

BURQUE **UNITE**

GERALD LOVATO







Catalogue published to accompany the exhibition, *Burque Unite*, a University of New Mexico Honors Thesis exhibition and community healing event on October 29, 2022, at the Orpheum Community Hub in Albuquerque, New Mexico, featuring the work of Gerald Lovato.

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BURQUE

*In April of 1880, the railroad reached la Villa de Alburquerque in New Mexico.
Legend says the Anglo stationmaster couldn't pronounce the first 'r' in "Albur," so
he dropped it as he painted the station sign for the city.*

Rudolfo Anaya, *Alburquerque*, 1992

ARTIST FORWARD

This exhibition saved my life. Let me explain, every semester of my academic journey at the University of New Mexico (UNM), I suffered a major tragedy, losing loved ones. I was collapsing in grief, considering dropping out of school and taking my own life. When my application was approved to complete an honors thesis, it softened the blade of devastating losses and gave me hope. I am no stranger to overcoming adversity and know this is what I needed to fuel my fire. Throughout my life, adversity has become the mother of my creativity. Without realizing it, I have used art for healing and spiritual connection since I was a small child. This is the same spiritual connection I had while practicing martial arts, and this body of work exemplifies my transition of healing from martial arts to healing through visual arts.

The world around me influences me, and today the world around me (Albuquerque, New Mexico) is at an all-time high in gun violence, drug addiction, and suicide post-pandemic. Our community needs healing! How can I use my work as a vehicle to inspire community healing?

My approach to this question is to use my UNM honors thesis exhibition as an opportunity for community healing through art. This led to more questions. How can I turn an art show into an event that is not ONLY about the art, but community healing? How can I disguise a body of work that is about losses to give the community an opportunity to experience catharsis? Can we reinterpret how we are connected as a community and create an opportunity to inspire change in new ways and mediums? This exhibition, in its entirety, is a conceptual piece with the goal of designing a safe space for community healing by using my art as a catalyst for creating conversations between youth, adults, and elders. My intention was to use my work as social praxis.

This catalogue contains documentation of the event and a series of essays about this body of work written by artists, curators, and art historians who were in attendance. I thought it was important to include a diverse collection of perspectives to help understand where this work fits in contemporary art.



Figure 1. Photo by Helin Montgomery

ROUND I

ROUND I

by Augustine Romero

Burque is street slang for Albuquerque, New Mexico. *Burque Unite* was an ambitious art event: a pop-up show that combined many of the elements that make up a complete cultural celebration, such as a fiesta or a matanza. The matanza is a New Mexican celebration, usually an all-day event where a pig is cooked over coals. A fiesta is a community event found almost anywhere in the Southwest around religious holidays or any public celebration, a coming together of the people. Other activities at the *Burque Unite* event included a car show, music, food, an art exhibit, performance art, and much more.

Burque Unite was organized and curated by Mr. Gerald Lovato, an artist born and raised in Albuquerque. Mr. Lovato draws on his own experiences and his journey to give voice to marginalized communities' realities by sharing his self-defined 'rite of passage.' A common thread in Mr. Lovato's art is his unapologetic focus on the cultural wealth and strength of his community's embrace of peace, healing, and self-reflection. This counter-narrative is particularly refreshing in a city that exemplifies contradictory realities, including a city that celebrates the privileged where they thrive and are celebrated; at the same time, others must fend for themselves in communities plagued by structural neglect and accompanying drugs, crime, and health disparities.

Growing up in Albuquerque has created some very colorful and inspiring experiences but also offered a tragic and dark side. Finding his own method of survival as a Chicano in a city where crime and drug use are part of your landscape is challenging and difficult to avoid. Stereotyping and race-gender profiling add to the difficulty of surviving and finding peace of mind. Mr. Lovato's journey begins with his own unapologetic embrace of his identity and community through his art in a critical reflection and meditation on his life journey of his Burque experience. *Burque Unite* touched those willing to attend, creating a space for his audience to sample what they wished and reflect on themselves and their community. The community witnessed Mr. Lovato's public transformation from a professional mixed martial arts fighter into a dedicated visual artist.

Mr. Lovato's idea of gifting his art is important because he honors his audience by giving his art rather than selling it. This gifting process is an invitation for the viewer to ponder a relationship based on art that may inspire others to create from within their own home or community. His audience is his own community made up of local heroes. These heroes range from the average working person struggling to put food on the table to family members. The larger community may

not celebrate these heroes, but by gifting his art, they become the cornerstones of family conversations, and the memory and folklore carry on. Art sales sometimes cloud success, but success is the ability and the means to make art, which Mr. Lovato embraces.

Mr. Lovato's enduring ability to face adversity has me drawing parallels to the 1987 novel *Bluebeard* by Kurt Vonnegut[1]. This might be too far fetched, but I had to ponder the sense of survivors syndrome that the main character, Rabo Karabekian, is dealing with. The novel plays on an artist who is writing his own biography. The personal reflection of losses and triumphs and the irony of valued art and the meaning of it, then and now. Karabekian is also trying to find his own peace of mind. What I witnessed in the planning of *Burque Unite* is what happens when artists can't break into an established art world. Learning the main exhibition venues are booked way into the future or don't give you the time of day. Probably the most important experience an artist can have is playing by their own rules.

For example, the city arts and art organizations choose and designate artists as their spokesmen, celebrated heroes, great local muralist, or chosen poet. The poet laureate comes to mind when the laureate becomes the mouthpiece of the city, never criticizing the hand that feeds them. Public art plays the same game of choosing art by consensus. Every artist wants big commissions, solo shows, and their works in a museum, but at what cost? Museums tend to function like the morgues of the past. If your art ends up in a collection, it could possibly be a death sentence for the piece because it may never be exhibited in your lifetime. The 'art crawl' becomes the art flea market, where art is made for 'the sale' and nothing else. In this scenario, art becomes a commodity rather than a reflection of your time and space. If you are an artist, which path do you take? Mr. Lovato counterpunches these aspects by gifting his work and taking an untraveled and potentially transformative path. By resisting neoliberal logic, Mr. Lovato's work intends to disrupt business as usual.

For many artists, art institutions, museums, and galleries are established by individuals who do not share the same lived experiences as the communities that have survived generations of injustice and live in the same geographic location as the museum. You may live down a block from an art institution that excludes you, especially if you are an artist. Imagine artists from marginalized communities that are never permitted to find or have a conversation with the art curator down the block. Imagine the artists from these communities and how they are never allowed to exhibit their work or be celebrated in museums, local galleries, and art spaces. In many ways, our art institutions are the gated communities of the art world, where most of us lack the code to enter the gate.

In the end, the community is excluded and ignored, and our neighborhood is gentrified by the outsider's view of what art is supposed to look like and, more importantly, who it is for. When an art institution excludes you, it sends an unequivocal message: you are not worthy or welcomed. The academic art world mimics the dynamics of the gated community, teaching about the art behind paywalls as well as literal and metaphorical walls. Minoritized artists are forced to grasp a part of art history that seems so foreign. Follow these philosophies, practices, and colonial logic to enter the gated community. The art institutions have a few minoritized students and instructors who offer different lived experiences. The art institutions are the spawning grounds for entry into the gated community of the museum.

Where do we, as artists, aspire to be? The twist here is some of Mr. Lovato's art influences came from a different institution. The prison industrial complex, where a different form of art was created and sent to Mr. Lovato's family, profoundly influenced him as a child. This becomes his source of inspiration. This art form is known as *Paño Art*, usually pen ink on fabric such as handkerchiefs. These works were sent from relatives who were incarcerated. The art reflected the Chicano history and mythology, replete with Chicano icons and stylization similar to tattoo art. The *paños* echoed the street culture of Albuquerque, symbolic of Chicano iconography and the social realism often seen in the Chicano murals of the past. The social symbolism of the Chicano mural is at the heart of symbolic identity and echoes the histories of those who are excluded from the celebration of American History.

The current public space has surrendered to public art control. The new gatekeeper controls the mural's content, keeping it under a deep check since Chicano icons may be too radical for the city-run public art gatekeepers. The communities' histories are being edited and censored. If you comply with the public art guidelines, you get rewarded for selling out and surrendering what is important to you. The new dilemma is who owns the public space. What Mr. Lovato did with *Burque Unite* is deconstructing many of the obstacles that minoritized artists of color experience by creating a place and time relevant to his lived experiences. The event had all the potent content of the Chicano murals of the past but with new freshness celebrating his survival.

Albuquerque has a long history of boxing, mixed martial arts, and visual arts. It was just a matter of time before an artist was born of these convergent passions. Mr. Lovato's paintings are fluid and thoughtful, like a strategic cage fighter warrior. They are also memorials to the ones we lost, the ones who should be celebrated for their efforts of forging through difficult times. The works also shed light on how private our communities are, like a small ecosystem in a larger ecosystem, yet one cannot exist without the other. I watched Mr. Lovato on his journey to exhibit his work encountering a lot of rejections, but like a good fighter, he did not give up. In witnessing the

installation, I saw the full circle of his influences being played out in front of me. I was especially moved by the printed images on silk. I immediately thought of the *pañó* art, a new and elegant response to these individual and collective experiences. The reception did what good art is supposed to do; it created an experience and conversations about who we are and what we are experiencing in sharing our lived experiences. More importantly, we often get confused about the meaning of validation. Art and historical institutions often represent one-sided views of our world. *Burque Unite* offers an alternative. I am looking forward to round two.

Augustine Romero has been a curator for the City of Albuquerque since 2006. Mr. Romero received a BA in graphic design at Colorado State University-Pueblo. He also earned his MFA in sculpture from New York University. His honors include fellowships at Socrates Sculpture Park and the Smithsonian. Romero continues to work as a contemporary artist and curator for local shows at the South Broadway Cultural Center in Albuquerque. Much of his work is exhibited regionally, with many public sculptures and works in private collections.

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Burque Unite, 2022, *Wins Series*, film still



ROUND II

ROUND II

Unite in Sorrow, Hope, and Change

By Alana J. Coates

The Orpheum Community Hub thumped with the surround stereo sound of an ominous heartbeat, intensifying as onlookers waited to see what would happen next. Finally, in white shorts and a teeth guard, artist Gerald Lovato entered the gallery dressed for a fight; the only thing missing were his gloves.

In the center of the room hung a punching bag covered with Lovato's handwriting that covered nearly the entire surface. [Figure 1.] These writings read as a stream-of-consciousness journal, narrating the artist's traumas. The cylindrical shape of the object partly obscured the words, and the tightly packed rows of print reminded me of cuneiform script. Specifically, the ancient stele is known as the Code of Hammurabi, which recorded ideas of justice and punishment as dictated by the god Shamash to the Babylonian King Hammurabi. Lovato's text is not a recorded supernatural narration to man; instead, the text descends from the artist's personal demons, flashbacks, and moments he cannot forget. The punishments are not prescribed by a deity but by the artist's conscience and unhealed wounds.

Gerald Lovato's performance, *The Fight for Change*, which he refers to as "the fight of his life,"[1] anchors *Burque Unite*, his honors thesis exhibition,[2] encapsulating the artwork he created while earning his bachelor of fine arts degree at the University of New Mexico (UNM). In addition to the performance, the exhibition included paintings, photography, sculptures, sound, installation, and a day of public programming.

Burque Unite centers on Lovato's lived experience in Albuquerque, New Mexico, growing up in the International District, often referred to as "the war zone" because of the area's extreme poverty, violent crime, and drug and gang activity. Lovato was raised in a family of addicts, and his life was full of hardships and loss. And after a near-death experience when he was stabbed, he turned to martial arts and became a prized and internationally successful fighter. Fighting was his first way of coping with the mental ills, drugs, and death that surrounded him. Art is his second career and his new avenue for catharsis.

By virtue of the medium, Lovato's *The Fight for Change* recalls the work of contemporary artist Jeffrey Gibson (Choctaw/Cherokee), who, after working through his aggressions with a therapist and physical trainer, made a series of punching bags with highly detailed beadwork—designs that form large, legible text—inspired by Native American fashions.[3] From his experience using physical release for healing, Gibson chose to create something beautiful and culturally specific in its aftermath.

In *The Fight for Change*, Lovato positions himself as both the punisher and the punished, contending with his most formidable opponent—himself. Each swing at the bag splat blood across the gallery, and each blow from his battered fists further obscured the text with blood-soaked marks. Self-harm has been a staple of performance art, as seen in the work of Marina Abramović, Regina José Galindo, José Villalobos, and Cassils, to name a few, with the latter having a direct connection to a physical fight and bodybuilding.[4] The body becomes the medium, like oil, acrylic, or tempera on the canvas. The smashing of flesh and drawing of blood is something that can evoke an immediate empathetic response from the viewer, and the destruction and release of rage are a creative liberation from suffering for the artist.

During the performance, Lovato brought the audience's attention to his painting series titled *Losses*. [Figure 2.] He approached, addressed, and embraced each of the six portraits, hung on the wall in the order of each sitter's passing. Then, he told the story of his loved ones by speaking to them directly. Through listening to these private conversations, audience members heard the names and learned the individual stories of their deaths: suicide, accidental overdose, homicide, gun violence, suicide, and homicide, all occurring between 2009 and 2022. Many people in attendance personally knew those depicted in the series, and nearly the whole room sobbed alongside Lovato. It was a space of collective mourning.



Figure 2. Losses Series, 2021-2022, gallery installation photo by Helin Montgomery

After addressing the succession of paintings, he returned to the bag once more, beating it until it fell to the ground. He then proceeded to annihilate the bag until pulp spilled onto the floor. Finally, Lovato concluded by touching his forehead with bloody fists and then raising his arms into the air as if in a victorious (or crucified) position. [Figure 3.] He won the fight against his past, or at least he was one step closer to healing from his losses.



Figure 3. *Burque Unite, Fight for Change*, 2022, performance film still

It was important for Lovato to draw real blood in *The Fight for Change* as an homage to his ancestral roots.[5] He wanted to connect to ancient concepts of bloodletting and Aztec histories, like in the portrait of his mother in his series *Wins* that portrays her emerging from Cōātlīcue (recognized by the double serpent head). [Figure 4.] The Aztec goddess wore a skirt of snakes (with serpent heads as volutes of blood) and a necklace of human hands and hearts. In Lovato's version, she is displayed with an additional symbol taken from Catholicism, a sacred heart, evoking ideas of blood and sacrifice.

Cōātlīcue birthed Huitzilopochtli, the great warrior known as the Turquoise Prince, whose name also means hummingbird.[6] Like Mother Mary, who birthed Jesus miraculously, Cōātlīcue was

impregnated with Huitzilopochtli by a cluster of feathers. Huitzilopochtli's symbol of the hummingbird is also an iconographic reference for warriors who died in battle. [7] By referencing his mother as Cōātlīcue, Lovato connects himself to Huitzilopochtli.[8]

Throughout Mesoamerica, including the Maya and Olmec cultures, people perceived the hummingbird's long beak as a symbol of blood and war. Scholars Mary Miller and Karl Taube state that "the act of bloodletting was commonly compared to the hummingbird sucking nectar from a flower." [9] And the speed and aggressive nature of the tiny creature may have inspired it as the stand-in for Huitzilopochtli's fierceness as a warrior.[10] For Lovato, the hummingbirds throughout his paintings represent his personal spirit guides, although he likes the ancient connections to bloodletting.[11] In Mesoamerica, bloodletting was performed to talk to the ancestors and gods, and Lovato used blood in his performance as a ritual to speak with the deceased.[12]

Blood is an essential medium for many contemporary artists to call attention to atrocities in communities globally. For example, in *Quién puede borrar las huellas? (Who can Erase té Traces?)*, Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo walked barefoot with her feet dipped in chicken's blood to leave red footprints in protest of a military leader with deep ties to Indigenous genocide who was running for office. We can think of Lovato's blood stains as reminders of those who die each year of mental health-related issues such as drug use, suicide, and gun violence, while those in power do little.

In addition to the performance, the exhibition contained three series of paintings: *Loss*, which the artist interacted with during the performance; *Wins #1*, which includes his immediate family members, the portrait of his mother, and his fighting self-portrait [Figure 5.]; and *Cycles of Addiction*, which includes a self-portrait of the artist as a child. A sound piece was also included, and three separate series of photographs were exhibited: *Community Portrait*, *Wins #2*, and *Guns Down*.

Lovato pays respect to his family through paintings and Burqueños through photography in *Burque Unite*, and his devotion to place is infectious. Although his work addresses the dark issues of suicide, homicide, drug addiction, and mental health, he also highlights the city's positive side: the community, a city with people full of resilience, grit, perseverance, and shared traditions.

The exhibition's photography components included *Community Portrait*, an uplifting and communal installation of black-and-white photos suspended from the ceiling, highlighting survivors and pillars of the local community. In the center hung a boxing glove with a Zia sun, the symbol appropriated by New Mexico from Zia Pueblo, positioned in such a way as to suggest pulling someone up. Lovato's *Wins #1* series captures the artist's gratitude and inspiration to continue the fight: His immediate family is noted, especially his daughter, as his greatest motivation to battle on. *Wins #2* continues the artist's portraits of living family members as larger-than-life-size photo transfers on silk tapestries. The little boy holding a Scooby-Doo toy (Lovato's nephew Johnathan) reminds us all of the urgency of addressing the issues that endanger our youth and our future. *Finally, Guns Down* comprise smaller black-and-white images that recall the consequences of inaction by documenting a gun violence protest that occurred just following the death of Lovato's other nephew (Gabriel) in 2021. Lovato spoke at this rally, and excerpts of this dialogue were used in his sound piece, *New Mexico True*.

Along with the audio recording from the protest, Lovato mixed tourism sound clips into the piece, demonstrating the conflicting and contradictory concepts of place. New Mexico has a complicated multicultural fabric with conflicting historical narratives. The tourism department promotes the state colloquially as the "Land of the Enchantment" for its stunning big skies and desert landscapes. New Mexico is known for the sunsets and red and green chiles; it is also known as the "land of mañana," meaning the land of tomorrow, boasting a laid-back or slower-paced lifestyle. Nevertheless, within this picturesque narrative, New Mexico is also home to the atomic bomb, and the state's largest city is rife with addiction, poverty, and homelessness. [13] Historically, it is the land of the successful Pueblo Revolt. Lovato's work exemplifies the complex "politics of place" and the location's chronicles of mixing the oppressor and the oppressed.

Cycles of Addiction, from 2020, stylistically reflects the artist's Chicano art influences. From 2014 to 2016, Lovato lived in San Diego, where he was largely influenced by the famous murals of Chicano Park, a case for art and activism that concluded with a community win and a mural mecca. Lovato studied painting under Andrea Rushing at the San Diego Art Academy in Barrio Logan. Additionally, during this time, he met and was mentored by Richardo Isalas and Enrique Lugo, aka Chikle. The series includes a depiction of a two-year-old with a larger-than-life personality informed by a photograph of Lovato as a toddler with a bandana around his forehead, a beer in his hands, and a joint in his mouth. [Figure 6.] Lovato painted the image of himself and included his personal iconography, the hummingbird, and another feature found throughout his work, his fight mask, appropriated from the late rapper MF DOOM, shown as a tiny medallion foreshadowing his future as a martial arts fighter.

Other background elements of this painting highlight the location. The child is standing in the middle of the road with classic cars on either side of him. Albuquerque is known for its cruising culture, and Central Avenue is packed with classic cars, special chrome rims, and hydraulic lowriders every weekend. The street signs are visibly Central, and Edith and the license plate reads the iconic Chicano slogan, "*Sí, se Puede*," traditionally translated as "Yes, We Can," implying that it is possible to make a difference in our communities if we are united.

Outside of the gallery, the programming felt like a festival, providing an opportunity for the community to come together. There were Aztec dancers, Mariachi bands, enchiladas, and paletas. The artist even rented a bounce house, noting that many visitors would have children in tow, and it would be best for them to be playing outside during some parts of the programming.

Lovato also gathered together organizations that help address the core issues of his exhibition through resources and other means of support. For example, Bernalillo County offered Narcan (a lifesaving overdose treatment) nasal spray and training, and Serna Solutions, a counseling firm, provided information for helping loved ones who struggle with addiction. Other participants included Crossroads for Women, an organization that helps women transition after incarceration; Token IBIS, a philanthropic organization that aims to help everyone donate to special causes; New Mexico Crusaders for Justice, a group for those affected by gun violence; and Turquoise Lodge Hospital, which focuses on substance abuse treatments and rehabilitation.

With all of the sorrow present, Lovato created space throughout the experience for reverence, and celebration was most apparent in the community *ofrenda*, altars constructed to honor the lives of loved ones in the tradition of *Día de Los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead. Additionally, the community feast, which Lovato classified as a happening and a food-as-art gathering, was the ultimate balance of pain and hopefulness, challenging us, as viewers and community members, to not ignore the problems, to not become overwhelmed and desensitized but instead to come together for our survival.

Alana J. Coates is a curator, educator, and arts professional. She has held director positions in private and academic galleries in Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Texas. As a Ph.D. student at the University of New Mexico, she focuses on contemporary American art with an emphasis on Latinx art, working under Dr. Kency Cornejo. She earned a master's degree in art history from the University of Texas at San Antonio, where she worked under Teresa Eckmann, studying modern and contemporary art of Mexico and art of the borderlands, and studied Chicano art under Malaquías Montoya.

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[1] Author interview with the artist, August 3, 2022.

[2] Orpheum Community Hub, Albuquerque, New Mexico, October 29, 2022. Burque is an affectionate name for Albuquerque, one of the nicknames for the city.

[3] Jeffrey Gibson, "Jeffrey Gibson on the origins of his beaded punching bags," *New York Studio School: Lecture Series Archive*, August 31, 2017. <https://nyss.org/jeffrey-gibson-origins-beaded-punching-bags>.

[4] I am specifically thinking of Cassils' "Becoming an Image."

[5] Author interview with the artist, November 7, 2022.

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Burque Unite, Wins Series, 2022

ROUND III

ROUND III

by Shelby Roberts

I feel unqualified to write about Gerald Lovato's work. His work intimidates me. He intimidates me. He's smart, he remembers more than most, and is strong. He meets challenges with discipline, persistence, and sensitivity. He sees a lot. He exudes energy with perceptible substance. Besides this, I'm not an art historian but a fellow artist and photographer. And I'm a biased writer because Gerald is my friend.

Gerald works with photography, though he also works in a wide variety of mediums and approaches. Photography can often treat our living world as a collection of readymade objects for the photographer's curation. It is treacherously easy to fall into alienation through the medium of photography. Gerald's photographic portraits, however, are rendered delicately on silk, suspended from rafters, and susceptible to subtle winds (such as those created by viewers walking by), and refer to family members and people whose lives are interwoven with Gerald's life. The photographic installation *Wins* borrowed the light which had fallen for a moment on the faces of friends and family and translated this event, not into evidence or a collection of simulated faces but into a gesture of gratitude to the audience the photographer anticipated – often, those pictured. To make the personal relatable is not a simple task, and can be an especially difficult one through the very specific and personal medium of photography.

I was first told, “the personal is the universal,” when I was a freshman studying photography. I couldn't believe it because I was also told never to bring up personal trauma, as it would delegitimize my work. As a freshman, I privately told my professor that five weeks prior, I had witnessed the accidental death of my friend while we were jogging and that I was having trouble finding pleasure in my artistic practice. It didn't make sense to take pictures. My professor started crying, stopped himself, and said, “you need to keep working.” After that meeting, I didn't talk about the accident for years. I navigated the regimented and increasingly absurd world of academic art while periodically weeping in the small film-changing spaces of our institutional darkroom.

Trauma and grief are not often celebrated. They are more often thought of as problems to be solved or secrets to be hidden and labeled private matters. For *Burque Unite*, Gerald brought personal traumas along with interpersonal connections and created an elaborate festival to honor all of it. This social gesture is both generous and self-accepting, unexpected and courageous, strong and unbelievably vulnerable. Gerald has a habit of colliding ideas that are usually set into false binaries, such as grief with celebration and toughness with tears.

At the center of *Burque Unite* was a cathartic spectacle – Gerald fought an impossible public battle against loss. It feels incorrect to call it either performance or improvisation, as it was planned but not scripted. It had a rhythm in addition to the deafening audio projection of an erratic, panicked, expectant heartbeat. Here is the rhythm: punch, drip, kick, cry. Pace. The flesh was in a profound state of flux – the loss of blood, the dripping sweat, the sprays of saliva, the grunts and cries, and the tears falling on the Orpheum floor. Discrete individualism becomes absurd when one considers the fluid exchange of our bodily existence. But at the same time, empathy is illusionistic, and I cannot truly understand Gerald’s experiences, memories, losses, and loves. I specifically think of friends I have lost, of my grief, of my fear, of the family lost to suicide, of my helplessness, of my anger, of the injustices of the city where I am a guest, a place which I have come to love. Gerald’s pain loosens other pain, and I notice that everyone nearby is crying as I am.

What I felt with my whole body was the inescapability of grief. Also, I found myself in a room filled with others who were riding their own wordless pain, and this brought me an incredible sense of communion and connection. We must live with our grief.

I have found it heartening to see artistic endeavors such as Gerald’s affirming that people can create strong work while experiencing profound pain. It suggests that *more* than survival in this sphere is possible. Like friendship, blood, and life, work such as this is a gift.

Shelby Roberts is a visual artist working and living in Stillwater, Oklahoma. She completed her Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at California State University- Long Beach. She has a special interest in waterways, processes of healing, and zine culture. Her work has been exhibited regionally and internationally.



Burque Unite, Danza Aztecas, film still



Burque Unite, Danza Aztecas, film still



Photo by Kailee Pete



Photo by Kailee Pete



Photo by Kailee Pete



Photo by Kailee Pete

ROUND IV

ROUND IV

Artist as Healer

Jen DePaolo

“Let them with eyes see, and they with ears hear.” Jesus, to his disciples

When I walked into the main gallery of Gerald Lovato’s *Burque Unite* honors thesis, my daughter on my hip, my adrenaline jumped. The pounding reverberation of a giant heartbeat sound installation filled the space. A breeze blew among the viewers, setting hanging portraits by the door spinning, causing large silk prints across the gallery to move forward and back. Fresh blood splattered the floor, and viewers ambled reverently around the gallery. Vivid life-sized portraits jumped from the wall into my view, everyone asking for my attention at once. I walked through the exhibition trying to steady myself and allow my feelings while mediating the experience for my three-year-old.

Burque Unite is Art beyond the scope of any thesis. It includes an exhibition of several bodies and disciplines of interrelated work, including A *Dia de Los Muertos* community installation of portraits, ofrendas, flowers, candles, and sugar skulls, *Cycles of Addiction* paintings, *Guns Down* activism documentation, audio works, a live gallery performance, photographs and paintings that comprise Gerald’s *Wins*, intimate portraits that honor his *Losses*, and community photo portraits. The day was centered on a community celebration where people of all ages mingled, enjoyed live music and reveled in the perfectly polished chrome and rich enamel of some beautiful lowriders outside the gallery.

“By writing, I put an order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it.” Gloria E. Anzaldúa

The heart of *Burque Unite* unfolds across life-sized painted and photographed portraits that fill the largest gallery space in the sprawling venue. Gerald’s portraits are intimately narrative in both visual and written language. His subjects are vividly and emotively rendered. Gerald conveys each of their characters: mischievous or innocently playful, warm and full of heart, proud and full of love, young and hungry for life. Gerald’s paintings from the *Wins* and *Loss* series are rich with symbolic detail. Figures glow against dark backdrops; energy swirls from the subjects outward in a golden glow and gold adornment. Butterflies flit about, and hummingbirds dart across the canvas or hover pleadingly, protectively next to the figure at the center of the painting. Aztec deities, skulls, roses, plants, and blood - painted and actual - draw viewers closer, eye to eye with subjects. Some details are full of personal significance, like the metal warrior’s mask that hangs from one portrait. This mask is an alter-ego, bloodline, and protection rendered across paintings

as earrings, medallions, and in utero. The meaning of some details might elude viewers, but nothing is hidden. Gerald writes letters to each of his subjects along all four edges of the stretched canvas. His boxing bag is covered in lines from a recent journal entry, easily legible to any viewer willing to spend some time.

Among Gerald's *Loss* series are depicted two boxing mates, a brother, a sixteen-year-old nephew, his daughter's mother, and a close friend - many within the span of two years and all by tragic, preventable means. Gerald asks viewers to come with him across a liminal threshold and keep company there for a while. Portraits balance mortality and eternity, blessing and curse, rendered and real. These portraits are Gerald's lifeline, conversations with his dearly departed, the rhythm of his grief, and a pathway through devastation.

But nowhere are survival and healing more present than in Gerald's *Wins*, where he depicts his daughter Esperanza. Her face is radiant and serene. So many times, larger than life, she glows from the gallery's center. Tiny paintbrushes alight in her eyes, and a succulent grows outward from her left eye as a symbol of her resilience. Near Esperanza is a portrait of biological family members Gerald met for the first time within this two-year period of extreme loss, where he writes, "Life always seems to give us what we need when we need it." The *Wins* portraits include a series of life-sized black and white silk prints of Gerald's living family members who stare candidly out, surrounded in light, swaying forward and back with subtle movements of air as if breathing. Standing before them, the viewer feels refreshed and revived.

"The only cure I know is a good Ceremony." Leslie Marmon Silko

Gerald began *Burque Unite* with what the contemporary art world would call a performance. Given what Gerald shared about his physical and spiritual preparation for *Fight for Change*, it is more accurate to call it a ceremony that required sacrifice, faith, and a willingness to lay everything bare. One with a purpose beyond any stills that might be saved for posterity. A ceremony meant to heal. Gerald took center stage in the gallery as both martial artist and visual artist and began beating his punching bag until long after his hands began bleeding. The audience fell into silent reverence. As Gerald's hands began to bleed, the facade of performance fell away. Each punch left a bright red mark, not unlike the roses in some of his paintings, until the bag was covered in such a bouquet. Then, still dripping, he walked across the gallery to his lost ones, laying his hands upon them and speaking all that needed to be said. Afterward, he threw one more punch, and the bag flew off the chains. Then he tore the bag open and emptied its contents. The murder of Gerald's 16-year-old nephew, Gabriel, is one of his deepest wounds, notwithstanding the stabbing that almost cost his own life. As Gerald expressed his grief in the gallery, his young nephew Noah, who had lost his big brother Gabriel and his dad, Nathan, found their own release. Weeping alongside his uncle, Noah

experienced his grief as a pathway to healing and witnessed his uncle begin a conversation that has the power to effect real change.

Gerald writes, “how can I create change through artistic interventions? ... I will manifest projects with purpose. I hope to inspire healing and other artists to use their talent to make a positive change.”

Many artists have long practiced integration and intersectionality in their work, often without support from their institutions. These artists follow a calling, not a marketing plan. Partnering art-making, sound, performance art, activism, and community organizing is a fitting reflection of the complexity and interconnectedness of Gerald’s lived experiences. In recent years, “Art as Social Action,” “Artivism,” “Socially Engaged Art,” and “Community Based Art” have gained momentum and found an international stage.¹ These practices are already being codified and commoditized, but it’s not for the artist to worry about what box to check as they work.

I agree with Nina Simone, who famously said, “An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times.” Our time is marked by mental unhealth, addiction, and violence, all of which have seen steep increases in the last few years. In 2020 in NM, the fentanyl-involved death rate was seven times the rate in 2016.² The medical industry has a well-documented history of neglecting and abusing patients for-profit and prescribing opioids to patients with mental illness while neglecting to prescribe anti-depressants and therapy. “In 2015-16, more than two million U.S. adults had an OUD. According to [the National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#), 62% of them had a co-occurring mental illness, and 24% had a serious mental illness. However, only 24% and 29.6% of them reported receiving treatment for their conditions.”³ In New Mexico, the number of gun-related child deaths increased by 45% between 2010 and 2019. Based on the [National Instant Criminal Background Check System \(NCIS\)](#), an estimated 114,354 guns have been sold in New Mexico since the beginning of 2022.⁴ The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) also reported that New Mexico’s rate of “firearm-related deaths across all ages, including children, placed the state fourth in the nation in 2019, the latest year for which a ranking is available”.⁵

We hear statistics so regularly that it’s easy to become callous to what these numbers mean. *Burque Unite* makes the real meaning of this data visible and poignant, a literal reflection of our time and of those we’ve tragically and unnecessarily lost. *Fight for Change* was an act of release, and it opened the floodgates of a conversation that needed to be had. In the days following *Burque Unite*, where several hundred people were in attendance, Gerald received message after message from people who connected to Gerald’s work and experiences. They shared stories of their own losses and hopes for their own healing. As is often the case when something of this magnitude connects with our communities, the response can be overwhelming. The artist has recently decided to step away from social media for the time being. As Audre Lorde said, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence; it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” Here too, Gerald is modeling a pathway toward healing and wholeness.

Gerald takes his artistic duty seriously and carries it further. He aims not only to reflect on his times but to change them and to heal himself and others in the process. Gerald identifies Martial Arts and Art Making as two pathways by which he's survived and healed from trauma. Gerald is also a gifted organizer: his ability to weave together an interdisciplinary and immersive art exhibition in collaboration is a pathway by which he helps to heal his community.

Gerald weaves his lived experiences, martial arts, artmaking, relationship building, therapy, and activism together in *Burque Unite*. He has dedicated his talent and time to surviving, healing, and helping to heal ~ *Burque Unite* bears witness to this effort and its impact. His persistence in living with integrity and wholeness, whatever the cost, is surely a road map to follow. And it's important to remember that change is possible. For example, in response to the rise in gun sales and deaths caused by firearms, the state has adopted "new laws expanding background check requirements and allowing guns to be seized from individuals deemed to pose a threat to themselves or others."⁶ When we grieve in community, we learn we are not alone, and that itself is part of the healing. Likewise, when we see individual lives honored, we remember that we are connected and that we must heal and act as one.

Jen DePaolo is an artist and organizer in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She grew up in a working-class family in Buffalo, NY, and earned a Liberal Arts Degree in Art and Writing from Houghton College. Jen later moved to Albuquerque to pursue an MFA in sculpture at the University of New Mexico, where she also began a lifelong study of race, class, and gender in the US. Jen pursues justice and healing through her studio practice, education efforts, outreach work, and collaborative events and projects. Jen has exhibited and published Nationally, and you can learn more about her work at jenndepaolo.com

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Burque Unite, Fight for Change, film still

ROUND V

ROUND V

Bloody Knuckles

by Manuel Gonzalez

Fighting memories
Punching the pain
The loss
The heartache
The tragedy of it all
Portraits of the people
The people who held our hearts
The ghosts who still haunt our dreams
Tears in the paint
Sweat on the canvass
Blood on the portraits
Friends and family
Lost
To addiction
To suicide
To gun violence
To mental illness
Leaving us to pick up what's left
Of our shattered hearts
Catharsis comes from the creation of art
The art that comes from our shared grief
Different mediums to express our pain
Collapsing into that puddle of emotion as a community

The artist is one but
the art is all of us!

Together we experience the shock of violence
The punch to the gut that steals our breath
Heart beats so loud it rings in our soul
Right hook to the resentment
Jab to the shame
An uppercut to the hatred
Breath and blood
With power and determination

Each strike cathartic
Releasing the long-held pain
Blood on the canvass
The Bag swings back defiantly
Cries of grief and loss
Unanswered questions
There is no reason why
Fighting against the opponent in our soul
This type of healing takes courage
Processing our trauma like this takes strength
Art ignites the fire inside of us to burn away
Everything that holds us back
Pushing through the barriers of self-hatred
Self-doubt
Loneliness in our suffering
Blood dripping on the floor
Is a sacrifice
The penance we pay

With every punch, the blood gets thicker
Until the last punch to bring down the roof
Drop the bag
So, it can be torn open and
Its guts spilled out onto the floor
Defeated adversary

Together as community
We heal in this way
Shared emotion
Deep breath exhaled
Mixed with tears
Familia and friends
There for us to lean on
Community coming together to mourn
And cry
And hug
And eat
And talk
And dance

And heal
Long lost family
And forgotten friends
Supporting and creating cultura
Art being the catalyst
Manifestation of different mediums
Silk tapestries and ambient sobs
Moving through the trauma
Release and recover

Listen...
The art speaks unexpectedly
Telling us that in order to change the world
We have to first change ourselves
Creating a movement
Ollin Mexica
An opportunity
A conversation
Inspiration
A safe place
A place where our bloody knuckles can be
Wrapped and covered
So they can heal
Leaving us the beautiful scars
So, we never forget
The blood spilled
The tears shed
The fulfillment of our ancestors' dreams

We dance
A community
Burque Soul, Burque sol
Coming together for healing
Humanity
Family
Bound together by trauma
Catharsis
And blood

...THEY WOULD DIE IN BATTLE. MYER SPENT SOME TIME BACK AS AN
...THIS EXISTENCE IS RELIEF AND CLOSE BE THE EAST COAST
...EVERYTHING IN THE SHOW HAS FIGHT IN IT. I HAVE COVERED
...ESSENCE AND VIBES IN MY PRESS. I AM ABLE TO LOOK
...IT IS HEALING. MY WEARINESS IN MY PRESS. I AM ABLE TO LOOK
...MY WEARINESS IN MY PRESS. I AM ABLE TO LOOK
...PEOPLE TO JUDGE ME BY MY APPEARANCE. I KNOW
...OF MY BODY LANGUAGE. I HAVE BEEN TOLD MYSELF
...PEOPLE THE MORE I DO IT THE BETTER I GET. IN JUNE
...THE CRAZY THING IS I DIDNT KNOW HOW TO AS GOING
...HAVE FAITH IN MY ALIGNMENT WITH GOD. FOR THIS
...EVERYONE CONTRIBUTED AND LENDED HAND
...AM LIVING MY DESTINY. EVERY DECISION I HAVE MADE
...THE LOVED ONES WHO REMIND ME OF WHO I AM
...BELIEVE WE BEEN FRIENDS SINCE WE WERE
...IT BECAUSE I THOUGHT THE WORLD WOULD NOT
...HE HAD A POETIC DEATH. HE DIED PROTECTING HIS
...WOULD BE OUTSIDE HIS BARBERSHOP
...I WAS WAITING FOR HIM. SHE WAS LOST WITHOUT HIM
...AT US AND FLEW OFF. I LIKE TO THINK THAT
...RELA'S ROSE AND ADDED A BLUE HUMANOID
...SH) WITH A ZIA SYMBOL BELOW AND A THUNDER
...PUT ON THIS EVENT. I WAS SO SCARED OF
...LIFE TAKING RISK. A LOT OF TIME
...NON TRADITIONAL MY FEELING, BUT
...THIS IS NON TRADITIONAL. MY WORKING
...WHAT IM MAKING WORK. I HAVE LEARNED
...CONVERSATIONS WITH ME. I HAVE
...BE SLEEP BEPONENT. EVERYTHING ABOUT
...FIGHTS BECAUSE REALITY. AS I REFLECT...
...BECAUSE IT REMINDS ME OF THE STRENGTH
...THROUGH GET MY HISTORY. THE STRENGTH
...WHO WAS SIGMUND. THE STRENGTH
...TO GIVE SIGMUND. THE STRENGTH
...IN MY AT RISK. THE STRENGTH
...A SPAN OF TIME. THE STRENGTH
...WORLD. THE STRENGTH
...OTHERS. THE STRENGTH
...NEW. THE STRENGTH
...LIFE. THE STRENGTH
...LOST.

ROUND VI

ROUND VI

Burque Unite: The Artwork

Gerald Lovato

My work aims to break the stigma around behavioral health, and posits as a reminder that change, recovery, and violence prevention are possible. My intentions are to create a safe space for community interaction and healing.

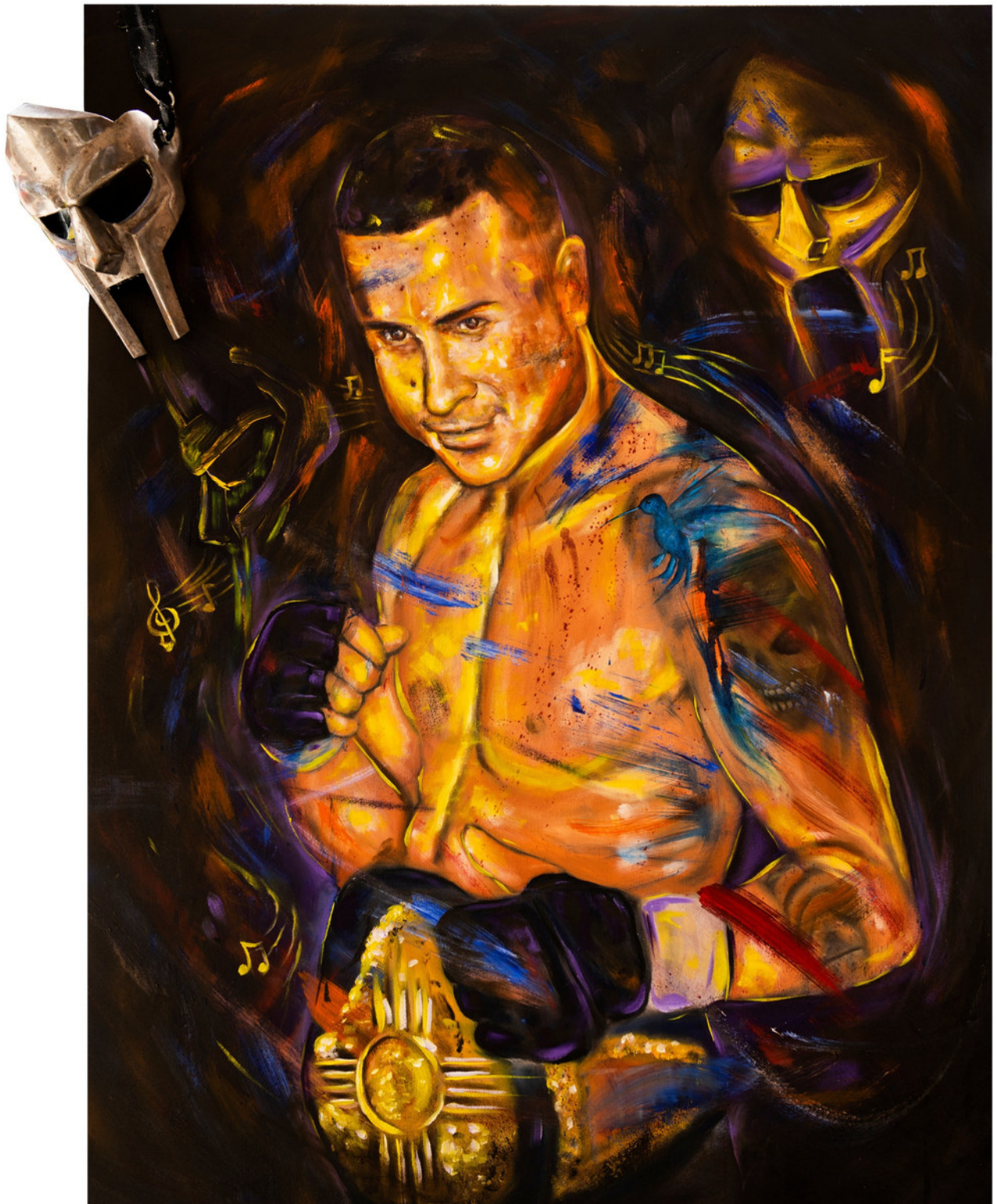




Wins Series, detail photo by Helin Montgomery

Losses Series
2021- 2022, oil on canvas

I made these portraits of loved ones I have lost recently to honor them. The process of painting allowed me to process my emotions as I worked with the materials to have healing inner-conversations with the subjects as I struck the canvas with the paintbrush experiencing catharsis. Making these helped me to gain closure.



Mikey, Losses Series, 2022, oil on canvas, 48" x 36"



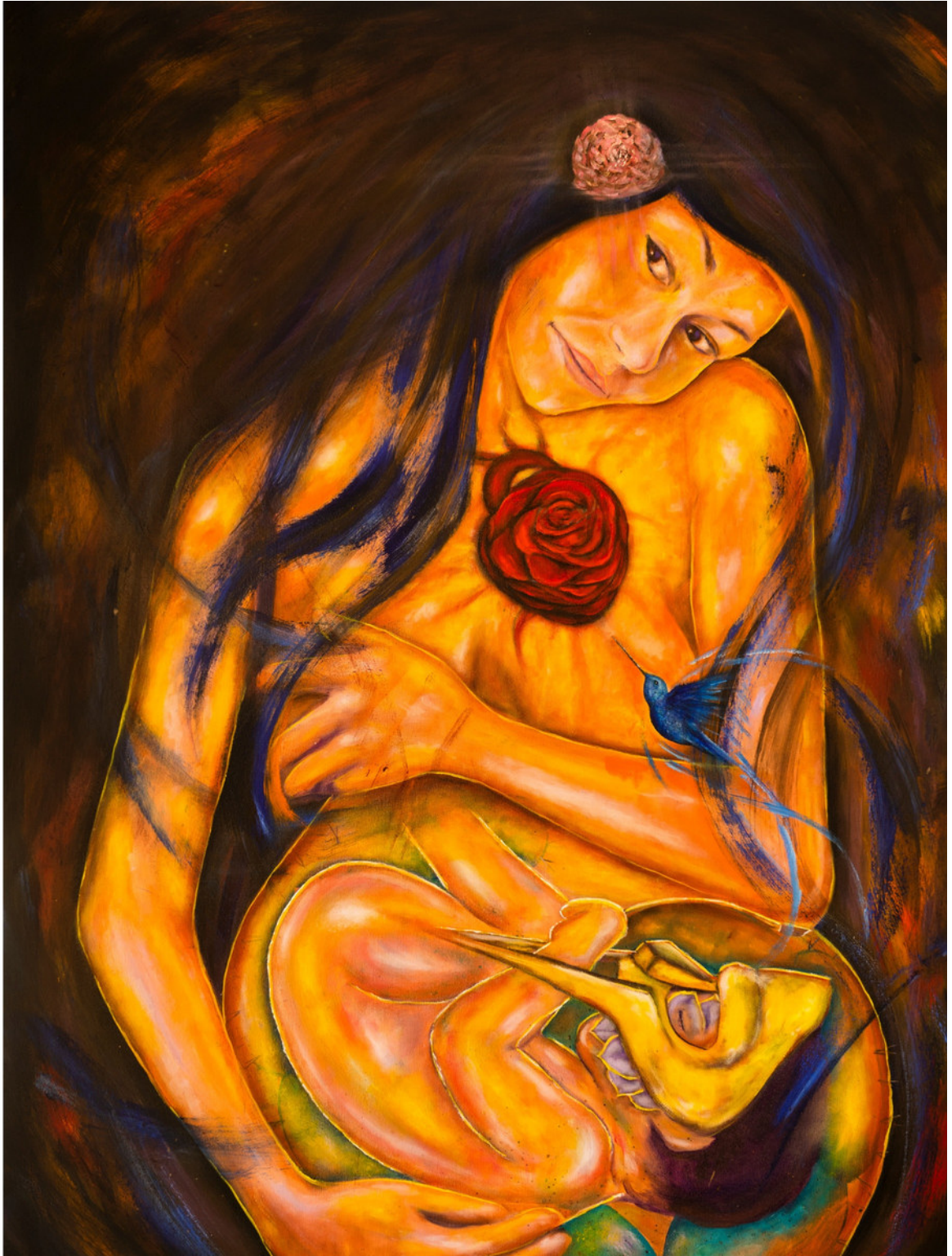
Nate, Losses Series, 2022, oil on canvas, 48" x 36"



Natedogg, Losses Series, 2022, oil on canvas, 48" x 36"



Gabriel, Losses Series, 2022, oil on canvas, 48" x 36"



Seed of Joy, Losses Series, 2022, oil on canvas, 48" x 36"



Barelas Rose, Losses Series, 2022, oil on canvas, 48" x 36"





Losses Series, gallery installation photo by Helin Montgomery

Wins Series #1
2021- 2022, oil on canvas

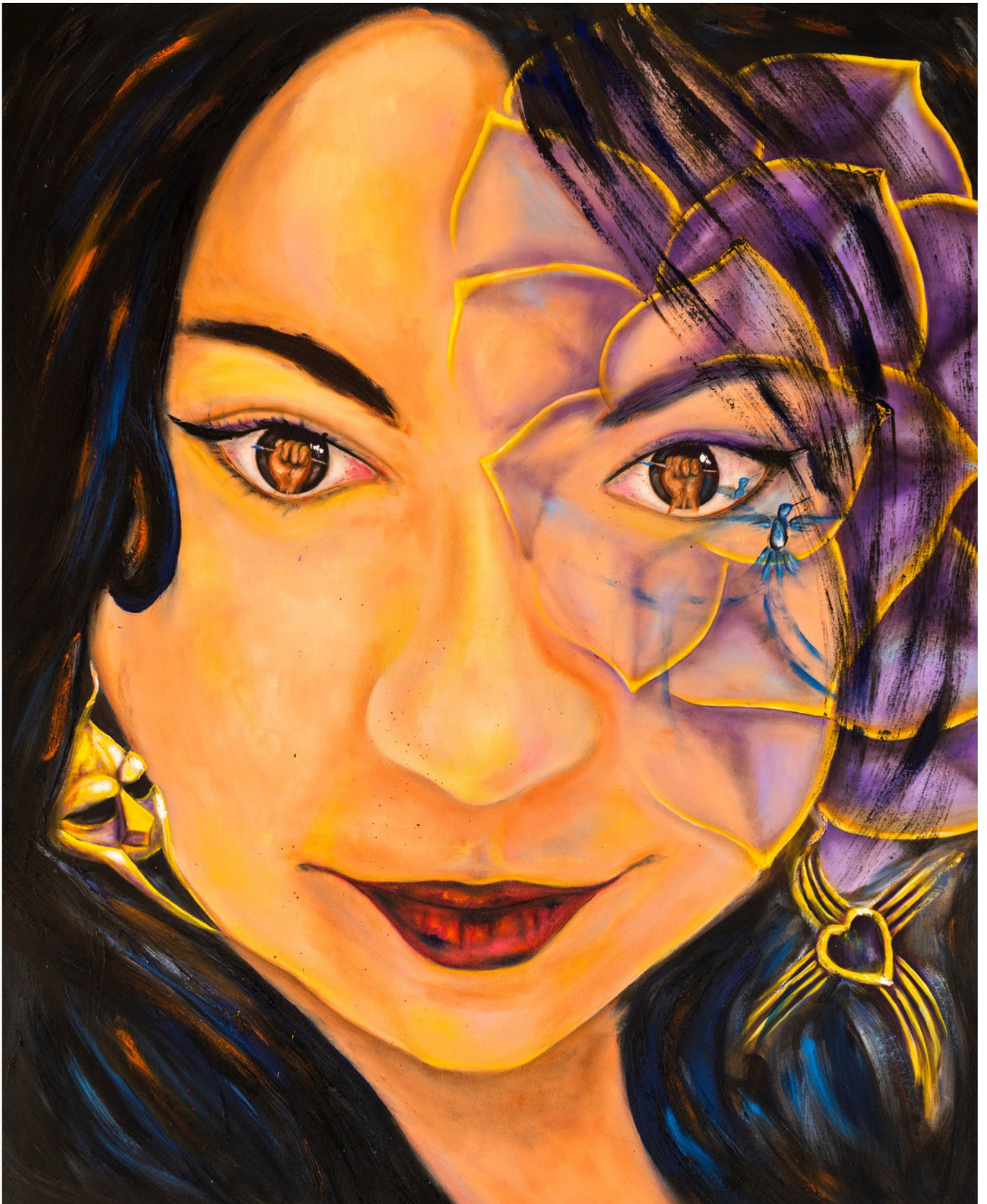
I made these paintings about what I consider wins. While I was making the loss series, I collapsed in grief and decided to focus on gratitude. What came out was a life impact moment near death experience/self-portrait, my daughter Esperanza, my mother, and my biological father and Gonzales family, which I only have recently met in 2021.



Figure 4. *Sacred Mother*, Wins Series, 2021, oil on canvas, 48" x 30"



Figure 5. Self Portrait, Wins Series, 2021, oil on canvas, 70" x 48"



Esperanza, Wins Series, 2021 , oil on canvas, 60" x 48"



Gonzales Familia, Wins Series, 2021, oil on canvas, 60" x 36"

Wins Series #2
2021, inkjet print on silk

Photography allows me to capture the essence of someone in a more intimate way than painting. This series was a continuation of a family portrait project. My approach was to make portraits on silk fabric of my immediate family. With these, I hope to balance my losses with a touch of softness and light to my overall body of work. My 'family' are my wins.



Wins Series #2, 2022, inkjet print on silk, 48" x 36"



Wins Series #2, 2022, inkjet print on silk, 48" x 36"

Guns Down Series
2021, digital photographic print

When my nephew Gabriel was killed in 2021, I was invited to speak at a community rally protesting violence. These photos document my experience. I was disappointed in the attendance. Most of the people who were there were family members of the victims. Why do we wait to advocate against gun violence until we lose someone?



Guns Down Series, 2021, gallery installation photo



Guns Down Series, 2021, detail gallery installation photo

New Mexico True
2021, sound installation

Working with sound allows me to communicate emotions that I cannot with other mediums. This piece aimed to offer a glimpse of what I have been going through during my academic experience at UNM. It is hard to put into words, but it is like, I wanted relief and it never comes. I wanted the listener to feel that. To listen to the audio for this installation go to:
<https://www.geraldlovato.com/portfolio/>



New Mexico True, 2021, gallery installation photo of listening station



Cycles of Addiction Series
2020, oil on canvas

I wasn't going to include these paintings in this exhibition however, with the rise of the fentanyl epidemic in this country, I thought these were necessary to be a part of the conversation. People sometimes are born into a cycle of addiction and we need to educate and talk about ways to break these cycles, which are the most likely to be affected by fentanyl deaths.



Rose Lovato, Cycles of Addiction Series, 2020, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"



Rose Lovato, Cycles of Addiction Series, 2022, archival print, 8" x 10"



Baby G, Cycles of Addiction Series, 2022, archival print, 4" x 6"



Figure 6. Baby G, Cycles of Addiction Series, 2022, oil on canvas, 24" x 30"



Feliz Navidad, Cycles of Addiction Series, 2020, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"



Burque Innocence, Cycles of Addiction Series, 2020, oil on canvas, triptych



*Burque Innocence #1, Cycles of Addiction Series,
2020, oil on canvas, triptych, 20" x 10"*



Burque Innocence #2, Cycles of Addiction Series, 2020
oil on canvas, triptych, 20" x 20"



Burque Innocence #3, Cycles of Addiction Series, 2020
oil on canvas, *triptych*, 20" x 10"



Burque Innocence, gallery installation photo by Helin Montgomery

Community Portrait
2020, mixed media installation

Over the past two years, I have been taking photos of friends, family and strangers in the hopes of one day bringing them together as a community through my art. This installation aims to unite by immersing the viewers into the community. Parts as a whole- we are all one.



Community Portrait, 2022, installation photo by Kailee Pete



Community Portrait, 2022, installation photo by Kailee Pete



Community Portrait, installation, film still



Fight for Change
2020, live performance

I was asked throughout my fight career, who was your toughest opponent? The answer was always, myself. This performance was to visually represent the catharsis I experience through martial arts and to represent my transition to healing through visual arts.



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



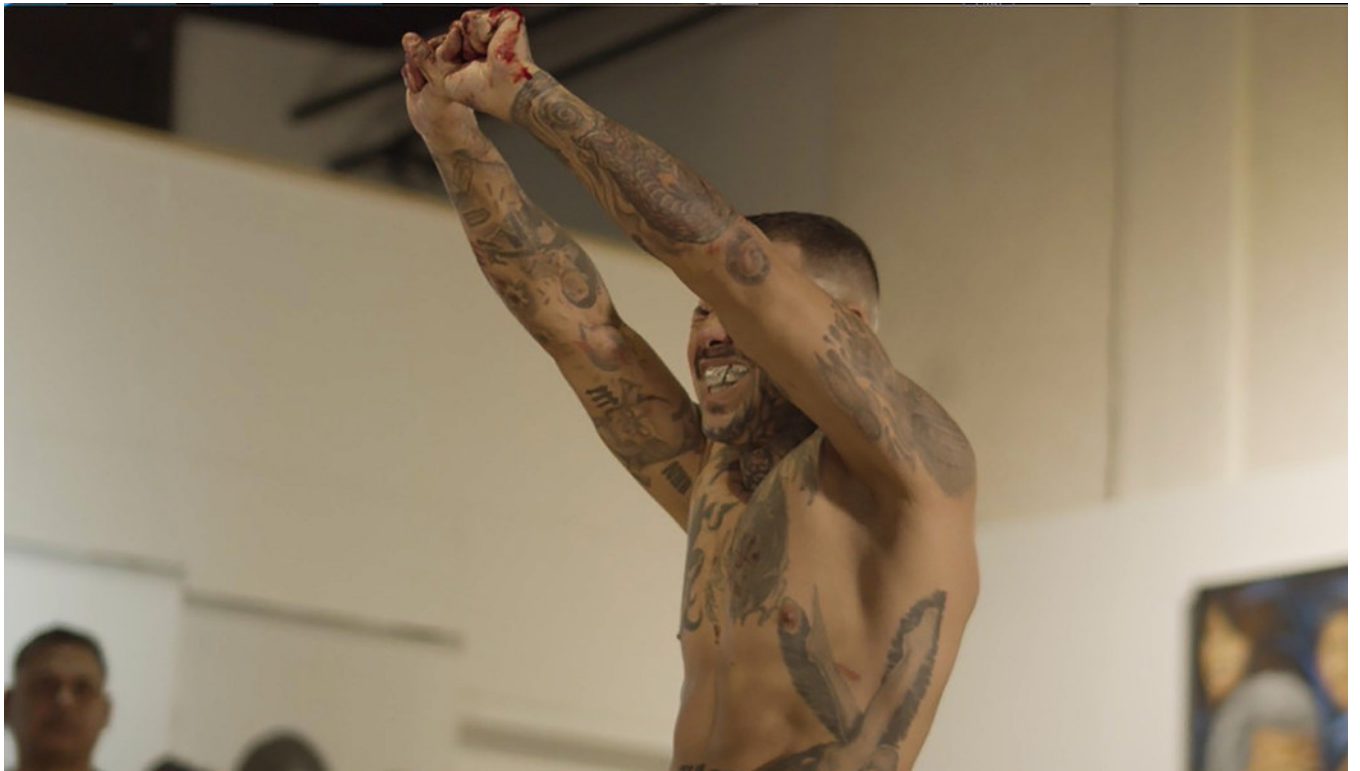
Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still



Burque Unite, Fight for Change, performance film still

Remains

2022, mixed media sculpture

After the 'Fight for Change' performance, the remains of the performance became a sculpture in the gallery for the rest of the exhibition.



Remains, installation photo by Joshua Mike-Bitah



Remains, installation photo by Kailee Pete

RESOURCES

You're Not Alone

If you or someone you know is struggling with addiction, violence or depression there are people standing by ready to help.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-TALK (Toll Free)

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a 24-hour, toll-free, confidential suicide prevention hotline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. Your call is routed to the nearest crisis center in our national network of more than 150 crisis centers. The Lifeline's national network of local crisis centers provide crisis counseling and mental health referrals day and night.

Línea de Vida Nacional para La Prevención del Suicidio para El Orador Español

1-888-628-9454 (Toll Free)

Agora Crisis Center, 1-855-505-4505 (Toll Free), 505-277-3013 (Local)

New Mexico Crisis and Access Line, 1-855-NMCRISIS (Toll Free)

A statewide mental health crisis line for anyone who resides in the State of New Mexico. It is a centralized, single telephone number, answered by professional counselors 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Counselors have access to emergency workers if needed, are trained in assessing a crisis and responding with the least restrictive alternative. We do not stop at the end of the call, our clinicians refer callers to resources local to them or conduct a follow up call by the next business day to check in.

Crossroads for Women, 505-242-1010

Crossroads is a non-profit rehab located in Albuquerque, NM. Crossroads provides housing and therapeutic services to empower New Mexico women emerging from incarceration.

Bernalillo County Department of Behavioral Health Services, (505) 468-1555

The Department of Behavioral Health Services provides quality health and social services, housing, and education to improve the quality of life for every community in Bernalillo County.

New Mexico Crusaders for Justice, (505) 463-5410

Helping families through the trauma of gun violence and reducing firearm injury and death through public health, education, advocacy, and public awareness, in order to protect the safety of our families and communities.

SAMHSA's National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Also known as the Treatment Referral Routing Service, this Helpline provides 24-hour free and confidential treatment referral and information about mental health and substance use disorders, prevention, and recovery, in English and Spanish.

<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

TTY: 1-800-487-4889

Website:

www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

<https://www.findtreatment.gov>

988: The 24/7 Lifeline for Emotional, Mental or Substance Misuse Support

Reasons to Call 988:

- Worried about your safety or someone you know
- Having a hard time managing strong emotions
- Feeling hopeless, confused, angry or lonely
- Worried about alcohol or drug use (substance use)
- Need information or referrals for local community services
- Have something on your mind that you want to talk over with someone outside of current situation
- Service member or veteran and their families in need
- Experiencing abuse or neglect
- Dating issues or domestic violence
- Struggling with eating disorders
 - Dealing with discrimination
 - Worried about parental discord or bullying
 - Stressed about work and having high anxiety

TEXT or CHAT

People who **text “TALK” to 988** will be connected to crisis centers equipped to respond to texts. Chat will be available through the Lifeline’s website: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat>.





"Albuquerque has a long history of boxing, mixed martial arts, and visual arts. It was just a matter of time before an artist was born of these convergent passions."
- **Augustine Romero, Artist, Curator**

"Lovato pays respect to his family through paintings and Burqueños through photography in *Burque Unite*, and his devotion to place is infectious."
- **Alana Coates, Art Historian, Curator**



"I have found it heartening to see artistic endeavors such as Gerald's affirming that people can create strong work while experiencing profound pain. "
- **Shelby Roberts, Photographer, Professor**

"Many artists have long practiced integration and intersectionality in their work, often without support from their institutions. These artists follow a calling, not a marketing plan."
- **Jen DePaolo, Artist, Organizer**