

Sculptural

WINTER 2007

Pursuit

ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS

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DAVID GREENWOOD
KENDALL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

LAS MADRES
Project

ABSTRACT STYLES
DOMINGO RAMOS
MARIANNE WEIL

Reuben Kadish
Past Revisited

WINTER 2007 Vol.6 No.4



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Sculptural Pursuit

Winter 2007



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The memorial *LAS MADRES, THE MOTHERS* memorial installation in the desert landscape of Pima Community College East Campus in Tucson.

Valarie James and *Las Madres* Project

Putting a Human Face
on the Plight of Migrants

by Barbara Stahura



Antonia Gallegos, model and collaborator, stands next to the prototype for the sculpture.

A diaper bag stuffed with infant's clothing and a birth certificate broke Valarie James's heart. That break moved her to create a new sculpture technique that reveals the heart of the migrant experience.

James, a sculptor and arts educator, often walks her dogs in the desert around her home in Amado, Arizona, an area near the U.S.-Mexico border that has been a migrant path for centuries. She sometimes meets undocumented immigrants in heart-wrenching encounters during which she can do little except offer food and water to the frightened, exhausted travelers. More often, she comes across items they have left behind in the unforgiving desert. One day in 2004, she found the cast-off diaper bag on the ground, surrounded by the mother's scattered clothing. *Who were this woman and her child?* she wondered. *What happened to them?* These thoughts haunted her, creating "a question mark in the sand," she says. She carried her poignant treasure back home.

Soon, James explains, other abandoned artifacts began to "find" her, and she could not resist their pull. "With every single item comes a story," she says. "People are forced to leave behind what's most precious to them."

Along with the more mundane items, which were nevertheless important to their owners, such as children's backpacks, baby-sized sneakers, high heels, cans of food, packets of herbs and seeds, stuffed animals, blankets, prayer cards, and woolen gloves, James has collected more personal, and so more heartrending, items: photos, children's school workbooks and diaries, love letters, and heirloom-quality embroidered cloths used to hold tortillas and other small items for the long journey. Many of these items now are respectfully displayed on her small ranch in a growing shrine, or *santuario*, open by invitation only.

The Process: (from top)
Artist Valarie James finishing the original plaster sculpture.
The artist is building the shell mold with burlap and plaster
James reseats the rubber mold in the shell.



Master metal sculptor Cesar Lopez and James lay the wire mesh armature into the mold.



The full size rubber mold inside the box made of scrap wood.



With her background in community art, James envisioned a more public project that would honor the humanity of these people often characterized so negatively. In particular, she wanted to honor the memory of the 3,000 men, women, and children who have perished in Arizona since the mid-1990s when Border Patrol policies began funneling desperate migrants away from urban areas and into the hellish desert.

Immigrant issues are not limited to Southern Arizona or to the United States, she explains. Refugees and migrants are on the move around the globe, so she considers her project to be a microcosm of the world. Her trio of sculptures, *LAS MADRES/ NO MAS LAGRIMAS (THE MOTHERS/ NO MORE TEARS)*, resides in the desert landscape of Pima Community College East Campus in Tucson. Arms crossed over their hearts, eyes closed, they stand in mute vigil, wordless testimony to the fate of the lost migrants and to the hope of a better future.

As James wrote on her web site, "*THE MOTHERS; LAS MADRES* takes the issue of immigration out of the realm of politics and brings it back into the heart, reminding us of our common humanity, that we are all *familia* with shared concerns. Seen en masse, *THE MOTHERS; LAS MADRES* have a powerful impact on the viewer. The Mother figures personify the wrenching exodus of the people from their native lands and the archetypal quest for a better life for one's family."

James paints the sculpture with encaustic.

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It is like working
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Close-up of *LAS MADRES* face.



Installed in 2005 as part of Pima Community College's award-winning Sculpture on Campus Program, *LAS MADRES* was originally slated for a one-year display, but has been extended through 2008. During the summer of '07, the installation took on new significance in light of the federal immigration bill debate, which tended to depersonalize, even demonize, undocumented immigrants. However, rather than inspiring negativity or complaints, James understands that people on campus have pulled benches around *THE MOTHERS*, coming to sit quietly or have lunch or read in their peaceful, yet vivid, presence.

"This project is above and beyond politics," James explains. "We worked hard on that. It's about the relationship between people and the land they cross, and the very real social and economic forces that drive people here."

To underscore these relationships, James rejected the idea of using harsh chemical materials such as urethane or fiberglass. *LAS MADRES* called for something intrinsic to the lives of the unknown migrants, something that



James works on the figure.

Fragment biomorphic paper torso #1
Fragment biomorphic paper torso #3

would accurately tell the stories of poor people who often live close to the earth and to the edge. After much trial and error, and in what she calls a highly inventive leap of faith, she developed a process to create a unique cotton rag blended with desert materials, which is then layered over a plaster form supported on an armature of steel rebar.

Among the items James and her colleagues bring in from the desert are pieces of clothing, some of which have been there for months or years. “The way clothing and fiber have become embedded into the land over time is amazing,” she says. “I discover material literally seamed into the clay banks of arroyos.” The jeans, khaki pants, and shirts silently tell their own stories, written by thorns or rocks or exposure and illustrated by the blood and sweat of their owners.

For *LAS MADRES*, James and her colleagues cut the cotton material into small squares and then pulped it in a Hollander beater that mixes in water and slowly shreds the fiber into a maché. James added prickly pear cactus mucilage as a binder and strengthener, as well as other indigenous plant materials—bast fiber from yucca plants, desert grasses, and beeswax—to reflect more of the natural environment. The resulting material, distressed and rough to the touch when hardened and sealed, reveals the character of the composite materials, she says, as well as “the physical and psychological experience of the arduous journey and its effect on the people.”

James and colleagues, including Tucson mixed-media artists Deborah McCullough and Lauren Raine, used twenty-two different processes in crafting the original plaster sculpture, making the mold, and casting the Mother figures. Another friend and colleague, sculptor Antonia Gallegos, served



Valerie James at Pima Community College with *LAS MADRES*.

as the model. The three artists first cast Gallegos's face to below her collarbone using plaster-coated medical gauze. They used the same technique over the model's shirt and skirt and, finally, over her feet and lower legs.

Later, the sections were joined together to create a shell mold into which plaster was poured—twenty pounds at a time, 320 pounds total. The resulting plaster sculpture was essentially intact, but James spent a week re-sculpting whole parts, particularly the face. In sculpting this original Mother form, “the feel of the plaster in my hands was delightful,” she recalls. “Plaster is a fabulous but underrated sculptural compound. It is like working with soapstone or soft alabaster, sensual and forgiving to work with.” Though it still bore a resemblance to Gallegos, the sanded sculpture was no longer an exact replica. Her likeness had been transformed into another entity, one that looked classic and timeless like the Great Mother of any indigenous culture in history, James says.

After making the rubber mold, James and Gallegos created a traditional shell mold out of burlap and plaster. Working with burlap in a plaster slurry “feels almost sensual at times,” James says. “I realized again how much I need the low tech, hands-on aspect of art making—a more intuitive, intrinsically female approach.” After the plaster shell dried, they demolded the parts, peeled the rubber off the original plaster sculpture, then placed the rubber skin back into the re-bolted shell and seated it into a large mold box constructed out of scavenged wood. The surface of the first sculpture was made with denim



LAS MADRES weeps in the summer desert sun.



Limited edition of three interior *MOTHERS*; one in foreground with crochet.

pulp shredded through the Hollander beater, then screened and pressed into the form. Twenty pairs of jeans were needed for the two- to three-inch layer of maché, which dried hard as a rock.

Sculptor Cesar Lopez, also of Amado, created an internal cage-like armature, welding together steel ribs extending from a rebar spine, with heavy wire mesh over that, to support the hollow figure. Balanced and harmonious, “the custom armatures were sculpture in themselves,” says James. A final plaster pour sealed the denim rag to the heavy wire mesh and steel armature. Then, after drying for almost a month, the first denim Mother emerged from the mold, a full body in *mezzo-relievo*, medium relief.

The three *Madres*—one each in blue, brown, and off-white, depending on the kind of fiber and plant material used—were sealed with an encaustic developed by James using damar resin mixed with beeswax. As far as she knows, no one else has used these kinds of natural materials for an outdoor sculpture. “I think the dynamic nature of a natural bi-polymer sealant used for outdoor sculptures, rather than a traditional fiberglass or urethane sealer, and how it has responded to the environment in much the way our own bodies would do, is pretty intriguing stuff,” she explains.

As James believed would happen, *LAS MADRES* are deteriorating with time. The fiber skin is cracking and shredding and will eventually break down entirely. In another appropriate development, *THE MOTHERS* appear to be shedding tears as the resin and beeswax sealant breaks down in the Arizona heat. “I predicted we would see *THE MOTHERS* weep,” James says. “By 2006, they were exuding great tears through the fiber. It’s so fantastic. You hope you can make work that truly articulates what you want to put out in the world.”

For the casting of the second Mother, made from found khaki and desert plants, she boiled down bast fiber from yucca plants and blended in mucilage from *nopales*, or young prickly pear pads, as a binder. The third casting, from found burlap, had its own challenges.

LAS MADRES project is still evolving -- from the beginning, James has written extensively about it and the techniques involved, hoping to publish the story someday. The next sculptural stage will speak to “the larger universal themes reflected in populations on the move worldwide such as ‘Water (or the lack thereof)’ and what it looks like to both ‘Give and Receive.’” Unlike the Pima College installation, this limited edition series with seven Mothers will first be a touring exhibit, although James hopes it will eventually find an appropriate permanent home, perhaps the Smithsonian or the National Museum of Women in the Arts. These large, biomorphic sculptures will not be full bodies, but one-of-a-kind fragments of torsos, some with faces, in descending sizes, mounted on a supportive

backing. The smallest one, red from the color of the shirt used for the maché, is merely arms and hands crossed over the heart. One incorporates crochet by one of James's foremothers, and another will contain cactus wren nests.

This series was, in part, inspired by the many cactus wrens on James's ranch. These clever birds scavenge all kinds of materials to weave into their nests, including feathers from other species, grasses, cloth scraps, and paper, such as English and Spanish newspapers and old maps. James has even found bits of her cotton rag and small squares of cut cloth in the nests. "If only we humans could share and utilize our resources this way," she says.

A creator of many public art projects and a former art therapist, James works hard to stay out of the political fray with her work. "Politics can be so polarizing," she explains. "I'm always looking for the common ground in which we can all meet, the universal language." Yet, finding it impossible to remain unmoved by the violence and inhumanity of so many political decisions, she takes a stand through her art, touching viewers far deeper than any legislation or decree.

This fall, James has curated a group exhibit at Tucson's El Ojito Springs Center for Creativity. Titled "The Heart's Path; Border Art and Artifacts from the Migrant Trail," the show is the first-ever joint Latino and Anglo exhibition of its kind and features the work of ten local artists. It will be on display until December 31, 2007.

Learn more about Valarie James and Las Madres Project at her web site, www.lasmadresproject.org. ❀

Barbara Stahura is a freelance writer in Tucson. Her articles and essays have been published in Newsweek Online, Science of Mind, Spirituality & Health, and elsewhere.



Artifacts from the migrant trail:

OCTILLO ROSE: Ace bandages found on the desert, hand dyed with cochineal, wrapped around thorny ocotillo, painted with rose madder encaustic



BORDADO CROWNED: Found bordado embroidery sampler, safety pins, and a crochet doily attached to a spindle made from a mesquite branch. Box crowned with found spools of thread, each with lone needles.



CICERON: Spanish word puzzle book baked by the sun, filled with anagrams and quotes by Voltaire, and Ciceron including in Spanish, "To continue learning; this is the true food of the soul." Hidden among the pages of the book are the remains of a rattlesnake commonly encountered by migrants on the desert. Empty food can sealed with rose madder encaustic.



STEEP PRICE OF ADMISSION: Knotted rope and empty "product of Mexico" burlap bags used to transport bales of marijuana. Found under mesquite trees along with a bandana printed with U.S. bills. Sealed with encaustic.



CONVERGENCE: Cactus wrens, the desert's great recyclers, gather everything they can find to build their abodes. Here one finds woven into their nests shredded clothing left on the desert, torn ace bandages, newspaper clippings in English, and scraps of Mexican airline tickets.