2020

The Program

Aaron Douglas Estrada
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd

Part of the Art Education Commons, Art Practice Commons, Creative Writing Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Law Commons, Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons, and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

© The Author

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6331

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
The Program

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

By Aaron Douglas Estrada
BA, University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Thesis Reader:
Gregory Volk

Committee Advisors:
Kendall Buster
Guadalupe Maravilla

Additional Advisors:
Veladoras

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2020
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank all my loved ones y todo los ancestros.
Thank you for all the support. Gracias por todo lo agradecido.
Much love and shout out to DOWNTOWN PICO UNION and ARLINGTON HEIGHTS!
Learned many lessons from the places and people I call home.
LOS SCANDALOUS. LOS ANGELES. LOST ANGELS.
To the ones that are no longer physically here but with us in spirit...
Forever in our hearts
Rest easy.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writings, Thoughts, Prayers, and Offerings to The Program</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artwork Information</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

In my work, I explore the engineering of identity and socioeconomics that are programed into Black and Brown communities. I refer to this as “The Program”. The Program validates, breaks, codes, and critiques the system that divided us. The Program is identifying with the struggle of growing up in a system that is programmed to see you fail. So if you get caught up in that system it’s a natural death within the program. But you can break and make your own program. If you stick to the program.

The paper's use of language is coded. Text has been written in English, Spanish, and Spanglish. It includes Black and Brown American colloquialisms, Ebonics from the United States, Caliche slang from El Salvador, Chicano American slang Caló, and other Central American dichos, shibboleths, dichos y movidas.
WRITINGS, THOUGHTS, PRAYERS, and OFFERINGS to THE PROGRAM

“The Program” is a growing ethnographic archive that begins to address the complex histories of Black and Brown bodies, landscape subjugations, and knowledge of self through the concept of social engineering. The archive contains rituals, residue, life, death, pain, joy, music, and achievements from Black and Brown bodies that have systemically undergone the hardships of the program. This program examines how disenfranchised demographics are subject to systemic racism and colonial turmoil. The specific locations I document are Downtown Los Angeles, Pico Union, Arlington Heights, South Central and the Eastside neighborhoods of Los Angeles. I have grown up, fought, cried, and lived in these locations. These areas are filled with multifaceted cultural signifiers: territorial symbols, tags, altars, shrines, murals, and other esoteric residue that contain a layered history. I am documenting these moments of erasure as a way to store memories. My intent is to honor but also question. Catholic ritual, Indigenous traditions Mayan/Aztec, Santeria, and Santa Muerte influence me. I use the framework of the aforementioned practices to create self-prescribed rituals. I am representing and changing icons, signs, and symbols that are associated with Indigenous, Black, and Brown/Latinx cultures. I am interested in conversations about the diaspora, decolonization, and daily life. I want to question the archetypes/stereotypes applied to Black and Brown bodies. I want to document landscape subjugations due to socioeconomic disparities such as unemployment, education, and income. I want the viewer to become a part of the work through their physical presence, position, opposition, or self-recognition.

The visual display of this program consists of chandelier/candelabra webs made from chains, hand-painted subwoofer music boxes that contain bouncing beans, lighters, videos, audio clips, and wheels made from hubcaps and razor wire. The program also contains drop cloth paintings made from enamel spray paint, bandanas, house paint, rubber bands, barbed wire, stickers, shoe prints, personal mementos, and found objects.

The paintings refer to cartography, indigenous textiles, Pendleton’s, dichos, the body, and semiotics. For example, I include shoe prints in my paintings because of the history each shoe has.

- Nike Cortez- Hernán Cortés/Spanish colonization and Los Angeles gang culture
- Reebok Classics- Britain’s colonization and Los Angeles culture
- Converse All Stars- reference to Los Angeles culture

I am combining found hubcaps and razor/concertina wire in order to create wheels. The concept of the wheel has been a major cornerstone in our society. The wheel has revolutionized the way bodies move, the way we live, and how we perceive time. The wheel has given us infinite possibilities. The wheels I am making function as a reference to migration, self-maintenance, the prison industrial complex, and moments of play. Typically, razor/concertina wire is used to keep bodies away but can also contain bodies like the ones held at detention camps and prisons. The razor/concertina wire I use has been sourced from California Youth Authority camps, California prisons/jails, the United States/Mexican border, and everyday businesses located in Los Angeles, California. Keep
in mind because this is a growing ethnographic archive I also include material from other cities and countries. The program is not solely a Cali thing. The hubcaps are usually salvaged from highways, streets, and random encounters. Over time, the documentation of this program has led family and friends to giving me hubcaps that they have found. I also archive these gifts to the program.

Conversations around the stereotypes/archetype people of color experience can be seen in “Shooting Star” and “Baby I’ma Star”. In these works, I paint black and brown color gradients on hubcaps that have been gifted to me. “Shooting Star” is enacting what the materials were originally programed to do. The chains are wrapped around the wheel in order hold it in place. The program is to keep it from moving. If the chains were gone the wheel could roll. However, the wheel still tries to roll even though it is constrained to the floor. There is beauty in this… it becomes a shooting star. While in “Baby I’ma Star”, the razor wire, hubcap, and chains function in a similar manner but also begin to defy the material to greater lengths. “Baby I’ma Star” floats in space. The chains are no longer constraining movement; instead they are used to lift the wheel in space.

The music boxes are intended to function as veladoras. They contain prayers, memories, music, stickers, and offerings. The music boxes are hand-painted and adorned with personal mementos such as bottle caps, lighters, beans, rice, amuletos, and drawings. They are activated through music and touch. The tops of the music boxes are filled with beans or other food staples. They contain black beans, red beans, and coffee beans that bounce on top of mercado bags, bandanas, and buena onda. They feed the veladoras. They are also reminiscent of going to el mercado as a kid and submerging your hands inside of the bean and rice containers because the touch and sound felt good. I am interested in the physical sensation of sound. Growing up cars would pass the road bumping rolas with heavy bass. Bass so heavy that at times the words could seem inaudible but if you know you know. Casi como, waking up to hearing your neighbor playing the same song over and over but you don’t mind because it’s your favorite. The music boxes play cumbias, oldies, bachata, corridos, r&b, hip-hop, jazz, funk, rock en español, reggaeton, soul, disco, boracheras, classicas, gangsta rap, and baladas romanticos.

For example, in “I Been Tryna Make It Out (Growing Pains)” I am incorporating childhood memories from the places I call home. I incorporate the songs and sounds I heard both waking up and going to sleeping. From “La Vida Es Un Carnaval” by Celia Cruz playing at 7:00 am to my mom tryna vacuum at 11:00 pm. I want the sounds to touch you. Each song has been selected based on a memory, feeling, or message the song evokes. The songs are layered with a heavy bass that may seem like “just noise” but its more than that. If you know you know que no but if you don’t you don’t. This may seem harsh to those that don’t but it’s all we got. It has been coded for those who have lived a shared experience. When I interact with the music boxes I like to tap a heartbeat into them. Depending on how I am feeling I then place the audio cables to my body; transferring my energy makes the beans bounce even more. In this process, some make it out only to realize they have fallen to the floor to either be picked up and planted or crushed because they’ve been stepped on.

I am also interested in the light that shines on and radiates from these materials. The light is a representation of life. A life lived. A life lost. A life gained. They represent the physical and emotional labor in which these materials are used. They are extension cords containing
currents of energy. I include lighters, multicolor light bulbs, work lights, and LED light strips. The light is also referential to the Sun and Moon. The Sun is represented through orange and blue for the Moon. The lighters contain drinking alcohol, water, gas, air, and spit. The work lights function under a similar manner. You can be near the work lights and feel their warmth. You can also stand in front of the work lights and hurt your eyes. Equally, that energy is present in the chain webs I install. They can aid you in how you maneuver through space but they can also trap you.

The chandelier/candelabra webs are created with a welded chain base and free-flowing chains. Each webs is different but their conversations can overlap. Some webs are about the school to prison pipeline system, family life, love, death, and the everyday. The webs represent both personal and communal aspects of life. The personal webs are usually hung indoors while the communal webs are outdoors. The webs are used for protection and release. The indoor webs contain dichos, movidas, graduation tassels, mini hubcaps that have fallen off of luggage bags, notes, bottles of mezcal, salt, vinegar, el ojo, shoes, rosaries, and other material that is personal to me. The outdoor webs start with a welded web chain base surrounded by razor/concertina wire and barded wire. They are usually installed where razor wire is present. I activate the webs by leaving a personal momento a pair of shoes, lighters, or beaded/string curtains. I also include material from the neighborhood. The chains, string, razor/concertina wire, and shadows that emanate from these materials are intended to function as pathways for discussions. Over time, members from the community begin to add their own items by throwing them into the web.

When I am making my work I partake in rituals, some cultural and some self-prescribed. The rituals include alcohol, smoke, sounds, light, cuentos and music. Each sculpture and painting can be activated. However, only certain people are allowed to touch and activate them. Each work has a life of its own. They are individuals with their own personality; however, when together they become a family. They are able to live and stand alone but can also come together to create a diverse familial space. They become stars and planets within this program’s space. Through these rituals I activate sensorial space: touch, sound, smell, taste, sight, vestibular, and proprioception. I am voicing narratives in order to physically place a body within the space I make.
Dis/placement

Walking down my street I saw...

For Rent
For Rent Increase
For Rent, Now Lease

Change

Spaces where I use to navigate ain’t the same
How do you navigate through socioeconomic displacement?

Use to label me guilty by association
But to navigate gotta have associations

Program
Where You From?

I’m from a place in LA
Where growing up all we heard was...

Where you from?

Slowing growing up, gotta move up

Where you from?

Unfamiliar faces get pressed...

Where you from?

Simple question slaying bodies cause of

Where you from...

Different place, same question, different stories...

Where are you from?

Learn to find some beauty in it all
Cause in the end all bodies fall
Summers

Not really good with numbers
Survived a couple summers
I’m scared to say I made it
Sad cause I haven’t yet
Another statistic
Don’t, complicit

Grew up seeing 17 killa bees
Close proximity
Turn the corner
See where the bEST be
Go down
Turn anotha corner towards K-town
Salvatrucha
Keep trucha
Cause there’s other neighborhoods

Psycho city rolling stoned through los scandalous streets
Lil homies turn 13
Never claimed a set so I stayed rolling thru
I’mma ‘bout my money honey
You can try to test me but the Gods blessed me
Cause I got no enemies
Quick to bless you with the piece
I don’t politic

Don’t you ever try to hold me back
Cause I’ve been doubted and dubbed dumb
But the mirror was done on them
Cause them don’t really know ‘bout the codes

If you know
You know
Whoop whoop
That’s the sound of the police
Que Lastima

To the enemies that wanna see me up against a wall
They wanna see me fall but I leave ‘em in grimace.

Have you in silent ride, with your family driving behind...

Que lastima

Shoulda know better
Cause I been praying to the living and dead

LA fitted blue what you gonna do
LA always reppin’ boo
Have your family with the boo hoo’s

Que lastima

Shoulda know better
You ain’t scary to me
I’mma lover not a fighter
But I’m ready go

Yadadadmean?
Guess I’mma Clown

Putting a smile to keep me from frowning
I guess I’m okay...

Don’t wanna be sad
But tears from a clown is how I be downing

Deserve all the pain
Until it subsides
I’ll just keep on smiling
Hunger

Plata o plomo
Tambien el oro
Me vale madre
Por que siempre como
Lomo saltado
Al cada lado
Siempre estoy así
Mala vibras
Si extian
Pero Ella esta con me
Fast Life

Tryna live a long life, not a fast one

That’s life
¿Qué Más?
Desvergue, Pero Con Buena Onda
Paño de Lágrimas y Alegria
Shooting Star
Baby I’mma Star
Baby I’mma Star
Mira
Up Against The Wall, They Wanna See Me Fall
No Seas Payaso
No Seas Payaso
Corrido
Corrido
I Been Tryna Make It Out (Growing Pains)
I Been Tryna Make It Out (Growing Pains)
I Been Tryna Make It Out (Growing Pains)
Keep Shining, Por Vida
Keep Shining, Por Vida
Keep Shining, Por Vida
Keep Shining, Por Vida
Dolor de Muela
Don’t Get Caught Up
Aguas
Respaldo
Everybody Got Dirt
Installation view of The Program
Installation view of The Program
Installation view of The Program
Don't Get Caught Up
Don't Get Caught Up
Installation view of The Program
Installation view of The Program
Installation view of The Program
Dolor de Muela
Whoop! Whoop!
¡Échale Ganas!
¡Échale Ganas!
Installation view of The Program
Cuerpo Still Growing
ARTWORK INFORMATION

Title: LA 503
Date: 2018
Measurement: 16 in x 20 in
Material: acrylic, enamel spray paint, pumice, pastels, image transfer, mezcal, spit, and smoke on drop cloth

Title: 1519
Date: 2018
Measurement: 16 in x 20 in
Material: acrylic, enamel spray paint, pumice, pastels, image transfer, spit, red wine and smoke on drop cloth

Title: ¿Qué Más?
Date: 2020
Measurements: 4 ft x 3 ft
Material: jade charm, dirt, monkeys in a barrel, baby blue mini lighter, monkeys in a barrel, baby blue satin string, mini hubcap, red plastic string, yellow nylon string, marañon seed, ojo, mezcal, enamel spray paint, prismacolor, neon green bandana, north gate market bag, watch, reebok classics shoe print, smoke, spit, chains and smudge stick on drop cloth

Title: Sigale (TMC)
Date: 2019
Measurements: 4 ft x 3 ft
Material: acrylic, enamel spray paint, India ink, masking tape, string, cement, blue paliacates, and smudge stick on drop cloth

Title: Desvergue, Pero Con Buena Onda
Date: 2020
Measurement: 4ft x 3ft
Material: two gold drops, niños from día de los reyes rosca, red paliacate, dirt, roofing nails, dulce, scapular, smiley face, raw mini lighter, fire, El Salvador heart key chain, red plastic string, yellow nylon string, ojo, mezcal, enamel spray paint, prismacolor, north gate market bag, converse chuck taylor shoe print, slow burn zig zags, smoke, lil goody bag, spit, sacred heart pendant, razor wire and smudge stick on drop cloth

Title: Paño de Lágrimas y Alegría
Date: 2020
Measurements: 20 in x 16 in
Material: frijoles, brown bandana, mezcal con gusano, salt, enamel spray paint, pumice, aluminum foil, dirt, charcoal, spit, water, and smoke on drop cloth

Title: Shooting Star
Date: 2019
Measurement: 5ft x 3ft x 4ft
Material: razor wire, chain, smoke, enamel spray paint, and hubcap
Title: Baby I’mma Star  
Date: 2019  
Measurement: 5ft x 3ft x 4ft  
Material: razor wire, chain, smoke, enamel spray paint, and hubcap

Title: Mira  
Date: 2019  
Measurements: dimensions vary  
Materials: razor wire, wire spoke hubcap, mirror, smoke and smudge stick

Title: Sacred Heart  
Date: 2019  
Measurements: 20in x 15in x 20in  
Materials: bandana, string, wire spoke hubcap, razor wire, and smudge stick

Title: Up Against the Wall, They Wanna See Me Fall  
Date: 2019  
Measurements: 5ft x 2ft x 5ft  
Materials: razor wire, wire spoke hubcap, mirror, smoke and smudge stick

Title: No Seas Payaso  
Date: 2020  
Measurements: 15 in x 15 in x 20 in  
Material: razor wire, beads, mirror, tik tack aguardiente keychain, white kitty key, rubber bands, bullet hole stickers, bolt cutter pendant, white bandana, black leather, smoke, tequila, little trees black ice air freshener, and clown sticker.

Title: Corrido  
Date: 2020  
Measurement: 15 in x 15 in x 20 in  
Material: Razor wire, brown leather, bottle opener, hearts, broken hearts, beads, camouflage lighter, blue bandana, red paliacates, tequila, pocket hair comb, coin, mirror, spoke hubcap, star, and smudge stick

Title: I Been Tryna Make It Out (Growing Pains)  
Date: 2019  
Measurements: 30in x 25in x 25in  
Materials: music playlist, beans, subwoofer, wood, bandana, string, rosary, cement, mercado bag, ojo, and smudge stick

Title: Keep Shining, Por Vida  
Date: 2020  
Measurements: 30in x 25in x 25in  
Material: music, coffee beans meant for café de olla, ojo, rosary, black beans, two red beans, Victoria bottle cap, mezcal bottle cap wrappers, smile now/cry later mask, black/white beads, wood, mercado bag, red bandana, enamel spray paint, subwoofer, red clear made in china lighters filled with mezcal, water, air, and gas, ruca roses, stickers, enamel marker, buena onda, smoke, mezcal, besos, veladoras, space, and time
Title: Dolor de Muela
Date: 2020
Measurement: 2ft x 2ft x 2ft
Material: chain, salt, vinegar, water, peppermint candy, wood dice, El Salvador flag key, chain, barded wire, weed joint, wisdom teeth, small packet of tajin, tequila, lighter, and slow burn zig zag papers

Title: Don’t Get Caught Up
Date: 2019
Measurement: dimensions vary
Material: steel, plastic, work lamps, and “Dream Big” stuffed plush heart

Title: Aguas
Date: 2020
Measurement: dimensions vary
Material: water, chain, plastic bag, smoke, and red string

Title: Respaldo
Date: 2020
Measurement: dimensions vary
Material: smoke, lighter, razor wire, red string, and yellow string

Title: Everybody Got Dirt
Date: 2019
Measurement: dimensions vary
Material: adhesive pads and foot prints from Errrrrrrrbody’s dirt

Title: Whoop! Whoop!
Date: 2019
Measurements: dimensions vary
Material: crown victoria hubcap, razor wire, blue cop light hue, work light, and extension cord

Title: ¡Échale Ganas!
Date: 2020
Measurements: 16 ft x 3ft x 7ft
Material: hammock from El Salvador stolen from my family’s home, razor wire, hubcaps, chain, and smoke

Title: Cuerpo Still Growing
Date: 1994-Ongoing
Measurements: dimensions vary
Material: smile now/cry later masks from Oaxaca, grinder, marañon seed, harmonica I stole when I was six regifted to me by my brother, veladoras, monkey skull pipe, my father’s OG cologne, strings, mercado bags, black beans, coffee beans, small El Salvadorian flag I found during Central American Independence day parade of 2016, dog teeth, my mother’s teeth, golden heart pendant, red heart pendant, tamarindo Jarritos glass bottles, speakers, coconut shell, blue Los Angeles Dodger hat, alpaca pipe from Peru, skull pipe from Oaxaca, shoe strings, ojo, woven black cincho, monkeys in a barrel, candle wax, tears, and music
VITA

Aaron Douglas Estrada was born on July 11, 1994, in Los Angeles, California. He graduated from Ramon C. Cortines High School of Visual and Performing Arts in Los Angeles, California. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Art from University of California, Los Angeles in 2016. He received a Master of Arts in Sculpture + Extended Media from Virginia Commonwealth University.