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Lotion in your lungs

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Lotion in your lungs

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art in Sculpture + Extended Media
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Raul De Lara
MFA in Sculpture + Extended Media 2019

Matt King: Chair of Sculpture + Extended Media Department
Gregory Volk: Thesis Reader, Faculty

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Abstract

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By Raul De Lara, MFA in Sculpture + Extended Media

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019.

Major Director: Matt King, Chair of Sculpture + Extended Media Department

Gregory Volk: Thesis Reader

This is a document explaining in detail my artistic practice from childhood to the day I graduated VCU. It will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already felt such ways, or similar ways – words and ghosts are mostly invisible.



"Sad" - 2017

Intro

The first teeth to come out of my mouth were my top canines. They became my first tool, and the first way of expressing myself with the outside world without having to use verbal communication. Learning how to use my hands as tools happened early in life. My parents still have clay figures from when I was a baby. At some point in my early life, both my family and the nuns at school realized I was left handed and had speech impediments. I stuttered most of my words, and could not roll my r's so that

cancelled out half of Spanish for me. I come from a family that believes in ghosts, luck and bingo. The nuns at catholic school would beat me with a ruler every morning for being left-handed, I kinda liked it. I am still left-handed. As a kid, I would write backwards from right to left and reverse letters. I would always wonder what these people were seeing or not seeing even in my native language, and why that kind of communication was punished.

After immigrating to the United States as a kid, I picked up freestyle BMX as my tool for communication. I ended up being sponsored and competing for many years. I did not speak, read or write English when we arrived, yet my bicycle gave me a liberating escape from the awkwardness of not being on the same page as anyone around me. My bike didn't ask questions or worry about what my mouth could do. I mainly remember the way my bicycle, wooden ramps, and I communicated. By blending my body with my bicycle, I conversed with skate parks through mute solid actions. I became attuned to silent dialogues, actively translating the foreign language each new ramp's inner life possessed. Letting our presence linger with one another broke language barriers – synchronized swing dancing.

During graduate school, I came to realize that I prefer and excel much better at long-term muscle memory than word-based memory. Neither English or Spanish as my first language. Ludwig Wittgenstein has written that what can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must remain silent. I prefer: What can be said at all can be said clearly; whereof one cannot speak thereof one must act silent. This thesis paper goes into detail on the ways I use long-term muscle memory, silent dialogue, and material as a way of making sculpture that unites us, not divides us.

DACA

In 2012, Barack Obama announced his executive order to establish the Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals program, DACA. This program is an American immigration policy that allows some individuals with unlawful presence in the USA after being brought to the country as children to receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation and become eligible for a work permit in the United States. This program does not provide a path towards citizenship or permanent residency. To be eligible for this program, a person needs to be free of felonies or serious misdemeanors on their records, speak English, and have attended / be currently enrolled in higher education programs.

Luckily that year, during my junior year of undergraduate studies at The University of Texas at Austin, I was able to apply for DACA. This was a big and frightening decision because if I was not accepted, I was now on the path to deportation. Not only was I exposing my body, but the bodies of my entire family since they are undocumented, and in order to apply to DACA, I needed to provide their information as well.

Collectively we decided that in order for me to have a better future in the USA, and a chance at pursuing my dreams as an artist, I needed to apply. During my first week of graduate school, I was welcomed with the news that the Trump Administration decided to end DACA.

What now? What was I supposed to do now knowing that my time in the USA might come to an abrupt end at the beginning of my MFA? The only way I knew how to respond to this situation was to channel all of this energy into my sculptures. It was then that I realized that my life in limbo in the USA had so much content that needed to be translated through my studio practice. During my time at VCU, I went through an intense process of layering myself from the expectations that I thought were put on me by being labeled with the DACA, Mexican, and Immigrant stamp on my forehead. I came to realize that making the kind of work that is expected from those labels would only perpetuate the expectations from such labels. I gave myself the mission of making

artwork that would not only challenge how my situation is perceived in this country, but also challenge, change, and reroute the visual, emotional, and conceptual frameworks assumed from these labels. A new perspective for a new world. I would no longer play the part of making artwork as a Mexican immigrant to an American audience, but rather, create artwork from the position of a human member of a new society moving towards a world without solid or imaginary borders.

As a “DACA Dreamer” and artist, I face the paradox of making public my art practice while simultaneously having to manage not being found by the wrong people. Today, many other immigrants have an invisible, limiting life due to the ever pressing and destabilizing fear of being found. My artistic practice started in Mexico at my dad’s old woodshop. My father was a practicing architect in Mexico, and my mother an interior designer. Back then there was a pride and joy both in the act of making within the studio, and the act of publicly sharing with the outside world. We abruptly left the country for reasons I will not disclose here. Since 2005 when my family and I immigrated to the United States, that pride and joy has shifted into strategic production behind closed doors. We were no longer the face behind the objects we made. Seeing how my family slowly lost their identity as makers left me at a place where I would have to choose between standing up with my work, or turning my back on it and hiding from the world in a dusty woodshop hoping for a change in my legal status. I chose to stand with my work.

With the woodworking foundation from my dad’s old woodshop, I have worked both legally and illegally around the country with many transient immigrants. One always says goodbye when leaving the woodshop because we never know if we will see each other again tomorrow. Almost none of them had a driver’s license but everyone drove on a daily basis to and from home. Some of these people make pieces that have the hope of being seen out in the public world while keeping the maker’s identity hidden within the walls of illicit workshops. These people have taught me a world of technical skills, respect for the material, and unique rituals from old generations that I keep alive now through my making. I use wood to narrate my story and that of many who can’t. I

came to graduate school to use these technical skills not as a way to make self-referential technical work, but rather, to spend my two years discovering and developing a lifestyle that propels forward my aesthetics, concepts, and technical possibilities. Stories of immigration, humor as a tool, adaptability, lost rituals, home comfort and furniture nostalgia are explored in my practice. For my thesis exhibition, all of my work is precariously balanced to make palpable for the audience the deep instability immigrant households experience in this country. The room is filled with the four seasons happening all at once to make the point that this problem is year round.



"Self- Portrait / DACA" – 2018

Invasive Species

Due to my inability to travel outside the country under DACA, I became interested in making work that could be a part of the outside world away from needing certain legal documents to travel. Work that is not stuck somewhere due to the way it looks, or where it comes from. How could I make art that I could vicariously travel through? How could I make it feel free and at ease with its own body, and then take the shape of its new destination? I wanted to make work that could easily be packed, shipped and installed anywhere by anyone, and while being the same parts, it could take the spirit of the new place where it resides.

My strong source of inspiration for this kind of work came from a conversation I had years ago with a scientist at a residency in Michigan. He was researching the invasive plant species inhabiting the area. I asked him: "How long does it take for a plant to no longer be invasive?" He said: "Well, that's the funny part. It depends who you talk to and their agenda. Plants tend to be considered invasive not based on whether they are native to the land or not, but rather, whether they are negatively affecting property value". He went on to explain that some plants have different effects on the land, some desirable, others not so much. His answer struck me as a direct metaphor for how my life has been treated in this country! Immigrants and other oppressed groups of people have to either take the shape of the space they inhabit, or rebel against it and make up their own shape. I needed to make work that would act, look, and behave like an invasive species. The work needed to adapt to the direct environment it lived in, and have an agency of its own. A sculpture that looked different every time you saw it.

I have been working with leaves as a theme in my work, but it wasn't until graduate school that I was able to take these leaves into a very new direction. This is when the "Invasive Species" series was born. I hand-carved hundreds of threaded rods and

nuts, large leaf-like forms out of boards of red oak that I brought from my home in Texas. Each nut and threaded rod were slowly carved to a form that resembles the same finish as metal nuts/rods. They are smooth to the touch, strong, and hold a radial symmetry. I created a sculpture that its final form strictly depended on the shape of the place where it was displayed, the person who installed it, and the natural elements surrounding it. This large sculpture when taken apart fits inside of a carry-on backpack. This new mode of making was a very special moment for me as I was able to see my work in places where I could not physically, and legally be present. At one point, I Skyped with a friend in London and got to see through my laptop screen my sculpture being installed. During my two years at VCU, I installed this piece in the lobby of the Fine Arts Building, the Wynwood district in Miami Beach, and the Nevada desert for Burning Man. Modularity and adaptability are now part of my making philosophy.



“Invasive Species” – 2018 (Miami)



"Invasive Species" – 2017 (Richmond)



"Invasive Species" - 2018 (Burning Man)

Sand

The invasive species artwork led me to dig deeper into the ground. I became interested in the idea of using sculptures to depict the idea of feeling at home and what that even means. If these invasive species were now taking over a new space, I wondered if that new place could be considered their home. I have never truly felt that Mexico or the United States are my home as they both seem so brittle, hazy and mutable. Not being able to visit Mexico, only remembering it through images and stories, the USA being a ticking time bomb for me, it all simply does not lend me a stable foundation to build up from. The material that seemed the most appropriate to share that feeling through was sand. The idea of touching land, touching a seashore, traveling through the desert, all of these ideas live within my use of sand. These places can act as entrances or exit points, depending on which direction you are facing. Thinking about the sands in the Mexico/US border as limbo spaces, I decided to create work that is focused on malleability as the fundamental principle for feeling at home, rather than a solid foundation.

During the summer between my first and second year, I took a trip to the closest place I could legally go to within the USA and Mexico. I ended up in Big Bend National Park in Texas. In this landscape I created “DACA / Self-Portrait”—a photograph of a sculpture the size of my body when I entered the USA in 2005 standing in the US desert with Mexican mountains as the background. This piece looks like a kid wearing white socks, standing still and being covered with a shiny silk camo fabric. At the bottom edge of the camo where the inner body is exposed, you can see a Mexican poncho coming out from within. I used shiny camo fabric to represent how DACA recipients tend to visually blend in with society yet never truly disappear. I also sourced Mexican sand to use later for sculptures by swimming across the river onto the Mexico side. I have never felt comfortable thinking of myself as being from Mexico, from the United States, or thinking about the self being “from” somewhere.

Thinking of home not as a place, but as a changing state of mind, I imagined how fragile and malleable a sand castle is, and similarly, how the idea of a home can be. To visually express this idea, I made works out of sand using symbols of interior spaces: A chair, a set of curtains and a space heater. The sand curtains, “Welcome”, look like a normal set of wavy curtains except that these are rock solid, and have the texture and smell of sand. They are stiff to the wind, and do not blow like normal fabric curtains. The sand chair, “Home”, is made out of a wooden skeleton, with a familiar scale and geometry of a common chair. This chair is then covered completely with sand and leans on its back legs as one front leg balances on the tip of a leaf. The leaf was carved out of a solid block of pine to the thinnest possible material. I use all kinds of hand-tools and power-tools to end up with such a fragile object. This wooden leaf is painted to look like a real green leaf that has been touched by water. If this leaf dries up and dies, the weight of the chair will come down on it making both the leaf and the sand chair crumble.

Furniture has always been an interest of mine because it creates the aura of a room and affects our psyche. Back when I lived in Chicago, my room was the only one in the house without heating. During the -45 Fahrenheit days, I would walk into my room before going to bed to turn on my space heater. This little guy saved me from the cold, yet it only brought up my room’s temperature to about 38 degrees. Warmth became a special feeling, mainly psychological, that I associated with being at home thanks to this space heater. The sand space heater, “Warmth”, that I made during graduate school is a little different. This one doesn’t not warm up the room, but it is balancing on four leaves as the base. The sculpture weighs about 50 lbs. and it truly surprised me to see how its own weight does not crush the fragile wooden leaves holding it up. I made this space heater out of solid chunks of pine, sand, and MDF. The process of adhering the sand to the object is similar to flocking, and involves water mixed in glue. The little leaves are made out of red pine because of its vertical strength. Once the entire piece is dry, the texture becomes very rigid, rough like sandpaper, and dry. Again, I imagine this moment as that of the home.

I see furniture as the silent roommates we all have, and as they change over time, so does the ever-changing feeling of calling a place home.



"Home" - 2017



"Warmth" - 2017



“Welcome” – 2017



"Lotion in your lungs" - 2019



"Soft Mesquite" – 2019

Rituals

My parents raised me through ghost stories, teaching me how to read the future from a coffee cup, and trusting luck playing bingo to pay bills when the money was short. Picturing my mother crossing her fingers under the table at bingo hoping to win in order to pay rent is a vision I deeply treasure. Looking through my family's ritual history became the last key for developing my voice during graduate school. We have a ritual, physical gesture, or unique ways of attracting luck to enact for almost any occasion and every holiday. As a family, we have lived our time in America in limbo as we have never known when it can be our last day here, or when we can go visit Mexico. Not having papers has opened up a lifestyle for us where we believe in the supernatural as natural, and the invisible as visible. Something about an inner foundation seems way more effective and appealing for me than a concrete, exterior one. The following short stories come from this mindset.



"She's so tired" – 2019

The Ghost of Pepe / Inflatable tombstone

There are many conceptual and formal reasons why I made this sculpture look this way, but I am not discussing those in this document. I will simply say that the tombstone part is made out of pink insulation foam covered with concrete then sealed. I originally casted this shape in solid concrete, but the surface results looked unmatched to my vision, and the weight of it was horrible. The base is made out of the same red oak from my parents Texas house. This story begins already closer to the end than the beginning. The beginning is me making this sculpture and getting stolen, my furniture job in Chicago, and Pepe the carpenter ghost. He haunted me while I worked at a furniture shop in Chicago, and tried killing me for five consecutive days during my first week at the job. Long story short, we became friends, and he stopped harassing me.

The part of the story I will focus on is about the ritual I performed on March 20th, 2019. On this day, I would be contacting an old ghost friend, asking him if he would like to live inside one of my sculptures. For his sake, I framed it more like a timeshare, than a home purchase. I only wanted him to activate the piece at will, not by force. In order to perform this ritual, I needed to reflect the moonlight onto my face to open up the portal to speak with Pepe. You can only talk to this kind of ghost during a full moon, no other phase works. I knew that the only way he would speak to me is if I brought him cocaine and tequila. Finding tequila was not the problem as much as it was finding cocaine in this town. I spoke with a handful of trusted friends about acquiring such powders, but everyone said it was too short notice for them to help me. Class started at 6pm, and I still did not have the two offerings for Pepe. I started to lose faith in being able to find the offerings to perform the ritual during that full moon. This class went from 6-9pm, and around 8:45pm, a friend who I can't disclose here called me. I could feel what this call was about so I gently grabbed my bag, and walked out of class without saying a word. I knew that saying I was about to go pick up cocaine and tequila was not an excuse my professor would be down with, or maybe he would.

Only having fifteen minutes before the liquor store closed, I ran as fast as I could. I quickly realized that the sky was completely clouded over, and heavy rain was on the way. The tequila was purchased, and I now found myself inside my friend's car not sure of where she was driving me. I didn't ask any questions since I knew we both believed in ghosts. We end up at a building I have never before noticed in Richmond, and from a high window, a pouch containing a key was thrown down at us. I will skip this part of the story as this person prefers to remain out of it. Long story short, I now had the two things I needed, except a clear view of the full moon.

I started to check the radar on my phone, and saw that I could drive towards Staunton to find a clear sky. The sculpture was loaded in my back seat, and we hit I-64 around 11pm. We drove for about two hours before any stars were visible. I kept anxiously looking around for the moon, but could not see it. All of a sudden, a bright, glowing cloud appeared on my left rear side, and I realized I was looking for the moon at the wrong place the entire time. I was so excited about seeing the moon that I tried to reflect the moonlight onto my face while driving. I almost crashed, so I decided to pull over as soon as there was a chance to do so.

For better or worse, I found myself parked at a rest stop off the highway sitting on my car's tailgate holding onto a fake tombstone. In one hand I was holding a mirror, and on the other I was holding a gram of cocaine and a bottle of tequila. I was that guy. I started the ritual by opening up Pepe's tequila bottle, my bottle and having a drink. After a few drinks, I went ahead and poured the cocaine onto the palm of my hand, and blew it at the tombstone. He loved it. We talked that night, and the rest is history. I am still not sure what was achieved at this rest area, but one thing is certain, he is in my studio right now.



"Inflatable Tombstone / Ghost of Pepe" - 2019

The Zompantle

Masks are a big part of my home country's history, and part of my personal artistic history. In Mexico, we believe that a mask isn't simply a costume or a character to personify, but a soul that you become while wearing one. I have made some masks in my life, but never one like the one I made for thesis. While thinking through the possibilities of my last thesis sculpture, I knew that I wanted it to have a mask of some kind. I didn't want to simply get any kind of wood and make whatever shape came to mind. I wanted to dig much deeper than the visible surface.

I started researching ways in which wooden masks historically are made in Mexico, and I found a fantastic book. The book is called Mexican Masks, by Donald Bush Cordry. It was a strange coincidence to stumble upon this book since UT Austin is where I went to undergraduate school. Cordry traveled on horse through México from 1910-1960 with the mission of recording and preserving old mask woodworking traditions fading away due to the Spanish conquest and capitalism. The author recorded hundreds of groups from all regions and states, and went as far as documenting the types of wood, glue, paint, rituals, technical skills, public uses and care of these wooden masks. There isn't another book like it.

As I was reading through the skull masks section, the author mentions a ritual that my mother performed during an eclipse the day before I was born. On that day, she tied a red ribbon around her pregnant belly and hung a US coin on it. This was supposed to prevent me from being rejected from her womb, and coming out dead or with bad luck. It also functioned as a way of charging me with all kinds of positive vibes and faiths. This ritual has been haunting me my whole life as my mother always reminds me that it is because of this ritual that I am so lucky, amongst other personal things. Whether this is true or not, I am not discussing here. What I am focusing on is the red ribbon part of the story.

The book shares that some mask makers use a red ribbon, based on this eclipse/ribbon/coin ritual, when making skull-shaped masks. A red ribbon is used to tie the mask to the head specifically for skull masks when they are made out of a wood called Zompantle. This tree is used for making wooden skull-shaped masks because it is believed that this tree holds immortal qualities. A dry branch can be planted and grow roots. Any size of branch or part of this tree can be used to grow another. This tree is also special because it creates a red hallucinogenic bean that mask makers would ingest to experience desired visuals while making their masks. The uses of this red bean, called *Tz ite* go as far as recorded history. The Mayans believed that this bean and wood were used to create humankind. Nowadays the beans are used for a fortune-telling ritual that is not known besides by some living Mayan shamans, and members of that highly exclusive community.

I was so overwhelmed when I found out about the red ribbon use, and the Zompantle wood. I needed to find some of it to use for my mask. Much energy was spent searching through lumber websites, eBay and obscure woodworking websites but none of them had any leads. I turned to Mexico for help. I started calling dozens of lumberyards throughout Mexico asking about this special wood. None of them had any, and I was also informed by an old man that this type of wood isn't commercially available anywhere. He seemed to know about the Zompantle tree, and its uses in mask making communities. I shared with him my plan, yet he said that the only way to get some of that wood is by going out into the areas where it lives and harvesting it myself.

My next move was to call my father. I told him what I was doing and what I needed. He told me that he has an old friend who lives on a ranch in the mountains of the area where that type of tree can be found. My father called his friend who, with some ridiculous luck, had just cut down one of those trees. He said that the tree was cut down because it grew right through a barbed wire fence and there was an issue with the other landowner on who would take care of that. He sent us images of the tree, and it had literally grown over the barbed wire fence! I couldn't believe that I was seeing

this magical tree through my phone screen. One of my aunts was flying to Austin, TX where my parents live, and I asked her if she could have the guy ship the wood to her then fly here with it. She was down with the idea, and she even was able to find me the red beans from the Zompantle tree. She said she found them in a market dedicated to alternative healers and witches. The person selling the beans was hesitant at first to sell them to her because these beans, if used incorrectly, can kill a person. While being charged with alkaloids that create hallucinations, they are also very toxic and can cause paralysis or death.

Many phone calls, texts and emails later, my aunt called to tell me that the package had arrived. She was in disbelief because it arrived during the five minutes she stood outside her house waiting for the taxi to get to the airport after missing the first taxi. All I could say was GO! That same day, I was also flying to Austin to see my family. All of these strangely choreographed events were too surreal to question, and too real to believe. My aunt kept me updated with WhatsApp images of the journey with the beans and the wood. She sent me an image of the box going through security in the Mexican airport. It went through and it all seemed to be flawless. As soon as she landed in Texas, she called me. She was so freaked out.

None of us knew what was really inside that cardboard box except the guy who sent it to my aunt. When TSA opened the box, all hell broke loose. The guy had sent a rough, dusty, spider-filled chunk of wood. It looked so wrong, and illegal in every way. Security freaked out and took the wood from her! She fought and tried to explain that this wood was artwork, and that it was a very special chunk of wood. The security person was furious, and even went as far as yelling at her for trying to bring in wood that has not been treated for bugs, etc. We were all so disappointed for losing the wood after so much trouble, but I was also extremely happy to find out that the beans had made it. They totally looked like some sketchy drug-like product since they were wrapped up in small plastic baggies. I now had the beans, knew the ritual to follow to make the mask, but needed to get the wood into the USA at any cost.

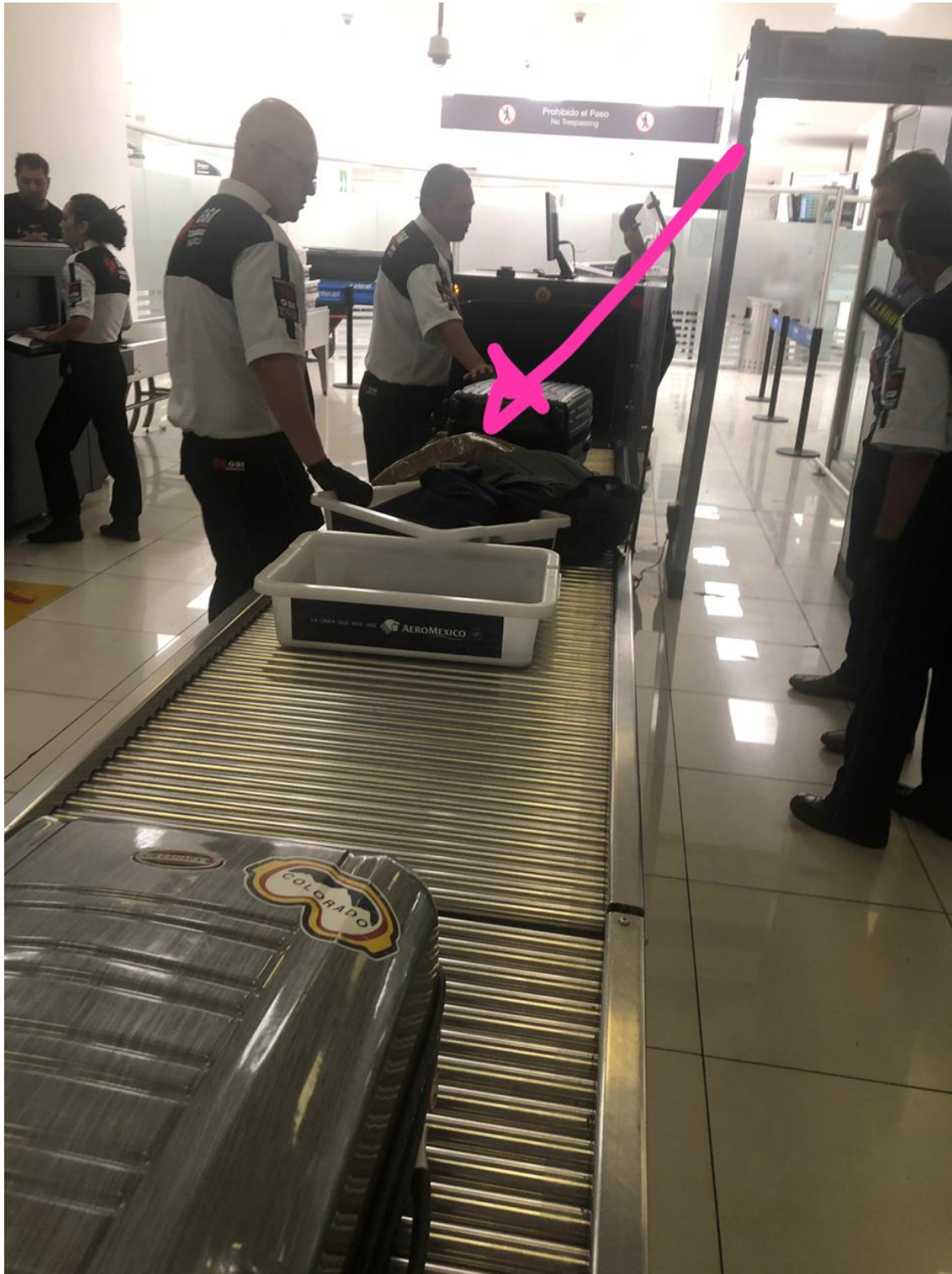
My father contacted his friend again, but this time I had a different plan. I told him to please use a chainsaw and cut a perfect rectangle out of the tree. Sand the wood to be smooth in all edges, then paint the entire surface of the wood with paint. The final touch was to paint on the surface of the wood this sentence: “Live, Love, Laugh”. This ridiculous form of art had to do the trick. I could already imagine the security checking the box opening it and saying “oh yeah, I have one of these in my kitchen” and then letting it go through. Well, it worked! As I write this, I have the piece of wood in my studio here in Richmond. The ritual took place in my studio on April 19th, 2019. That day, there was a full moon, a tornado warning, and a heavy storm that hit Richmond.











Zompantle package at the Mexican airport.



“Zompantle” - 2019



“Zompantle” (Close-Up) - 2019

Vita

Raul De Lara Guasco was born on August 18, 1991, in Culiacan, Sinaloa, Mexico and immigrated to the United States in 2005 - DACA recipient since 2012. He graduated from Vista Ridge High school, Cedar Park, Texas in 2009. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art from The University of Texas at Austin in 2015 and subsequently was a fellow at Ox-Bow School of Art and Artists Residency. After Ox-Bow, He moved to Chicago and co-founded the artist commune Fat City Arts, was awarded the Chicago Artist Coalition HATCH Residency, worked with Nick Cave as his full-time studio assistant, and worked at Barron Custom Furniture before starting his MFA in 2017. He received his Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture + Extended Media from Virginia Commonwealth University in May 2019. Once De Lara leaves VCU, he will start the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown Fellowship for 2019-2020.