

Victoria Martinez Highlights the Energy of Urban Sites Through Pattern, Color, and Site-Specificity

Olivia Clanton speaks to Victoria Martinez about the undiscovered value of urban environments through a deep consideration and investigation of the re-purposed materials used in her site-specific installations.



21st Place Mural, repeated revelations by Victoria Martinez. Image Courtesy of the Artist

Victoria Martinez brings attention to urban environments that are often overlooked through vibrant fiber installations, that create moments of chance interaction with forgotten architecture in Chicago. Martinez's process begins with her own discovery and collection of unique, discarded objects. These objects are material for large compositions realized through collaging, stitch-work, printmaking, and painting techniques. The materials respond to their new environment and inspire reflective moments on the relationship between place, personal experiences with forgotten urban landscapes, and the undiscovered stories they are holding inside. Martinez has exhibited at Northwestern University,

Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago Cultural Center, the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, and Chicago Artists Coalition. Upcoming projects include group exhibitions at the National Museum of Mexican Art, Heaven Gallery, and the Franklin in Chicago.



Between Movements by Victoria Martinez. Image courtesy of the Artist

OLIVIA CLANTON: The materials further the narrative of their installation site. They tell the story of the space, and symbolically, they help us imagine how its residue can be used for its future, and how its history is necessary to understanding it. Once it all comes together, what is the relationship between the materials you use in your work and the space you install in?

VM: The materials that I utilize in my site-specific projects are from local establishments, thrift stores, or variety shops in close proximity of the artwork. At times, since I've created a relationship with certain people in the Pilsen community, where I grew up in Chicago, some of these materials are also gifts. I use vibrant textiles and soft, household items that relate to the spaces I work within order to channel the inspiration granted from my neighborhood. I take many walks in Pilsen to study patterns that exist on the concrete walls, glass, and advertisements. For me, it's also exciting to combine this kind of stimulation with my personal writing and poetry along with past travels to Latin America. These are observations and studies of pattern and mark making that make it into my projects through combining paint with fabric and other two-dimensional found materials. I thoughtfully collage and stitch these objects together, remembering the things I've learned from the urban environment and I try to deliver works of art that potentially allow the audience to experience pleasant remembrances that are reminiscent of the everyday magic I find.



Untitled by Victoria Martinez Image courtesy of the Artist

OC: How do you use fiber and collaging processes to create visual narratives and what do these visual narratives mean to the history its installed site? How do your processes and your chosen materials lend itself to the interruptions you create for others?

VM: In terms of the weaving I have created in the past, I incorporate materials including grocery store plastic bags that say "Thank You", vibrant yarn, strips of patterns I painted on plastic tablecloth, which was inspired by nature, and scraps of my thrift store purchased shorts. The weaving I'm referring to is sacred to me because the materials relate to my beliefs of highlighting community spaces, moments of mystery, intuition, and desire of learning about textile methods and history that inspires me to produce art. I also recently visited Peru where I practiced weaving and dyeing techniques in the Sacred Valley this past summer. I brought back the yarn wool that I dyed with flower and herbs and plan on creating site-specific projects with the material.

OC: Thinking about the presence and roles of murals in Chicago, how is your work informed by this? What connection exists between the objects you are using to the disruption you create in public spaces?

VM: Some of my inspiration relates to Pilsen murals and graffiti because of its history, organic forms, enticing color pallets, celebratory energy, and monumental scale. Although fibers and public art are different media, I flirt with the idea that they coexist and work poetically together. Fabric is a universal material that works well in most spaces and is a significant resource in society.

I don't see my artwork as an interruption. My artwork is an extension of the emotions associated with memories related to the sites I respond to. Therefore, I buy materials near the spaces I choose. I value soft and two-dimensional materials, which are accessible and adaptable. These allow me to build dimension by stitching them together, often ending up with a lot of texture and reminding me of the past histories I am honoring. My projects are fragments of skin; raw in memory, nostalgia, and with the attempt of preserving my reasons for being an artist. I work with domestic and feminine items that relate to my Mexican identity because I love to explore and conserve the beauty of my culture and how significant it is to society.



Untitled by Victoria Martinez Image courtesy of the Artist

OC: At times your work involves collaborating with people who live near the spaces you create interventions for. In what ways do you involve participants in the gathering of materials and the making process?

VM: Recently, I worked on a collaborative project titled “Traveling Minds,” with Benito Juarez Community Academy youth, their art teacher Ms. Paulina Camacho, two elementary schools in the Pilsen community, a youth center, and a group of mothers from the high school. We created an 8-foot by 20-foot outdoor fiber installation at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago. I joined Ms. Camacho’s class as a Visiting Artist and together, as a collective, we practiced fiber techniques including weaving, sewing, and embroidery. One way I approached material selection in this project included surveying the group of high school youth about what type of colors and materials they believed best represented them and their community. I wanted the participants to deeply connect to the work and I believed that a series of conversations about materials would make it a vibrant experience. When it comes to making work independently for the public, I carefully study the colors and patterns that exist in and on the urban environment. It’s one of my favorite things as an artist because I see this process as a way for me to authentically respond to and create work for accessible sites in the neighborhood.

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