into a light but hearty laugh. "I mean, who calls you up and tells you you've won that kind of money at my age?"

Indeed, the award's prestige and the accompanying cash prize are substantial. Some of the other illustrious painters, poets, and musicians who've received the honor over its 15-year lifespan also describe the experience as exhilarating and amazing. Consider it. One moment you're immersed in the rituals of your day. Then comes a call with validation and cash you never sought from a group of peers — artists and arts leaders — tasked with sifting through a confidential index of recommended names for one who possesses a lifetime of work mighty enough to embody the region's artistic eminence.

As she moves around her studio, with a photographer's lens capturing her every step, Nora adds a new word to the list of descriptors for the Kresge Eminent Artist Award: life-giving. With a smile, she adds, "Remember, I'm 92. I guess this means, I can't die now." Plus, there's the unending question of what to do with the money. "Maybe I'll get some new carpeting," she says, laughing.

Nora's selection as the 16th eminent artist also ushers in a new era for the award. She is the first to receive the increased unrestricted prize of $100,000. Historically, the prize had been $50,000. The increased amount is but another step to help amplify and honor artists whose lifetime legacies contribute profoundly to today's cultural vibrancy and whose impact will be felt for generations to come.

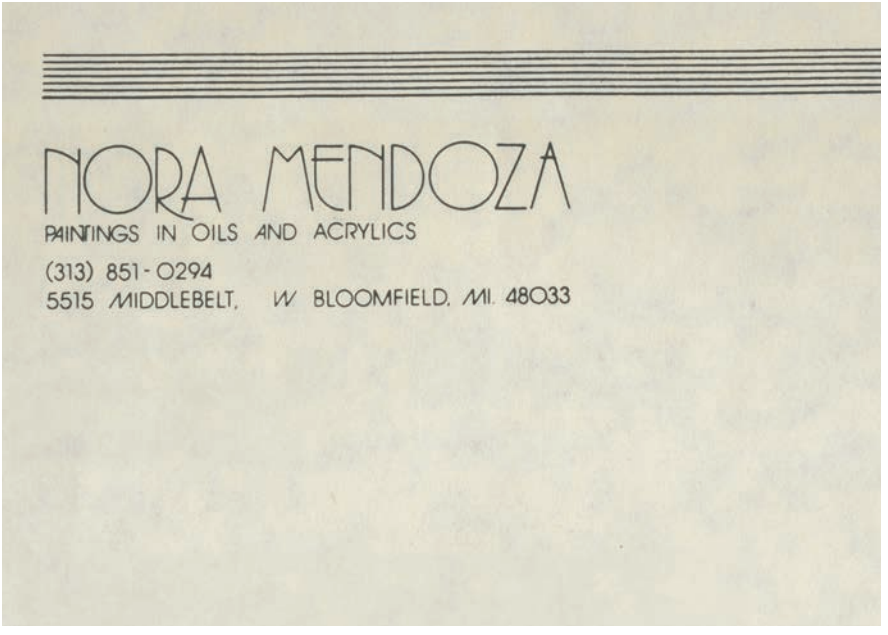
The annual selection process is lengthy and shrouded in secrecy. While the award carries the Kresge imprimatur, the Foundation has no involvement in the naming of nominees or selection of the ultimate winner. The entire process is entrusted to an outside panel of judges convened by Kresge Arts in Detroit, the Foundation-supported office at the College for Creative Studies that administers the annual Kresge Eminent Artist, Kresge Artist Fellowships and Gilda Awards. Members of the 2024 panel say Nora is an artist whose life and professional resilience reflect the specialness of making art and impact in Detroit. “I hope that I’ve been a role model, that young people who want to be an artist can learn something from what I’ve done and the way I’ve done it. Find yourself; know who you are and then embrace it no matter what,” says Nora.



Nora in a moment of reflection in her studio.

Nora shares memories and laughs as she shows off family photos and a signed letter from Cesar Chavez.

Nora's original letterhead, advertising her "paintings in oils and acrylics," served as an inspiration for the design and treatment of this monograph.



Arts and culture producer Drake Phifer was one of the 2024 judges. "Her work is a testament to her dedication to social justice and her passion for creating art that inspires and uplifts," explained Phifer. "For those familiar with her, you know that this award is overdue. For those unfamiliar, as I was at the beginning of the selection process, you will find that her impact in the Detroit area and beyond is equally as thorough and reverberating as it is unsung."

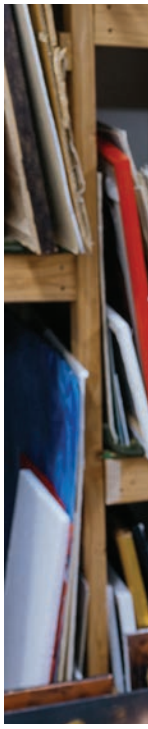
Award-winning dancer and choreographer Gina Ellis joined Phifer on the panel and in his assessment of Nora as the 2024 choice. "I just loved her work," Ellis said, but added "her continued involvement in the community is what stands out."

Kresge President and CEO Rip Rapson says Nora exemplifies art's ability to transform lives and culture. "Her work conveys a rare combination of grace and perseverance in the face of the innumerable societal obstacles placed in the path of an artist with Chicano and Indigenous roots," he says. "She has inspired multiple generations with her full and powerful embrace of the overlapping causes of women, migrant workers, and civil rights."

If Nora Chapa Mendoza's legacy were to be drawn as a shape, it would resemble an infinity symbol more than a straight line. She has been a painter, a gallerist, a cultural activist, and a treasured community sage, teaching youths and adults to express themselves through art. Culture is intentionally at the center of Nora's creations. So is evidence of a lifetime of travel as a speaker and sought-after workshop leader from Mexico to Guatemala and Peru to Germany. "My art for me is my life. It reflects who I am as a woman, mother and Latina. I want to pass on what I have learned to those who are less fortunate or less able to express themselves and my hope of healing pain, and striving for freedom for all people."

Nora was a founding member of Nuestras Artes de Michigan, a collective of Latin artists with chapters in Detroit, Pontiac, and Ann Arbor. In 1981, she made a larger leap with the launch of Galeria Mendoza, in Detroit's Harmonie Park district. The gallery was considered Detroit's first solely Latin-American showcase. Nora's paintings were often paired with at least one new emerging Latin artist. Choosing to focus on her art, Nora closed the gallery after just three years. Her artmaking career spans more than five decades and straddles multiple forms and mediums — oils, acrylics, canvas, boards, paper scraps, photographs, and even a collection of discarded violins — with each choice infused with a childlike curiosity. "Beauty is in everything."

Nora's ability to transcend artistic styles and transform culture also helped earn her the highest recognition from Detroit's historic Scarab Club. In the fall of 2023, Nora was invited to "sign the beam." Surrounded by family and friends, she climbed a ladder and joined a hallowed tradition by adding her signature to those on the storied building's ceiling and side beams. Art lovers and historians visiting Detroit routinely flock to the Scarab Club to scan the handwritten signatures of more than 200 local and internationally renowned artists including Diego Rivera, Isamu Noguchi, Norman Rockwell, Marcel Duchamp, and previous Kresge Eminent Artists Charles McGee, Bill Rauhauser, Marie Woo and Shirley Woodson.



"Putting my name up there, I mean, up there with Diego, that's tops. It doesn't get much better." The signing was also the culmination of "Stages of a Life: A Retrospective," a solo show at the Scarab Club. The exhibition included assemblages, papier-mâché reliefs, and various mixed media works as well as paintings "as a captivating visual diary, offering profound insights into the rich tapestry of experiences that define her life," as described by gallery director Dalia Reyes, who likened Chapa Mendoza to Frida Kahlo.

To Laurie Psarianos, the older of Nora's two children, witnessing the back-to-back honors has been the thrill of a lifetime. "She's my hero, my best friend," Laurie says. "For her to be able to experience all of this at the same time while she's still so alive and up every day creating, it's just incredible. The money will never mean as much as the recognition. She's done so much for so long without it."

Osvaldo "Ozzie" Rivera counts himself fortunate to have been a member of the 2024 Kresge Eminent Artist panel that selected Nora. Working around Detroit as a well-known historian, musician, and community activist, Rivera was already familiar with the "legacy" of Nora Chapa Mendoza.

"At 92, she has this extensive body of visual work that's impressive by itself," explains Rivera. "But when you have the chance to look back, her significance and her impact in the community has been much larger even though it's been quiet."

Rivera encountered Nora's influence during his "younger" days as a member of Detroit's Hispanic arts community. Her name was spoken as if sacred. "My visual arts friends were always talking about her presence," he says. "But now I can see that it wasn't just my visual artist friends but [also] performing artists and cultural activists who revere her," he said.

Nora with her daughter, Laurie Psarianos.

"Nora is one of those elders that made sure everyone was on the right track just by her presence and her practice, someone who had this status of doing great work but still being humble, giving freely of her consejo."[1]

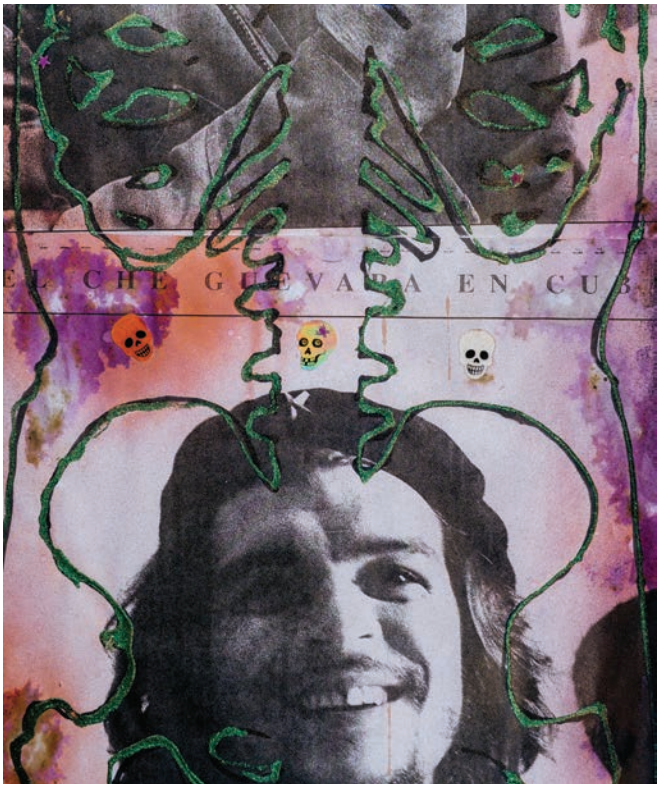
In the two-bedroom house where Nora lives and works alone, the walls are lined with proof of her decades-long creative involvement. From the living room to the studio, framed award plaques, thank-you letters, and official salutes from various social and governmental leaders tell an all-encompassing story of a woman with a cause, actually, several causes including the fight for labor rights for migrant and farm workers, for women's rights, and using art to expand awareness of Chicano history.

1 Consejo is Spanish for advice.

Many call Nora a steadfast, barrier-breaking champion of culture and art. "I've been wanting her to win this award for a long time," explains Detroit photographer, graphic designer, and ceramicist Barbara Barefield. "She's been a leader in the arts, and advocating for the arts for so long, for poets, musicians, writers, filmmakers. She's shared herself, not just her art but her voice on a much larger scale to make a difference in the creative community in Detroit and Michigan." Barefield's son, A. Spencer Barefield IV, studied art with Nora for years and has joined her in exhibitions.

Barefield adds: "In the same way that you see that sense of freedom, beautiful expressions and movements of color, that's who she is as a person, too, a real spirit of breaking barriers and freedom."

Nora in a moment of collaboration with noted artist and muralist Marta Ramirez Oropeza.



A detail of a painting in Nora's studio, a series of acrylic and mixed media on foam featuring Che Guevara and assorted symbols that appear to reference Dia de los Muertos.

Longtime Detroit community activist Elena Herrada met Nora in Detroit in 1977.. "You really wouldn't know what a huge life Nora's had because she doesn't brag or even talk about how much she's done." Herrada credits Nora with personally broadening her understanding and appreciation of what it means to be mestizo[2] in America, specifically of Mexican and Indigenous heritage. "As a Chicana, she's the first person I remember embracing Indigeneity from a pure place not just as a fad or something to have shame around. Her pride and understanding of both cultures is her mark."

In 2021, Herrada, on a hunch, introduced Nora to painter and curator Marta Carvajal. The connection quickly evolved into a select exhibition and community celebration of Nora's artwork. One visit to Nora's studio, at Herrada's insistence, convinced Carvajal, "The world needs to know Nora."

2 Mestizo is a Spanish term used to describe Mexican people of mixed ancestry including an Indigenous background.

Carvajal, a native of Madrid, Spain, found herself enchanted by Nora's discipline and her unapologetic commitment to cultural representation in her art. "The way she surrounds herself in art, thousands of pieces, sketches, paintings, found objects, a completely magical person. She is so true to what she does and why." Carvajal and Herrada had to first convince Nora to allow the exhibit which required hours upon hours of Caravajal working side-by-side with Nora to select and document the works for display. During some of her visits, she was even able to paint with Nora. "Some days, we spoke only in Spanish. I felt so privileged to be learning from a true master, showing me what is possible from a life in art. She is a warrior for art even now. Still going with fire."

Herrada, who hosted a second community celebration in 2024 after the Kresge Eminent Artist news became public, equates Nora to a living legend. "A lot of young artists and creatives in the community haven't had a chance to see or know all that she's done. She's a quiet but powerful model of culture in action, the way she's blended her art and her heart for the community without letting anything stop her." A framed photo of Cesar Chavez sits atop the desk where Nora rarely pauses long enough to sit. Other pictures of Chavez hang on the studio's walls, a quiet tribute to the late labor leader and civil rights activist's singular impact on Nora's career.

Jokingly, Nora says, "He was almost my boyfriend."

In reality, the two met in 1986 at Wayne State University in Detroit. Chavez, the co-founder of the National Farm Association, known today as the United Farm Workers Union, was in town to give a speech. Nora had heard the news of Chavez's upcoming visit but decided she was too busy with her art to slip away. When she mentioned the visit to her son, Sam, he not only insisted she attend, but he joined her. "She was already so focused on doing this kind of art," says Sam. "It would have been ridiculous for her not to be there to hear him." Sam also convinced his mother to bring along a stack of business cards that he'd recently created for her. "The cards actually had one of her migrant worker paintings."

As it turned out, Sam's insistence, and his do-it-yourself business cards, opened the door to one of Nora's biggest career moments. After the talk, she shared one of her newly made business cards with a Chavez associate who'd been sitting beside her. The man took a look at the art and told Nora and Sam he had someone he'd like them to meet. That someone: Cesar Chavez. Neither Nora nor Sam recall much of the conversation that day. Sam cherishes a grainy black-and-white photo of his mother's moment with Chavez in his home.

Above: Nora and her son, Sam Mendoza, pictured with labor activist Cesar Chavez in Detroit. Photo courtesy of Sam Mendoza.

Left: A detail from one of Nora's many paintings of farm workers.

Meanwhile, in her studio, Nora is reminded of the encounter by evidence of a different kind, copies of the artwork commissioned by Chavez to benefit the union, specifically an effort called "Children of the Fields." "Everybody has pivotal points in their life," says Sam. "For Mom, I think this was one of those spectacular points where a lot of things connected and changed a lot for her."

Like the painting on her business card, Nora's Chavez series featured figurative and somewhat stark images of migrant workers in various stages of labor. Begun first as illustrations for a book, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970*, the images developed into a series of postcards later seen all over the world, even appearing on the cover and in the pages of *Labor's Heritage*, a quarterly publication of The George Meany Memorial Archives.[3] "I easily identify with the field workers trying to survive," Nora explained in a 1995 interview for the magazine. "...I try to convey the migrant worker in the field; exposure to the sun and the heat of the day, working from sun-up to sun-down, labor heightened by sunlight. I try to identify the hardships of their conditions. ...I feel a social consciousness and sense of loyalty to support the human rights of all people."

Over the years, Nora's Chavez postcards have been repeatedly reissued to salute the beauty and strength of Mexican and Chicano culture. "My series of the migrant workers is an example of my convictions trying to show the Latino laborers as heroes against the odds," she said. This thread is one of the major focal points of the Nora Chapa Mendoza collection at the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian, the world's largest museum.

In 2018, a Smithsonian researcher visited Nora with a request that she consider donating her papers, lectures, notes, sketches, exhibition catalogs, and photographs to the archives. No official record explains what prompted the Smithsonian's interest in Nora. "I remember her telling me one day that she had 15 boxes for the Smithsonian," says Sam. "I was floored that she'd kept so much, all of these seemingly little moments built up over a lifetime."

Indeed, a lifetime of details exists within the manila folders comprising Nora's Smithsonian archive. Perusing the boxes, a more layered understanding of Nora emerges, an intent of transforming much more than the canvas. An array of speeches and handwritten correspondence depicts Nora personally lobbying Hispanic creatives in Detroit and around the state of Michigan "to join this movement."

3 George Meany was the first president of the AFL-CIO. The archives chronicle the history, influential moments and individual leaders of the labor movement.

In one of many undated speeches, Nora writes:

> As far as we can tell, there are very few Hispanics in Michigan who are willing to share their time to get involved. Organizations such as LA SED (Latin Americans for Social & Economic Development) and the Michigan Office of Latino Affairs are all anxious to present arts programs, to support our arts. The funding is available but we need you. You don't have to be a visual artist or a performing artist. There are other opportunities for well-paid careers. If you aren't ready today; be ready tomorrow.

Nora's voice on such issues was amplified by her presence as a founding member of the Michigan Hispanic Cultural/ Art Association, not to mention being a co-founder of the aforementioned Nuestra Artes de Michigan and owner of Galeria Mendoza. In 1999, Gov. John Engler presented Nora with the Michigan Artist of the Year and Governor's Award in recognition of long-standing cultural commitment to the state and, most notably, southwest Detroit. Nora's practice soon grew to include restoration techniques and mural projects, especially as one of eight artists selected to create work for a $6 million renovation of the Detroit Music Hall. By that time, Nora had already established herself as a voice of cultural change. She was a long-standing member of New Detroit and a vice chair of the New Detroit Arts Committee.

Still, to Nora, one accomplishment will always rank highest: "I'm self-taught." Her voice is matter-of-fact, absent any trace of braggadocio. To know this singular detail is to know something greater about the woman and why she is beloved by so many. In fact, in her papers at the Smithsonian, Nora is forthcoming about the struggles that grew alongside a dream that seemed at times impossible.

> I have to constantly remind myself that I have no control over sales — and that not selling does not reflect on who I am or what I do. If you have been blessed with a gift, it is your responsibility to develop it and pass it along to the next seven generations.

Painter and muralist Elton Monroy Durán sees Nora as a personal inspiration. "You meet a lot of people who say they're an artist. But you don't meet a Nora every day. She's an original, someone who is an inspiration not only for her work but also for this very romantic idea of growing old and continuing to have that creative spirit so forcefully alive inside you." Adds Monroy Durán: "I'm hoping that my destiny is going to provide me with the same spirit as Nora."

Even in the face of such praise, Nora is matter-of-fact. "I didn't have the option of becoming an artist like most people. I think I was born this way. I was born an artist."

BORN OVERCOMING

Every path has a beginning. Some smooth, others rough. Nora Chapa Mendoza's journey to art was marked at the start by pain, a childhood layered with poverty, death and episodes of parental abandonment.

Like the pride she exhibits in being self-taught, Nora speaks of her upbringing with disarming acceptance, describing it as just another textural dimension to her journey. In her papers, she writes,

> We were poor but nobody realized it, including myself. That rampant poverty of my family and almost everybody I knew; it hasn't crippled my character, hasn't created bitterness or a defensive stance and I know it has not had a lasting impact on my creativity. If anything, it's made me stronger and made me fight for myself and my art.

Nora, according to a copy of her birth certificate, was "born alive" at 10:30 p.m. on Jan. 20, 1932. The family she came home to was already in flux. Her parents, Casimiro and Josefa Chapa, were young, in their mid-20s, newly arrived Mexican immigrants, determined to make a new life in Weslaco, Texas, in the heart of the

Rio Grande Valley. By the time they welcomed baby Nora home, the couple was already struggling to care for two other young children, a boy, Jaime, the eldest, and Raquel.

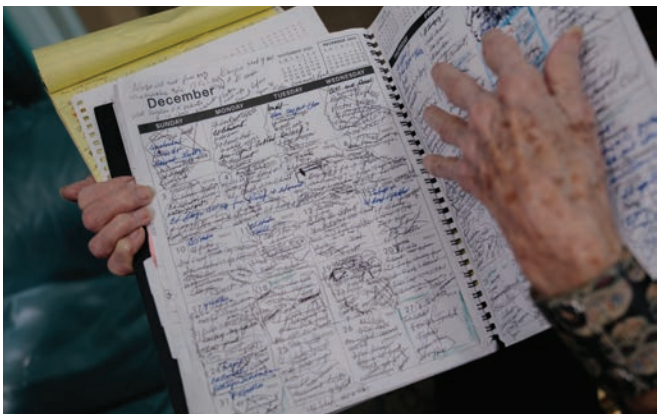
Little about the Chapa family's early days is remembered with elation or cheer. "We lived in a one-room house," recalls Nora. "There really wasn't much opportunity."

Four days after Nora's fourth birthday, Josefa died. "My dad left shortly after that," Nora recalls. "He left us with my aunt, his sister. My aunt had seven or maybe it was nine children of her own. I don't really remember for sure."

Even the memories that remain crisp are laced with signs of misfortune and economic struggle. The feel of the white-hot Texas sun as family members picked cotton and citrus fruits around Weslaco still lives with Nora. "I remember after my mother's death, my aunt tied a potato sack to me, one in front and one on my back, and took me to pick cotton with her."

The family's struggles and agricultural lifestyle delayed Nora's introduction to formal school until age 8, the same year she began learning to speak English. Though she initially lagged academically, the school opened up a new world. It was there where art first piqued her interest. She remembers being captivated by the vivid colors and images on Mexican calendars and in comic books. Nora recalls that her aunt "eventually had enough and took us back to him. She said: 'Here's your children; you raise them.'"

Once reunited, Nora became fascinated with tools of her father's trade as a house painter. "Cans of paints and brushes were always around in the house. My father was the first person to encourage me, to teach me about colors," she says. He would bring me outside when the sun was out and he'd show me how to match the colors when the sun hit them a certain way and also how to paint the trim without getting the paint on the glass."



Opposite page: A photograph of artist Nora Chapa Mendoza's mother in one of her paintings.

Left: Nora shares a peek inside the hand-written calendar she uses daily.

Exploring Nora's studio, one is immediately plunged into a sea of wild colors, competing hues, chaotic textures, stacks and stacks of canvases, and an array of atypical tools, everything from razor blades and Afro pics to toilet tissue rolls. Only Nora grasps the order of things. She has never wanted or had an assistant or a functional filing system beyond the daily handwritten notes she looks to as her compass. "I like that it's just me and the art."

Yet Nora knows every inch of her space and the stories that each piece contains, those naked to the eye and the ones carefully camouflaged. "I like paintings with a little something hidden." Her signature painting, a towering figurative canvas entitled "Metamorphosis," is perhaps the most direct example. The scale and the vibrant burst of yellow encircling the woman at the painting's center call the viewer first. It's instinctual to move closer. You are fortunate if you have Nora beside you ready to share at least one of the painting's secrets, namely the fact that it is partially inspired by Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico.

Nora's vision of the saint is decidedly more edgy than most, and studded with autobiographical breadcrumbs, from collaged grainy photos of her parents and siblings to the broken chains and hearts wrapped around the woman's wrists as they are clasped in prayer. The word "divorce" and a seeming self-portrait of another woman, a female painter in rapturous delight, are the lone clues to the painting's true depth.

A less direct example of the autobiographical element in her work is seen in "Fire Ants," a mixed-media acrylic on a side wall of her studio. Muted in tones, the painting could easily be overlooked amid the dozens and dozens of larger and bolder canvases. Those eyes that notice do so only because the canvas is a piece of wood cut in the shape of Texas, a trio of toy ants dangling from its tip, and a crying baby figurine attached in the center. Even a double glance could never reveal the pivotal meaning for Nora.

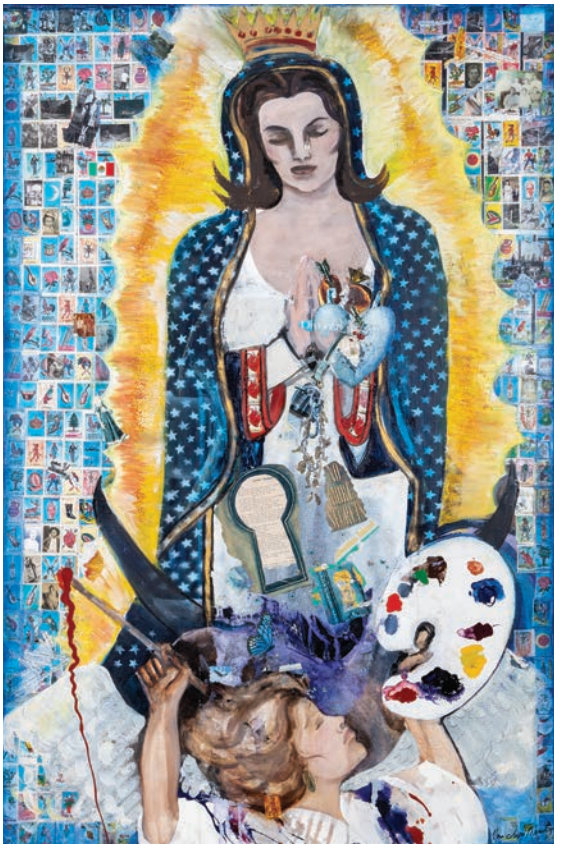
"When I was born my mother was very sick. Everything had to be very quiet," she explains to her visitors. "Every time that I cried, they put me outside. We lived in Weslaco, Texas, at the time, where it was very hot, and there were a lot of ant hills. No matter where they would put me, there would be an ant hill. I remember the ants would bite me, and my brother would say, 'You were so bad, when the ants bite you, they'd roll up and die.'"

Somehow, the painting's story ends with Nora lightly laughing, a gift of time and the artistic process, she explains. "I never realized that I needed healing from that until I painted it," she says, referring to the memory of the ants. "My art became my way."

Left: *Fire Ants,* an autobiographical acrylic and mixed-media painting about a painful childhood memory.

Below left: Nora's signature painting, *Metamorphosis Lotería,* acrylic on canvas, 1986.

Below right: A detail view from the same painting shows embedded family photos and other personal elements within the painting.



By conventional measure, Nora Chapa Mendoza's career as a professional artist began late, amid the peak of the second wave of modern feminism.[4] "I wanted to become an artist long before I wanted to be a wife or a mother."

By 1975, Nora, the doctor's wife and devoted mother of two, had become a 43-year-old free-spirited divorcee ready to make art and live life on her own vibrant terms. "Art has always been my true love."

The sentiment was true even in 1953, at age 21, when Nora married her other great love, husband Sam Mendoza. The couple married the day after Valentine's Day. Sam, who was 10 years older, was born in a railroad box car and grew up poor like Nora. He had worked his way through medical school at the University of Texas. His next stop was a residency in Highland Park, Michigan. Life suddenly looked lucky for Nora.

4 The second wave of modern feminism took place from 1963 through the 1980s, with the mid-'70s marking the peak in part because of the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971 and the passage of the Equal Pay Act and later the landmark Roe v. Wade U.S. Supreme Court ruling.

"Everybody was after him because he was a medical student." Nora was happy to be at her husband's side, content to let her passion for painting live only as a hobby. "In the beginning, he was OK with me painting," Nora recalls. "He even built me a tiny little area, a studio, in the basement. He just didn't want me to earn money myself. It never entered my mind that I could earn money from it. It was just something I loved doing. I do remember that someone came over to the house and saw one of my paintings and wanted to buy it." Soon, Nora and Sam became parents to a daughter, Laurie, in 1956, and a son, Sam, two years later. In sync with the times, her husband, Nora recalls, insisted motherhood be her focus and priority. "I was supposed to be a good girl," she said.

In 1975, Nora chose divorce. The choice changed everything. "It was a huge thing to do back then, a metamorphosis," she said. As children, Laurie and Sam witnessed Nora carve an entirely new identity, drawing strength, they say, from much of the pain she endured along the way. "Her art focuses on all of these issues in subtle and strong ways, particularly her views on women and children," Laurie continued. "She's taught me the meaning of being a of warrior."

Growing up, Laurie says, she and her brother seized every opportunity to celebrate Nora's tenacious spirit. "We even sent her Father's Day cards on Father's Day because she was everything." Adds Sam: "My father was really good at what he did professionally; he was admired by lots of people in Southwest Detroit for his caring. But at home, he wanted things a certain way. He just could not adjust to the changing times, kids growing their hair long, and women's liberation and independence. To the day he died, he was still stuck back in the '50s."

Though Sam followed in his father's professional footsteps – he's a doctor, an addiction psychiatrist – Nora's artful life transitions taught him the most, he says. "My mom exemplifies perseverance in her continuing to do and do and grow through her choices," he explains. "As an artist, she went through periods where it seemed like it wasn't going to go anywhere or do anything."

For instance, Sam recalls Nora's early days selling art at street fairs and flea markets and positioning herself for acceptance into major art expositions such as the Ann Arbor Art Fair. Often he and his sister would help Nora work her booth. "So many moments, it seemed frustrating," he said. "You'd just sit there with people walking by but nobody buying much. It's only in retrospect that you can see that there was not one thing that shaped her but an accumulation of things, all these moments, that she somehow wove together."

WHAT NORA KNOWS NOW

Nora Chapa Mendoza relishes the fact that she has lived 92 years and counting. Occasionally she double-checks that the years are indeed hers. "That's a long time," she jokes. With time have come practices and beliefs as sacred as her time with her brushes and paint.

Nora lives by faith: "I believe in a higher power; nothing is just by chance." Nora lives with no big regrets. "I've been lucky. I have the best children. I really wouldn't change anything," she says. "I'd do it all the same but only better."

Nora knows no fears either. "I'm not worried about anything nor am I afraid of anything. Fear is a terrible disease. It can kill your spirit." In the studio, Nora has learned what she calls a masterful lesson. "I don't pressure myself. Tomorrow takes care of tomorrow," she explains. "Whatever life gives me, I'll deal with it the best that I can. I think I've done a pretty good job."

She's lived long enough to become the woman and the artist she always wanted to be. "I started out painting very realistic. First, I had to learn to copy like a camera, like a photograph," she explains. "But I always wanted to be an abstract painter. "

Her older figurative paintings are nearly overshadowed by stacks of examples of bold stroke-making and unrestrained expressions of color. The studio is her mirror, every inch of space a reflection of Nora comfortably at play. "Abstraction is a love relationship with your eyes and the canvas... the paint, of course, is part of the lovemaking. I don't copy or try to compete with a camera anymore." Ease and exploration are the only true muses now. "It's more sexy," she says with a laugh, "to come in and just be with the canvas and the colors. I love seeing what comes out."

This is the Nora Chapa Mendoza way of life, wisdom gleaned and sharpened by both her approach to art making and infusing every aspect of her life with spiritual aspects of her Native American ancestry. "I pray to the Creator for everything," says Nora. She was named a certified elder of Kanto de la Tierra[5] during a ceremony in Mesa, Arizona, in the 1980s. "My faith is in everything; it's the same hand doing all of it."

Faith is also what Nora credits as the source of the surge of energy that she still finds each day, each moment, in her studio. "I'm grateful that I can come in here and bend and stand and just play,"

5 Kanto de la Tierra is an intertribal council dedicated to praying for Earth's healing.

she says. “I don’t think about my age or anything. I come in and I let the paint and the canvas tell me what to do. It still fulfills all my needs.”

This fact is one of many that the elder Nora would love to travel back in time to share with young Nora, the survivor, and the dreamer. “I’d tell her, ‘You’re in for a rough ride.’” “But” she adds, with her paintbrush in hand, “you’re gonna love every minute of it.”

Many of Nora’s paintings contain words, scraps of handwriting, snippets from her calendar, and other flotsam and jetsam from around the studio

NICHOLE M. CHRISTIAN is a writer and veteran journalist. She is the creative director, editor and lead writer of five past Kresge Foundation Eminent Artist monographs: *The Book of Melba* (2023), honoring Melba Joyce Boyd; *The Culture Keeper* (2022), honoring Olayami Dabls; *A Palette for The People* (2021), honoring painter and educator Shirley Woodson; *Wonder and Flow* (2020), honoring ceramicist Marie Woo; and *A Life Speaks* (2019), honoring poet and activist Gloria House. Nichole is also the co-author of *Canvas Detroit*, and a frequent essayist for M Contemporary Art, a gallery in Ferndale, Michigan. She has written for the PBS American Masters Series.

Her writing also appears in the poetry chapbook *Cypher*, summer 2021; Portraits 9/11/01: The Collected “Portraits of Grief” from The New York Times; the online arts journal *Essay’d; A Detroit Anthology*, and *Dear Dad: Reflections on Fatherhood.*

NORA ONI NORA: PORTRAITS IN WORDS

Nichole M. Christian,
Editor

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Elton Monroy Durán, *Fearless Nora*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 inches. This painting contains references to various paintings and small artworks created by Mendoza and owned by Durán.

This section is comprised of autobiographical elements adapted from Nora's notes, diaries, and writings housed at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art.

> "Since my early years, I absorbed the colorful flavor of Latino culture: songs, dancers, and colorful dresses at weddings and festivities.

Nora photographed in Texas as en envoy of Kanto de la Tierra.

A corner of Nora's home studio, adorned with objects and artifacts from her travels.

"I believe that an artist has to have convictions and has to be sincere in his work. I believe that he cannot be afraid and should express freely even if this means controversy.

Being a Latina artist in particular, my work strives for justice and freedom and against discrimination. I am touched by struggle. Painting for me is a form of healing the struggles not only of my culture but my own. My work reflects who I am and what I feel. Emotions energize me and make me a more productive person. But I try to maintain a balance, to be in charge of my emotions so they work for me.

“My gift from the Creator is my art. My art reflects my involvement with traditional ceremonies, my Indigenous Chicana background, my culture, and my life experiences. I paint about Indian/ Chicano people and their issues. Although my art helps me survive financially, I create my art because I consider it my medicine that heals me and gives me the energy and the vision to create.

In 1980, the late Raymundo Tigre Perez organized a forum and art exhibit in Mesa, Arizona. I was invited to submit my work for the exhibit and was accepted.

The last four days of the conference were spent at Fort McDowell Reservation where I did my first traditional Native American ceremony. This was my introduction to The Red Road. From the very beginning, I felt at home: a place where I belonged.

I knew what my purpose in life was to be from then on. I went through a fierce transformation, and my work took on a new strength and focus that I needed to get grounded and to take my work more seriously. Every year after that, I experienced a renewal from each ceremonial gathering, enough to last until the next one.

A card from the series of greeting cards that Nora Chapa Mendoza designed for the United Farm Workers of America Children in the Fields Program at the request of Cesar Chavez. In 1999, Mendoza was awarded Michigan Artist of the Year for the series, and appointed to the Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs.

“My series on migrant workers is an example of my conviction, trying to show the Latino laborers as heroes against all odds. After seeing this particular series, Cesar Chavez commissioned me to paint a series to become greeting cards for the United Farm Workers of America on the subject, ‘The Wrath of Grapes.’

Cesar changed the whole world by humanizing farm laborers, the lowest of the ladder of work in this country.

Nora and other members of Kanto de la Tierra in Germany in the 1980s.

> “These ceremonies are a celebration of unity among Indigenous people. We balance our lives between the past and the present and the celebration enhances our relations with people of all ages. The ritual evokes memories of our ancestors’ songs, stories and food. By working together, and encouraging each other, the ceremonies inspire self-expression, strengthen identity, and give hope for a better life.

Nora lights a small flame during a ceremony in her studio.

“I was born in Weslaco, Texas, in 1932 to Mexican-Indian parents from the state of Nuevo Leon, Mexico.

My grandfather died very young leaving my grandmother with six or seven very young children during the [Mexican] revolution. She packed her children, crossed the border and settled in Texas.

My father grew up and became a house painter and married my mother who also worked with her hands. Her mother, my grandmother, had a tortilla factory and my mother made tortillas.

I spent much of my time alone. School was very different for me because of the language barrier, poverty, and neglect, and because of this, I was a victim of abuse by the other children who didn't understand my situation. I didn't speak English until I was eight. I was made to feel ashamed of being Mexican and Indian.

Art projects made up for some of the abuse. I was good at drawing (although I didn't know it) because in middle school I was asked to illustrate a book my teacher was writing about Mexican life. When I was about 14, my dad brought home a set of paints, a canvas, brushes, and a picture to copy. From that day on, I knew that I wanted to be an artist. But it took many, many years before I could truly call myself an artist.

I painted all the time. I copied everything I liked, teaching myself how to paint by painting. I had natural skills but I didn't know it at the time. I didn't know any artists other than my art teacher; there were no role models for me.

Nora's father, Casimiro Chapa, and Aunt Feliz.

Nora receives her Doctor of Arts Honoris Causa at Oakland University in April 2024.

“College was not an option. Although my boyfriend encouraged me to finish high school, he also discouraged me from going to college and pursuing an art career. Instead, we married. I continued to paint, as a hobby. My best creations, my masterpieces, were my two children. I did not take my art seriously until my divorce at age 43.

My art was my salvation and pulled me through the hard times. I began to rediscover myself through my art. I painted from memories of my past — churches, searching for spirituality, mother and child; searching for my need to nurture and be nurtured and I painted women searching for self. As I changed, my work changed, from very small, very realistic, to very large abstracts.

I needed money to live on so I started doing street fairs including the Ann Arbor Art Fair, and selling at Trappers Alley and in Harmonie Park. Eventually, in 1978 I opened a gallery and studio in Harmonie Park called Galeria Mendoza. I had opened one in Pontiac in 1976 called Galeria Latina. I always felt an urge pulling me toward my heritage and, step by step, one thing led to another, and one exhibit led to another; I became very involved in the Latino Arts Movement, serving in many capacities for many organizations while at the same time creating my art. I started hosting Hispanic exhibits, sometimes just my work. Sometimes nobody came.

It was my effort to bring awareness to Hispanic art and artists. It was also my way to heal from my childhood, from my past.

Nora and husband Sam Mendoza in Galveston, Texas, her last stop before moving to Detroit.

Family photo, 1963.

Nora at an early exhibition of her work.

Studies, scraps, postcards, and other printed ephemera are an ever-present force in Nora's studio. Some of these collected elements make their way directly back into the work as collage; others might reappear by way of osmosis.

> “I have traveled extensively through my art, to Mexico for many reasons. Mexico is where I did my Sun Dance which has given me knowledge that has inspired my desire to be a voice for not only migrant workers but Indigenous people from the US, Mexico and Latin America.

“If you have been blessed with a gift, it is your responsibility to develop it and pass it along to the next seven generations. It’s never too late.

ON BECOMING AN ARTIST

Nora Chapa Mendoza

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A list reproduced from Nora's writings housed at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art

The advantages

1. Happiness
2. Freedom
3. You are your own boss
4. You must have a drive; a passion to create
5. You have to learn to see not just look
6. If you are a painter, you can paint almost anywhere except somebody's very clean and organized home
7. There is no higher high than creating work
8. Creating reduces stress
9. Because you can use your art as a tool to express beauty as well as social issues and concerns and hardships, issues you feel strongly about.
10. Because you wake up eagerly each morning to another day's work.
11. Because with each painting you feel a sense of accomplishment
12. Because you share your work with the world and it lives on after you are dead
13. You gain self-respect, self-trust, self-love, self-value, self-reliance
14. Recognition and admiration — if you get it from others, it's a bonus
15. Travel — Adventure

The disadvantages

1. You may never get rich; if you are lucky you'll get by
2. You may never become famous or even recognized


SUA


ARTE

BORDERS, VIOLENCE AND BEAUTY

Dr. Elaine Carey, PhD

Places and their pasts inform an artist's work. Nora Chapa Mendoza's paintings tell a vivid story about the intersectionalities of her life, and her work reflects her movements between major border towns: the U.S.-Mexico border and Hidalgo County, Texas, and the largest crossing on the U.S.-Canada border, Detroit-Windsor. Her use of light, color, and themes are influenced by border communities and *borderlander* experiences which she fuses to recreate their stories and connections in her paintings.

Borders serve as spaces that divide people, leading to the social construction of seemingly distinct races, nationalities, genders and cultural practices; these open wounds (*heridas abiertas*) define and categorize social, political, cultural, and economic networks as safe and unsafe.[1] Historically, inequalities manifested at borders provide opportunities for those with the necessary political, cultural, social, and economic capital to take advantage of these nebulous spaces.[2] As Gloria Anzaldúa wrote, "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants..."[3]

Economic inequalities and other forms of marginality created by borders provide opportunities for those who seek to explore the fluidity of the place. Borderlanders live among constant change and diverse languages. Borders attract people, whether for opportunity, safety, or art, and that lure is ephemeral. Yet, frequently the response to such changes and movements is the creation of formal borders reinforcing the "need" for strengthening with fences, customs workers, policing agencies, and laws that reinforce disparities across the region.[4]

These inequalities, and the attempts of governors or presidents to control people from permeating, penetrating, and crossing borders, extend the possibilities by turning every location across the entire continent into a potential borderland, with different effects on different classes of people.[5] For example, how Indigenous Mexicans have found themselves and their identities, contributions, and languages attacked such as during the Zapatista[6] movement while celebrated in the national myths.

1 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 25. Sam Truett and Elliot Young, "Introduction: Making Transnational History: Nations, Regions, and Borderlands," in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, Samuel Truett and Elliot Young, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 6; Roger Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Spaces of Postmodernism," in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, David Gutiérrez, ed. (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1996); Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History* 8:2 (Fall 1997): 211-42. For a contemporary study of impact of drugs on borderlanders and on a particular border site, see Howard Campbell's *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez* (Austin: University Texas, 2009).

2 Karl Jacoby, "Between North and South: The Alternative Borderlands of William H. Ellis and the African American Colony of 1895," in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, Samuel Truett and Elliot Young, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 230; Kimberly L. Thachuk, "An Introduction to Transnational Threats," in *Transnational Threats: Smuggling and Trafficking in Arms, Drugs, and Human Life* (Westport, CN: Praeger Security International, 2007), 3-20. These entrepreneurs should also include what Peter Andreas and Ethan Nadelmann call "transnational moral entrepreneurs" who generally work to convince foreign elites to adopt the moral codes of one society as if they were universal truths. See Peter Andreas and Ethan Nadelmann, *Policing the Globe: Criminalization and Crime Control in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

3 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*,, 25.

4 Josiah McC. Heyman, "U.S. Ports of Entry on the Mexican Border," in *On the Border: Society and Culture Between the United States and Mexico*, Andrew Grant Wood, ed. [Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2004], 222. Peter Andreas notes the symbiotic relationship between smugglers and states, arguing that it is the perception that smuggling [of goods or people] is a "growing threat that is most critical for sustaining and expanding law enforcement." See Peter Andreas, "Smuggling Wars: Law Enforcement and Law Evasion in a Changing World," in *Transnational Crime in the Americas*, Tom Farer, ed. [New York: Routledge, 1999], 94. Moisés Naim similarly argues that the focus on sending countries is "politically profitable" and the tools such as "helicopters, gunboats, heavily armed agents, judges, and generals" are more "telegenic" than focusing on demand. See Moisés Naim, *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers, and Copycats are Hijacking the Global Economy* [New York: Bantam, 2005], 234-5.

5 Samuel Truett and Elliot Young, "Conclusion: Borderlands Unbound," in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, Samuel Truett and Elliot Young, eds. [Durham: Duke University Press, 2004], 327; Jane Bayes and Mary Hawkesworth, "Introduction," in *Women, Democracy, and Globalization in North America: A Comparative Study*, Jane Bayes, Patricia Begné, Laura Gonzalez, Lois Harder, Mary Hawkesworth, and Laura Macdonald, eds. [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006].

6 The Zapatista movement broadly refers to a 1994 uprising demanding greater Indigenous rights, land reform, and an end to a colonial legacy of poverty, racism, and inequality in Chiapas, Mexico.

Nora is a *borderlander*. Born in 1932, she grew up in a small Texas town in Hidalgo County, a mere five miles from the Mexican border. In that county, the major McAllen-Reynosa border crossing has entered the popular imagination as a major port for licit and illicit commodities. For generations, people have lived on both sides of the border going back and forth for work, recreation, and family visits. More than one hundred years ago, this area was the epicenter of violence against Tejanos (Mexican Americans from Texas) and Indigenous and Black Texans. For Tejanos, tensions along the border flared as more Anglo-Americans moved into south Texas beginning in the late 1800s. With the changes wrought by Anglo migration, Tejanos who had lived in the areas for centuries experienced unfair treatment and violence at the hands of the new residents who sought to displace them from their land and from political power. Further tensions flared as white Texans sought to undermine Tejano influence in south Texas, and as Anglos grew more anxious over race and racial identity in the borderlands because the Mexican population was a majority and growing by the 1910s. In other words, Anglos created a minority-majority rule in south Texas.

During the Mexican Revolution (1910–1921), the United States government under President Woodrow Wilson militarized the border region by building military bases in proximity to major border crossings and adding additional border agents and soldiers to monitor the movement of people. Between 1910 and 1920, the Texas Rangers and vigilantes terrorized Tejanos and Mexicans along the U.S.-Mexico border. Formed in 1823 to fight American Indians, the Rangers sought to gain control of land and territory for colonial rule. Over time, the Rangers evolved, hunting runaway slaves who sought to escape to freedom in Mexico. In the early 1900s, as Mexicans fled the revolution, the Rangers cast Tejanos, Mexicans, and Indigenous and Black Texans who had lived in south Texas long before the arrival of the new migrants as bandits and criminals.[7] They developed campaigns of state-sponsored terror with the support of governors and sheriffs, many of whom were plucked from their ranks.[8]

While the violence may have declined later in the 1920s, the terror and power of the Texas Rangers enshrined Jim Crow-style segregation that included segregated communities and schools as well as voter intimidation and suppression. Tejanos, both men and women, continued to challenge the status quo. They pursued investigations at the state and national level, formed organizations, and wrote about the violence in their local newspapers.[9] Families banded together to support widows and children who lost their fathers and brothers to lynching and other forms of terror. This was the world that Chapa Mendoza was born into and came of age in south Texas. Her art focuses on her Chicano and Indigenous roots and the lives of women who survived difficult circumstances. In a recent article, Nora explained that she came from a family of "strong, independent women."[10]

As an adult, she moved to another border community in 1953 when she and her then-husband moved to Detroit for his medical residency. In Detroit, she would see familiar patterns of segregation and racial tension. In Detroit, she continued to paint, became active in the arts community, and discovered that many other Tejanos and Mexicans had sought to leave Texas and moved to the north in search of jobs and less violence. Initially,

7 Doug J. Swanson, *Cult of Glory: The Bold and Brutal History of Texas Rangers* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020).

8 Monica Muñoz Martinez, "Recuperating Histories of Violence in the Americas: Vernacular History-Marking on the US-Mexico Border," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 661-689 and *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018)

9 For a great overview of how scholars have changed the perception of the Texas Rangers, please see the public history project "Refusing to Forget" which documents the atrocities of the Texas Rangers. https://refusingtoforget.org/the-history/

10 Laurie Psarianos and Nora Chapa Mendoza. "Nora Chapa Mendoza." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 49, no. 1 (2024): 230.

Mexicans and Tejanos found work in agriculture. Over the first part of the twentieth century, Tejanos and Mexicans joined the growing Mexican American communities in Chicago, Illinois; Gary and East Chicago, Indiana; and Detroit, Michigan. They worked in meat-packing, steel, and automobile industries. With the onset of the global depression in 1929, Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants again became the targets of vigilante and state terror as they had a decade earlier in Texas.

In Detroit, the United States Repatriation Program focused on Mexicans as foreign workers. Over one million Mexicans were repatriated from the United States to Mexico, and over 60 percent of repatriated Mexicans were U.S. citizens. Identifying with the struggles of Mexicans in her home city, Nora painted "Caravan of Sorrows" based on her conversations with Detroit activist Elena Herrada in which Nora depicted the caravans of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in their Model Ts traveling from Detroit to Mexico in which they had to pass through the hostile environment of Texas. Elena's grandfather helped migrants convert their Model Ts to campers so the migrants could transport their families and household goods back to Mexico. The families traveled in caravans for protection because they had to cross the very state where only two decades before Tejanos and Mexicans had been massacred.

Over the years, Nora has expressed her solidarity with the struggles and the legacies of betrayal that Mexican Americans have endured being cast as outlaws in their own lands whether in Texas or Michigan. Her series "Broken Promises" documents continued betrayals by the United States and state governments against Chicano, Tejano, and Mexican American citizens by capturing their vulnerability but also their strength and perseverance. As a borderlander, Nora has keenly observed the lives of women, Mexicans, Indigenous peoples, civil rights, and social justice in the Americas. For decades, Nora has been an agent of change by capturing the violence and beauty of borderlands and the lives and resilience of borderlanders.

ELAINE CAREY is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. She is a professional historian and the author of over seventy articles. Her books include *Plaza of Sacrifices: Gender, Power, and Terror in 1968 Mexico* and the award-winning *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime*. She is also the co-editor of *Smugglers, Brothels, and Twine: Transnational Flows of Contraband and Vice in North America* and the editor/author of *Protests in the Streets: 1968 Across the Globe.*

UP WHERE SHE BELONGS

Dalia Reyes

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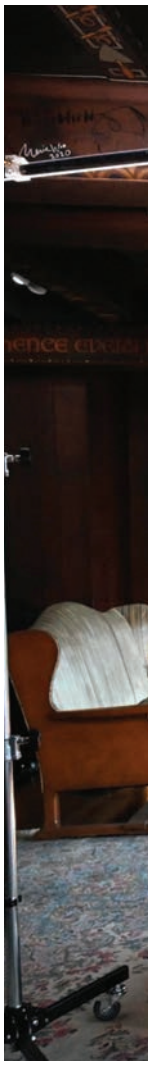
In 2014, I had the pleasure of meeting Nora Chapa Mendoza at an opening reception for a gallery where I was working. Her work instantly mesmerized me, possessing the beautiful quality and care of an artisan combined with the raw subject matter of a contemporary artist – I was intrigued!

As I got to know Nora better, I became aware of the striking parallels in our lives. We were both Latinas, both Mexicanas, and both hailing from different yet neighboring places; she from Weslaco, Texas, and I from Valle Hermoso, Mexico, just over an hour away from each other. Reflecting on these similarities, I couldn't help but ponder the shared experiences we might have had. Discovering another Mexican artist whom I could look up to was wonderful, especially considering the scarcity of Latino artists being exhibited at the time.

Left: Dalia Reyes, Nora, and Kathryn Dimond, Scarab Club's Executive Director, discuss Nora's signature painting.

Opposite page: Nora strikes a pose and flashes a smile during a lifetime achievement moment at Detrot's Scarab Club.



Despite not having encountered her work sooner, I was completely captivated. It struck me that all the aspirations I harbored, Nora had already pursued. She ran a gallery, she's traveled the world, and she's connected with amazing people like Cesar Chavez and Edward James Olmos. She emerged as someone I could potentially lean on for guidance, a beacon reminding me to stay steadfast and authentic to myself. Nora's motivations weren't rooted in the pursuit of wealth or fame; rather, she was propelled by the desire to share her stories of social justice and spirituality.

Even after moving on from that nonprofit gallery, I kept her in mind, eagerly anticipating a chance to collaborate with her someday. Several years later, I accepted the position of gallery director at the historic Scarab Club. It's a responsibility that included proposing artists to sign the famous wooden beams in the Scarab Club's legendary upstairs meeting room, featuring the signatures of notable figures such as Diego Rivera, Norman Rockwell and Marcel Duchamp. Nora Chapa Mendoza immediately came to mind as a top candidate. It felt like fate when, during my first week at the club, I stumbled upon a pamphlet from a 1980s exhibition featuring Nora.

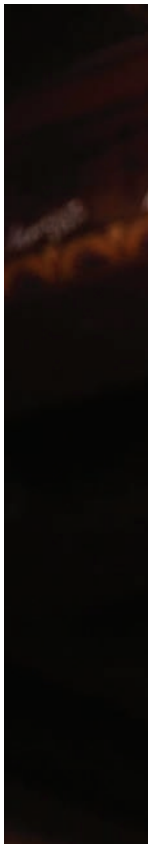
Determined to make this collaboration happen, I reached out to mutual friends and acquaintances who could help me connect with her. With the blessing and approval of the executive director, I crafted a proposal and submitted it for the board's review. To my relief and delight, the decision to designate Nora as the next beam signatory was met with enthusiasm, making her the first Latina and second Hispanic artist since Diego Rivera to sign the beams.

The planning of Nora's solo exhibition was a joyful experience. Nora, along with my exhibition team (Christopher Gene and Chillian Thomas) and me, spent days in her studio reviewing her work, planning and hearing the stories behind each selected piece. Nora's studio is impressive; it's packed with works of art from different times in her life, spanning multiple mediums, some abstract, some prints and some more figurative – of course, all distinctly Nora. Her spirit flows freely in her art, unbound by any one medium, guided intuitively by her spirituality. She used various techniques to portray her personal stories and played a pivotal role in inspiring numerous southwest Detroit artists. Through her art, she bridged activism and social justice issues, commenting on topics like the labor movement, wars, and children in detention camps.

Nora has an admirable fearlessness that is infectious. These are two major aspects of her work that draw me to her: her passionate spirit, and her ability to give all of herself to her craft. She is a true role model, not driven by fame or fortune, but by living authentically and creating work that frees her and speaks to others. It is no secret that Latino artists are sometimes overlooked, so it is extraordinary that with all Nora has achieved she is finally being recognized for her many accomplishments. I am so thankful to know Nora, and to have been able to elevate her work with the retrospective exhibition, "Stages of a Life." We are holding and creating space for Latinas in the future; her work opens doors to many possibilities.

One of my favorite pieces is "Stages of a Life," a painting in which she depicts a woman in different stages of life, from youth to death. Again, dealing with fearlessness here, speaking on death. Creating beauty from one of life's darkest moments. We are so lucky to have Nora in our lives. In her mere presence, she unwittingly paved the way for so many in southwest Detroit and beyond.

Hopefully, this well-deserved award as the 2024 Kresge Eminent Artist will open up opportunities for many other Latino artists in the future.



DALIA REYES is a curator, an interdisciplinary artist from southwest Detroit, and Gallery Director for Detroit's historic Scarab Club.

Stages of a Life, undated. Acrylic on canvas.

Nora prepares to become the first Latina to add her signature to the Scarab Club's legendary beams.

SEEING NORA: EYE AND MIND

Vince Carducci

Toward the end of an interview about being named the 2024 Kresge Arts in Detroit Eminent Artist, Nora Chapa Mendoza was asked what of her practice, at this stage in her long, productive career, continues to most excite her.

Her response was immediate and unequivocal: “The abstract paintings.” In listening to the interview, I kept thinking about an essay by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. While Merleau-Ponty was writing about painting in general, he could have just as easily been writing about Mendoza’s abstract works.

Mendoza, in her description of the abstract painting process, acknowledges that it's a dialogue between the artist and art object coming into being. I would go further and say that Mendoza's abstract painting takes place at the existential threshold between inner being and outer nature, which concerns Merleau-Ponty in "Eye and Mind."

The "eye" Merleau-Ponty is talking about is more than the physical organ through which we encounter the world outside our bodies. He's talking about visuality in general and how painting makes us aware of that aspect of our being in the world. As Merleau-Ponty writes: "[O]ur fleshly eyes are already much more than receptors for light rays, colors, and lines. ...They are computers of the world, which have the gift of the visible as it was once said that the inspired [person] had the gift of tongues."[1] Further, Merleau-Ponty goes on to say: "Of course, this gift is earned by exercise," which is the iterative process of the act of painting as experienced over time by the artist in the studio.

Later in "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty quotes Surrealist Max Ernst that "the role of the painter is to grasp and project what is seen in [themselves]."

This is something that is most readily apparent, I would argue, in abstract painting where the referents of the outside world, which is to say, representational imagery as traditionally understood, are absent and visibility in its purest form is made palpable. It is something that Mendoza sensed early on in her development but apparently took a while for her to come to terms with.

In the interview, Mendoza states that she always wanted to paint abstracts but started with traditional methods of representation, typically of the figure, often of women. Then one day, she began to listen to what the painting was trying to tell her and, as she says, "I started throwing the paintings around and seeing what would happen."

In characterizing her process as one of the work "telling" her what it wants to be, Mendoza is describing the relationship between her embodied being and the pictorial event unfolding beneath her. Indeed, often in the abstract works – with their cascades of color and built-up surfaces – one might say that the paint has a mind of its own and that Mendoza goes with the flow as it were until equilibrium has been achieved and a work can be considered finished.

1 Quotes from "Eye and Mind" by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, translated by Carleton Dallery and collected in *The Primacy of Perception* (Northwestern University Press, 1964), have been modified for gender neutrality.

Untitled blue landscape, undated. Acrylic on canvas.

Where that process begins and where it ends can be seen in works such as “Blue in Flight and Flight of the Spirit” (all works ca. 2017). In the former, the pigment’s aqueous nature is prominent with washes of blue and purple unfurling under skeins of opaque white skirting along on top.

In the latter, the paint’s materiality is foregrounded with solid pigment flooding the surface of the picture plane and layers of impasto giving texture to the picture’s surface. References to the natural do appear from time to time as in works such as “Canyon” — where earth tones evoke windblown sand, a patch of blue the desert sky, and a swath of purple running diagonally across the canvas a ridge – not depicting a particular Western landscape but projecting a feeling one might have of being absorbed in it.

This sense of reversal in the relationship between the artist and the visible is one of Merleau-Ponty's key insights into painting as "a magical theory of vision." That the inspiration of the artist is not just one of projecting outward but of taking in:

> We speak of "inspiration," and the word should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action, and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted.

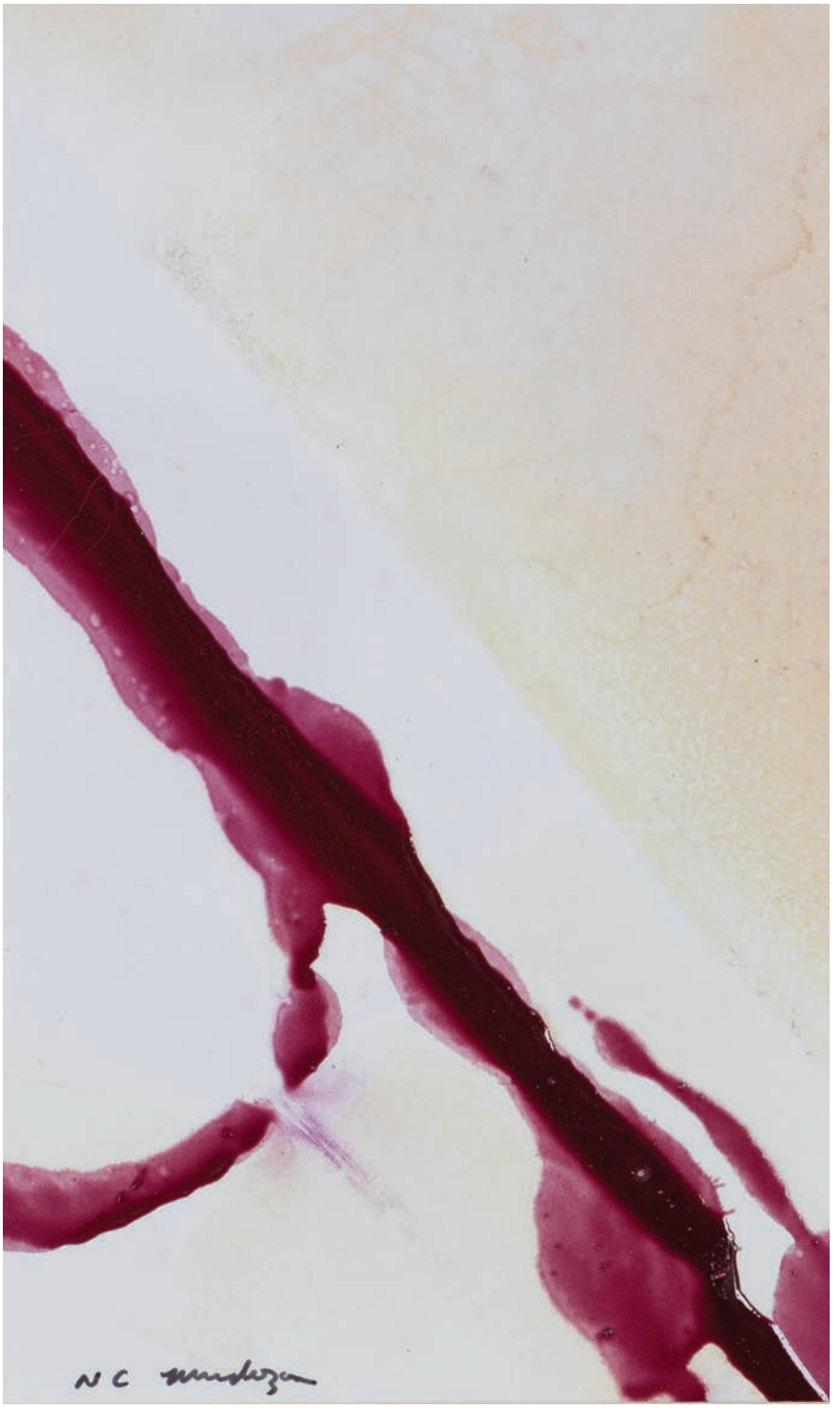
That is the heart of Mendoza's abstract paintings and her gift to us.

Canyon. Undated.
Acrylic on canvas.

VINCE CARDUCCI is Dean Emeritus at the College for Creative Studies and a 2010 Kresge Artist Fellow.

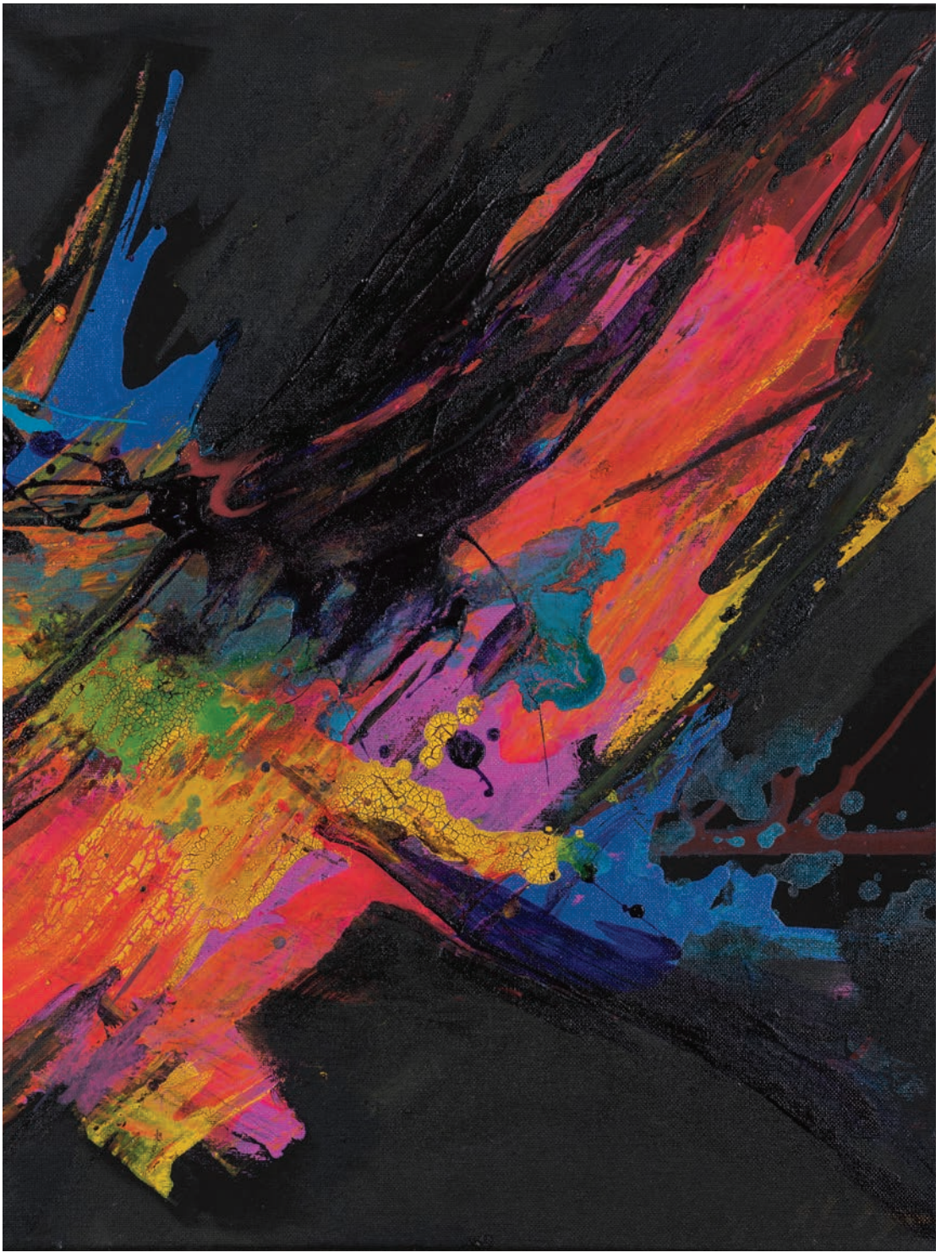
GALERIA MENDOZA

This section contains selected work from the long span of Nora's ouevre. Unless otherwise noted, works are left untitled; the careful listing of materials and naming of finished work have remained less important to Mendoza than the act of creation itself.

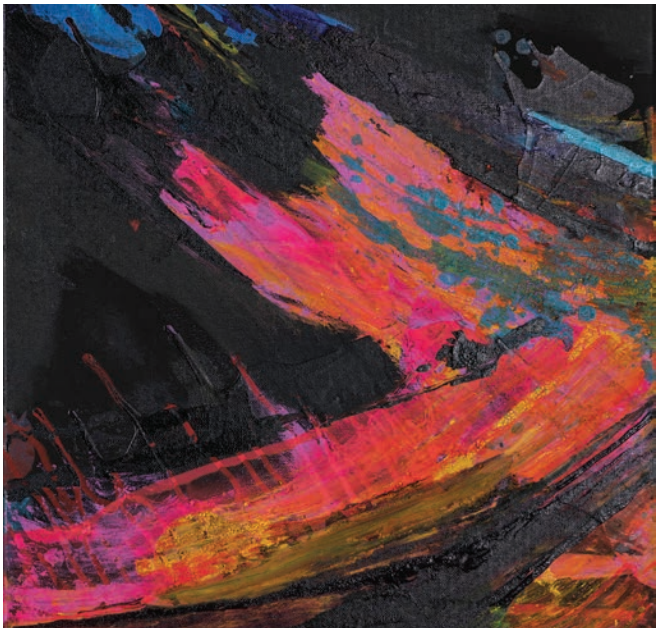

N C

Color Purple. 2014
Oil.
16 × 20"

Canyon Mist II. 2009
Acrylic on canvas.
22½ × 30"



Los Hilos de mi Abuela. 2017
Acrylic on canvas.
16 × 20"

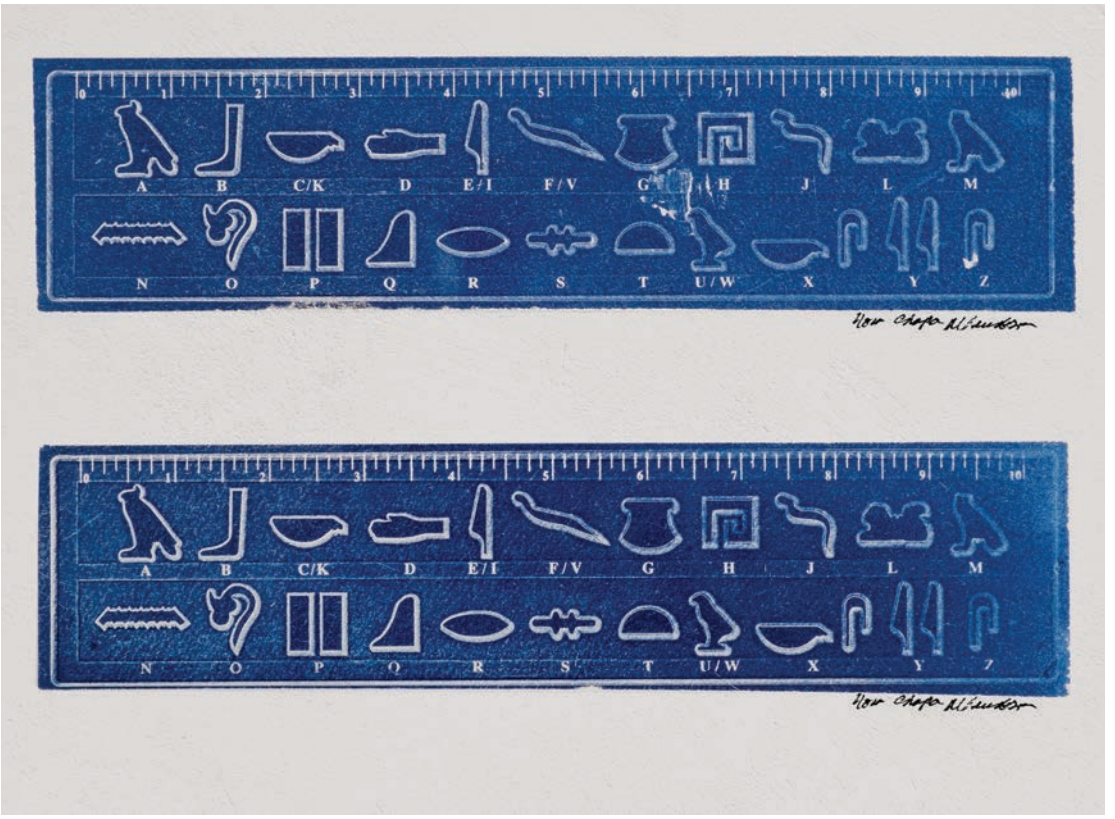


Route to Oventic.
Oil and mixed media on canvas.
32 × 30"


DETROIT


EL MUSICO


CAUTION
PASS


A B C/K D E/I F/V G H J L M
N O P Q R S T U/W X Y Z
A B C/K D E/I F/V G H J L M
N O P Q R S T U/W X Y Z

Cards from the series of greeting cards that Nora Chapa Mendoza designed for the United Farm Workers of America Children in the Fields Program at the request of Cesar Chavez.

The floor at Nora's studio, photographed in early 2024, isn't far off from some of the surfaces of the artist's paintings.

KRESGE ARTS IN DETROIT ADVISORY PANEL, 2023–2024

Nora Chapa Mendoza was named the 2024 Kresge Eminent Artist by a distinguished peer group of metro Detroit artists and arts professionals convened by Kresge Arts in Detroit:

Gina Ellis
Dancer and choreographer

Dawn McDuffie
Poet

Drake Phifer
Arts and culture producer

Osvaldo "Ozzie" Rivera
Detroit historian, musician and community activist

Shirley Woodson
Painter and 2022 Kresge Eminent Artist

THE EMINENT ARTIST AWARD

The Kresge Eminent Artist Award celebrates artistic innovation and rewards integrity and depth of vision with unrestricted support of $100,000. The award is given annually to an artist who has lived and worked in Wayne, Oakland, or Macomb counties for a significant number of years. Along with the Kresge Artist Fellowships, and Gilda Awards – administered by the Kresge Arts in Detroit office of the College for Creative Studies – the Eminent Artist award reflects The Kresge Foundation's belief that support for artists themselves is integral to a robust arts and culture ecosystem across metropolitan Detroit. Since 2008, Kresge Arts in Detroit has awarded over $8 million through 16 Kresge Eminent Artist Awards, 278 Kresge Artist Fellowships, and 52 Gilda Awards ($5,000 each). In 2024, the fellowships (historically $25,000 each) increased to $40,000.

Kresge Eminent Artists 2008–2023

2023
Melba Joyce Boyd

2020
Marie Woo

2019
Gloria House

2016
Leni Sinclair

2015
Ruth Adler Schnee

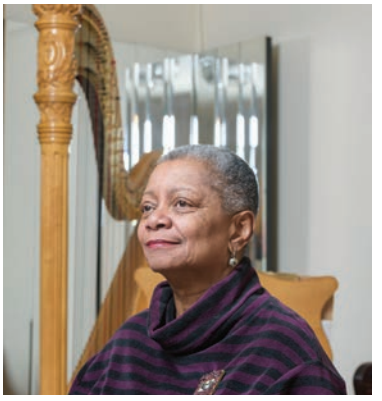
2012
Naomi Long Madgett

2011
Bill Harris

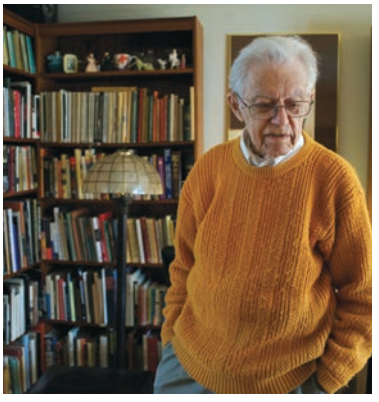
2022
Olayami Dabls

2021
Shirley Woodson

2018
Wendell Harrison

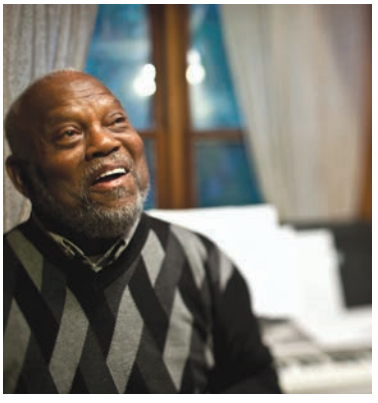


2017
Patricia Terry-Ross

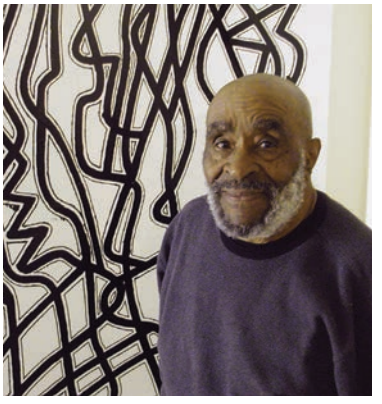


2014
Bill Rauhauser

2013
David DiChiera



2009
Marcus Belgrave



2008
Charles McGee

Credits and Acknowledgments

About The Kresge Foundation

The Kresge Foundation was founded in 1924 to promote human progress. Today, Kresge fulfills that mission by building and strengthening pathways to opportunity for low-income people in America's cities, seeking to dismantle structural and systemic barriers to equality and justice. Using a full array of grant, loan and other investment tools, Kresge invests more than $160 million annually to foster economic and social change.

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Complimentary copies of this monograph and others in the Kresge Eminent Artist series are available while supplies last. All monographs are also available for free download by visiting kresge.org/eminentartist

Unless otherwise noted, photos used throughout this monograph are from the personal collection of Nora Chapa Mendoza and the Mendoza family. Every effort has been made to locate and credit the holders of copyrighted materials.

Acknowledgments

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Our gratitude also goes out to photographer Erin Kirkland and to Elton Monroy Durán for their thoughtful contributions to *Su Arte, Su Vida*. Extra appreciation to Laurie Psarianos for generously sharing family photos and documents, including photos on pages 42, 66, and 67, among others. All photos of Nora Chapa Mendoza's work in the Galeria Mendoza section by Carrie Williams Acosta.

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