Unveiling the Invisible:

Paño Art and Its Implications

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Introduction

The Latino artist and former prisoner Elizam Escobar stated the following in regards to his experience as an incarcerated creative: “The power of art will show its face in spite of the bars.”[1] This quote reflects the potential for art to serve as a means of mental, emotional, and spiritual escape for prisoners and its ability to shed light on the individuality and humanity of people who are not given a time or place in society. While many forms of prison artwork, such as visual arts, poetry, and music, are well documented, paño artwork is one that is worthy of more appreciation.

Paño is a Spanish word which means “cloth,” but can also refer to a variety of household textiles, including handkerchiefs. This paper will focus on the paño as it is applied to the cotton handkerchief canvas upon which artists draw or paint diverse subjects, ideas, and cultural symbols.[2] Paño art is a traditional artform in Southwestern U.S. prisons with high concentrations of Chicanx inmates who repurpose the handkerchiefs allotted to them by prison staff. The most common medium used for paño art within the prison environment is ballpoint pen, but “colored pencils…coffee beans, ash, and even egg yolk” have been used by inmates to fulfill their artistic visions.[3]

This essay aims to celebrate paños as their own diverse genre of Latinx artwork and supplement the research of this largely overlooked artform.[4] I will first provide a brief history of paño art, examining the evolution of the tradition and highlighting prominent collectors and scholars of paños. I also will recognize the social justice issues relevant to paño art, as it is an

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[1] Victor Alejandro Sorell, "Latino Visual Culture Behind Bars: Artistic Inspiration and Redemption Within the Bowels of Despair,” in *Behind Bars: Latino/as and Prison in the United States,* Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 197.
[2] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Canada: Harvard University Press, 2009), 77-78.
[3] Michael Hoinski, “How Prison Art from Texas Captured the Art World’s Attention,” TexasMonthly, February 13, 2014, https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/how-prison-art-from-texas-captured-the-art-worlds-attention/.
[4] Álvaro Ibarra, “*Sueño en paño:* Texas Chicano prison inmate art in the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art Collection, Utah State University, and the Leplat-Torti Collection,” *Latino Studies* 19, (2021): 23.

artform produced by subjects of the flawed U.S. legal system. Following this introduction, I will analyze three diverse examples of paño artwork, showcasing the creativity of Chicanx prisoners and arguing that paños allow prisoners to explore and express their identity within the demoralizing and oppressive atmosphere of prison. Additionally, I will examine some qualities of paño exhibitions, arguing that while these exhibitions raise important ethical questions, they may serve as activist events by providing exposure to Chicanx prison artwork and drawing attention to aforementioned social justice issues. Finally, I will discuss the legacy of paño art by drawing parallels between the paño art of prisoners and the paño art of Japanese-Chicana artist Shizu Saldamando, who uses this significant and versatile artistic tradition to explore identity amongst subcultures in Los Angeles.

Paños: Historical and Contemporary Context

Paño art arose from the resourcefulness of Chicanx inmates who had a desire to create while enduring a state of captivity. The first documented paños were created in the 1930s in Texas prisons, after prisoners were given handkerchiefs as an alternative drawing surface to the bed linens they were deconstructing.[5] The original purpose of the paño was for communication, whether that be with friends and family outside of the prison, or with other prisoners.[6] Paños could also serve as a form of informal currency, their intricacy making them worthy of trade between inmates.[7] The artform evolved to become a mechanism by which prisoners could express themselves and their emotions.[8] Additionally, paños may be inspired by movements of social change: paño artists sometimes "employ the Mexican muralism's liberal juxtaposition of divergent symbols and narratives in creating powerful public statements using kinetic and

[5] Hoinski, "How Prison Art from Texas."
[6] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 12.
[7] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 12.
[8] Hoinski, "How Prison Art from Texas."

attention-grabbing compositions."[9] Paño art as a tradition is dying out today, not only because prisons rarely have funded art programs for inmates since 1990, but also because several prisons have banned the artform entirely.[10] The reasons for this are numerous, but include the fact that prisons want to repress the gang-related and political ideals often represented visually on paños, and the institutional idea that because prisoners are wrong-doers, they should be punished in every way—including through the suppression of their creativity.[11]

Paños have garnered increasing attention from collectors in more recent years. Perhaps the most famous paño collector is Rudy Padilla, whose collection can be viewed at The Hourglass Museum in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which boasts over 100 of these artworks.[12] His collection and scholarship indirectly inspired another now prominent paño collector, Reno Leplat-Torti, who has an extensive collection of paños which has toured across the world.[13]

There has also been an increased interest in researching the art history of paños. One example of scholarship in this area is Nicole Fleetwood's *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration,* a major award-winning publication which discusses paños among other related prison artforms. Fleetwood examines how these artworks are a function of prison conditions and describes their ability to represent the resilience of prisoners and the injustices of incarceration.[14] Other important paño scholars include Álvaro Ibarra, who in writing discusses paño exhibitions and curates some himself, and Victor Sorell, who examines how art can serve as an "act of liberation" for Latinx prisoners.[15] This interest in paño art within the scholarly community is actively increasing the relevance of paños to the art world.

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[9] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 9.
[10] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 13.
[11] "Paño, Art on a Square," Latino USA, last modified November 15, 2013, https://www.latinousa.org/2013/11/15/pano-art/.
[12] "Into the Hourglass: Paño Arte from the Rudy Padilla Collection ," National Hispanic Cultural Center, accessed November 19, 2023, https://www.nhccnm.org/event/into-the-hourglass-pano-arte-from-the-rudy-padilla-collection/.
[13] Hoinski, "How Prison Art from Texas."
[14] Fleetwood, *Marking Time.*
[15] Sorell, "Latino Visual Culture Behind Bars," 209.

Paños and Social Justice

Just as society's exposure to paño artworks has increased over time, so has the incarceration of Chicanx people in the Southwestern U.S. over the past sixty years. During the Chicano Movement of the 1960's, Chicanx gang members, teenagers, and young adults rallied behind "la causa," an effort to reform discriminatory policing and increase local governmental representation.[16] Despite these efforts, the percentage of Chicanx prisoners in Texas has only increased from the beginning of the Chicano Movement to today: from representing 16% of Texan inmates in 1973, to more than 25% in 2000.[17] These rates have been exacerbated in recent years through presidential administrations that have promoted "brutal family separations at the US-Mexico border, enhanced criminalization of immigration, and child detainment centers."[18] The reasons for such high rates of imprisonment are varied but include an apparent desire to sequester impoverished people of color and, often in the case of rural areas, the resulting provision of a cheap workforce.[19] Despite the efforts of social justice organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens to curtail the mass incarceration of Hispanic people, more than half of Latinx people have been subject to at least one encounter with the U.S. legal system.[20]

The high rates of Latinx incarceration in the U.S. are in part a function of entrenched and systemic prejudice against this group.[21] It has become true after years of institutionalized racism and discrimination that "an inmate's individualized humanity is obscured by rhetoric that portrays incarcerated Latinos as a dangerous collective, a horde, an invasive species."[22] The

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[16] Robert T. Chase, "Cell Taught, Self Taught: The Chicano Movement Behind Bars - Urban Chicanos, Rural Prisons, and the Prisoners' Rights Movement," *Journal of Urban History*, 45, no. 5 (2015): 838.
[17] Chase, "Cell Taught, Self Taught," 839.
[18] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 12.
[19] Suzanne Oboler, "Introduction: '*Viviendo en el olvido…*'," in *Behind Bars: Latino/as and Prison in the United States,* Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 2.
[20] "Criminal Justice Reform," LULAC, accessed November 19, 2023. https://lulac.org/advocacy/issues/criminal_justice_reform/.
[21] Oboler, "Introduction," 3.
[22] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 12.

stories of these inmates, the dehumanizing conditions of U.S. prisons, and the injustices committed against them by the U.S. judicial system and local law enforcement are largely ignored and unpublicized.[23]

In the introduction to *Behind Bars: Latino/as and Prison in the United States,* a book that discusses different aspects of Latinx imprisonment, Suzanne Oboler issues a call to action regarding the need for prison and judicial reform as it pertains to the Latinx community. She states that the current system fosters "an impermeable barrier of complacency and indifference grounded in social insecurity, fear, and even terror of one another."[24] It is in this context that paños can be used to call attention to social justice issues. These intricate and deeply personal works force viewers to abandon complacency and fear, and instead consider the humanity of prisoners who are commonly considered "the other." Because the process of making paños allows prisoners to "resist the isolation, exploitation, and dehumanization of carceral facilities," paños can give viewers a sense of what injustices occur within the U.S. legal system and where positive societal changes can be enacted.[25]

Paño Art as Identity

When considering the harsh conditions of many U.S. prisons as well as the factors and life events that may lead to an inmate's incarceration, it makes sense that art could become a means for mental, spiritual, and emotional escape. The aforementioned artist and prisoner Escobar "suggests that it is through artistic creativity that the prisoner rescues and redeems a life suspended between captivity and liberty."[26] By analyzing specific examples of paños that have not yet received much scholarly consideration, I argue that paños allow prisoners to resist the

[23] Fleetwood, *Marking Time,* xvi.
[24] Oboler, "Introduction," 2.
[25] Fleetwood, *Marking Time,* page 3.
[26] Sorell, "Latino Visual Culture Behind Bars," 192.

demoralizing atmosphere of prison as they transform a common textile into a vector of identity expression.

Paño artworks are often rich with symbols and motifs, which can allude to the situation or emotions of the artist. *Asi Es Mi Vida*, created by Pepe Baca of the Penitentiary of New Mexico, is a hallmark example of a paño which conveys themes of sorrow and inner turmoil. Within the confined dimensions of the square handkerchief, we can see symbols of time, death, and Christianity (Figure #1). The focal point of the piece is a clock that reads five minutes to twelve, indicating that Baca's time in jail, or perhaps his time on Earth, may be almost up. The tear placed purposefully below the clock's hands likely represents "grief, sorrow, pain, [or] death."[27] Reflecting these themes of doom and fate is a spider web, which partially obscures a gravestone upon which Baca's own name seems to be carved. These two symbols combined seem to indicate that Baca feels trapped in a system which has caused the "social death" of his life as he knew it. Contrasting these messages of death and despair is a cross, which in the Christian faith symbolizes truth, resurrection, and rebirth, and a cherub, which usually symbolizes innocence and love. However, the cherub's position as oriented away from the composition may indicate that Baca feels that he has been estranged from his former innocence. The identities of the large male and female heads in the piece are unclear. The man may be Baca himself, or a Mexican Revolutionary figure; the woman could be a loved one.[28] The composition is a conglomeration of these contrasting symbols and can be difficult to parse through, shedding light upon the conflicting, difficult emotions that Baca was processing at this time in his life. In sum, the rich symbolism contained within *Asi Es Mi Vida* seems to indicate that the paño is a surface upon

[27] Mariah Sacoman, "Paño Art," Online Exhibitions, accessed November 8, 2023, http://online.internationalfolkart.org/panos/index.html.
[28] Sacoman, "Paño Art."

which Baca was able to grapple with the pain and sorrow that accompanied his identity as a prisoner.

Paño artists often include symbols of Chicanx identity in their compositions, an example of this being Maurio Muñoz's (also known as "Cat Eyes") *Aztec Calendar Stone* (Figure #2). Central to the piece is a figure, which represents an Aztec warrior, carrying a female figure who appears to be unconscious or deceased, her body mostly nude. The stance of these figures may allude to the tragic myth of lovers Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl, whose names also belong to the two volcanoes which frame Mexico City.[29] These figures are haloed by an intricate Aztec calendar stone and partially obscured by an eagle holding a serpent, a direct reference to Mexico's flag. The inclusion of Aztec iconography central to Mexico's history and current geography likely speaks to Muñoz's pride in his heritage. A variety of more modern symbols surround the calendar stone. Several of these are explicit references to boundaries: a prison watchtower overlooking a barbed wire fence, a brick wall, and a figure peering through chain-links while fire rages beneath him. The walls and fences could speak to a sense of entrapment and despair or reference border issues between the U.S. and Mexico, as the inclusion of walls and fences in paños can represent "independence" and "freedom from outside domination."[30] The identities of the two women surrounding the calendar stone, one who appears to preside over the scene, are unclear. However, the bandana that one of the women wears could reference those worn by Chicanx gang members.[31] The large number of iconographic references to Chicanx history and imprisonment on this paño indicates that Muñoz strongly identifies with this culture and sees the paño as a way in which to express this identity.

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[29] "The Legend of Popocatepetl & Iztaccíhuatl: A Love Story," Vanderbilt, accessed December 11, 2023, https://as.vanderbilt.edu/clas-resources/media/The%20Legend%20of%20Popocatepetl.pdf.
[30] Martha V. Henry and Peter D. Joralemon, *Art from the Inside: Paño Drawings by Chicano Prisoners* (Brooklyn: New England Center for Contemporary Art, 2004), 51.
[31] Henry and Joralemon, *Art from the Inside,* 51.

Many paños have a utilitarian purpose: to communicate with family and friends outside of the prison. The colorful paño, *Happy Mother's Day: Prayer for the One I Love!* (artist unknown) expresses love and devotion to a maternal figure through image and text (Figure #3). The writing running down the center of the paño is both a poem and a prayer. In the first stanza, the artist clarifies the purpose of their message: "So I may feel much closer/to the one I care."[32] The artist declares their love and appreciation for their mother, and makes a religious claim that mothers do God's work by caring for "his little children."[33] The paño's message conveys a deep-rooted Christian faith which transcends the walls of the prison, and is able to reach a loved family member who is physically far away but close to the prisoner's heart. The poem is adorned with a border of colorful roses, a reference to the eight roses which often surround images of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The implementation of these roses equates the mother mentioned throughout the poem to Mother Mary, indicating that the prisoner associates their mother with this holiness. This paño has a purpose in conveying an important message to a cherished family member and allows the prisoner to demonstrate their identity as a mother's child by maintaining their connection with her.

These paños encompass only a few of the many different symbols and subject matters of the genre. It is important to note that these paños have been removed from their original context and their makers are not easily contacted. Despite their reliance on known symbolism and previously studied iconography, these three paño examinations are necessarily subjective, as little information is publicly available concerning the context of their creation.

[32] Henry and Joralemon, *Art from the Inside,* 25.
[33] Henry and Joralemon, *Art from the Inside,* 25.

Paño Exhibitions as Activist Events

As the scholarly recognition and collection of paños have increased over the years, so has the frequency of public and private paño exhibitions. Over the last 24 years, about 24 paño exhibitions have been shown globally.[34] The paños of the aforementioned collectors Rudy Padilla and Reno Leplat-Torti make up arguably the most well-known and analyzed exhibitions.

Into The Hourglass: Paño Arte from the Rudy Padilla Collection, an exhibition of over 100 paños comprising a variety of subject matter, is showing at the National Hispanic Cultural Center Art Museum until April 14, 2024.[35] The exhibition's stated aim is to "[explore] the interconnectedness of paño arte and Chicano and American art, [honor] the social and cultural legacy of Padilla's work, and [examine] the topic of incarceration in contemporary society."[36] The exhibition emphasizes that Padilla "did not disassociate the artists from their work or treat them as 'anonymous or 'outsiders,' which differentiates his perspective from the common approach of galleries at the time," the time being the 1970s, when Padilla accumulated most of his paños (Figure #4).

Leplat-Torti's collection encompasses about 500 paños and has passed through exhibition centers worldwide. One exhibition in which a fraction of Leplat-Torti's collection is shown, *Artepaño/Kerchief Art* at the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, is self-proclaimed as "the largest and most diverse *artepaño* exhibition to date."[37] Over the past 12 years, Leplat-Torti's collection has been showcased in "France, Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland, Canada, Mexico, Taiwan, and Japan" making its reach global.[38] In interviews, Leplat-Torti has expressed an

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[34] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 7.
[35] "Into the Hourglass."
[36] "Into the Hourglass."
[37] "Artepaño/Kerchief Art," Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, accessed December 2, 2023, https://www.usu.edu/artmuseum/exhibitions/artepano-kerchief.
[38] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 9.

interest in prison reform and sees paños as a way to recognize the individuality of prisoners.[39] He states that he places an effort upon building relationships with prison artists, although maintaining them is difficult due to the fact that he resides primarily in France.[40]

Despite the best intentions of these collectors and others, paño exhibitions raise some important ethical considerations. Paño artists are rarely, if ever, present at their own exhibitions to explain the context and meaning behind their work. This limitation may be a function of the inconvenience and costliness of traveling, especially in the case of Leplat-Torti's international exhibitions, or because the artists remain incarcerated. Certainly, a viewer of a paño may be able to glean meaning and personal value from one of these works, but one must wonder if the artists should have more agency in how their paños are displayed and described in exhibitions.

Moreover, visitors to paño exhibitions "are not usually aware that they were intended to drive private dialogue between the producer and the original, intended consumer," due to a lack of transparency and education on the part of the exhibition's curators.[41] Leplat-Torti himself stated that "viewing [paños] can feel intimate, almost indecent, like reading a letter belonging to someone else, but the letter is so well written you can't stop until the end."[42] Prison artists use paños to express themselves in deeply personal ways and to maintain social and romantic relationships within and outside of the prison's walls. In contrast to exhibitions, "paños aren't typically framed and hanged by the families who receive them…Instead, they are treated as keepsakes."[43] Therefore, many paños are not showy displays of artistic prowess, as other museum artworks can be, and should not be mistaken as such.

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[39] "Paños created in US prisons spark the passion of exhibitor in France," Justice Arts Coalition, accessed December 2, 2023, https://thejusticeartscoalition.org/2013/06/13/panos-created-in-us-prisons-spark-the-passion-of-exhibitor-in-france/.
[40] Justice Arts Coalition, "Paños created in US prisons."
[41] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 25.
[42] Justice Arts Coalition, "Paños created in US prisons."
[43] Hoinski, "How Prison Art from Texas."

Another ethical consideration that must be considered when visiting paño exhibitions is the manner in which the artworks were sourced. Countless images of paños across online and print sources, including Figure #3, are attributed to unknown artists. This fact may indicate that these paños have passed through many hands, distancing the artist from their creation, or it could imply neglect on the part of collectors, who should be making detailed records of the artwork's creator. Little research is publicly available indicating how paños are historically and presently sourced by collectors, raising important questions. Are paño artists aware that their artwork is being publicly shown to thousands of museum patrons? Are paño artists compensated fairly for their work and credited appropriately? Paño scholarship suggests that this is usually not the case.[44] In many instances where prison artists work with outside artistic collaborators on projects, they "have no access to the terms of the grant, do not know how much money the artist or organization has received, and are not allowed to receive any remuneration for their labor or from the circulation or sale of art resulting from the collaboration."[45] The collector's inherent position of power in comparison to the prison artist and their removal from the carceral sphere cannot be ignored. By ignoring these ethical issues, collectors and viewers of paño art may be exploiting inmate artists and contributing to their invisibility.

Despite their various ethical implications, paño exhibitions have the potential to serve as highly educational and transformative events. Paño exhibitions must place an emphasis on educating their viewers. They should both define paño art as an important and underrecognized Chicanx artform and clarify all the possible purposes of their creation to avoid "demot[ing] them to the status of objects of fetishistic interest rather than objects of art."[46] Also, to the greatest extent possible, paño artists should have creative input on the curation and execution of

[44] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 25-26.
[45] Fleetwood, *Marking Time,* 162.
[46] Ibarra, "*Sueño en paño*," 8.

exhibitions. If we are to remove the paño from the prison setting and hang it in a museum like a Van Gogh painting, the maker of the paño should be considered an artist before a prisoner. Although the paños may no longer be legally theirs, after being acquired by a collector, the identities of the artists should be displayed alongside their own interpretation of their artwork, if they wish to describe it.

As a collection of works created by a group of underrepresented artists, paño exhibitions have the power to draw attention to incarcerated Chicanx artists as well as the societal and legal issues that may have contributed to their incarceration; it is true that "The public interest in paño art, in effect, humanizes prisoners, in contrast to government's efforts to dehumanize them."[47] Paño exhibitions are powerful assemblages of identity, emotions, desires, hopes, wishes, and dreams that come from a place of despair where most of us will never go. They represent the resiliency of the human spirit and may reflect the prisoner's desire for inner transformation and systemic change. One paño alone may reflect some of these qualities, or none of them; it is important to realize that most paños are not made with an activist message in mind. However, the display of multiple paños in exhibitions represents a "massing of energies" that is characteristic of activist artwork.[48] These exhibitions are also activist in that they are "socially *involved*": they take paños, which are little-known and private works, and display them in a digestible and educational format to the general public.[49] It is necessary to include paños alongside existing museum artworks, because regarding "art by incarcerated people as existing outside of art discourses or institutions rehearses the violent erasure of being imprisoned."[50] At exhibitions, viewers have the opportunity to realize how much talent, individuality, and intelligence is

[47] Henry and Joralemon, *Art from the Inside,* 3.
[48] Lucy Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (Boston: MIT Press, 1984), 341.
[49] Lippard, "Trojan Horses," 349.
[50] Fleetwood, *Marking Time,* 3.

suppressed and forgotten behind bars. Curators have the opportunity to capitalize on these beautiful art assemblages for good, by creating exhibitions that educate the public and call attention to the need for prison reform.

The Legacy of Paño Art

Paño art has evolved as an artform since 1930 and has also influenced the work of contemporary artists. Some formerly incarcerated artists continue to make paños outside of prison, and others implement the resourcefulness of paño techniques in their art: for example, formerly incarcerated artist Krimes started his bed linen textile work *Apokaluptein 16389067* while in prison, installing it after his release.[51] The artform has also inspired artists who have never been incarcerated, like Shizu Saldamando.

Saldamando is an artist of Chicana and Japanese heritage who is well known for her hyper-realistic mixed-media portraits. Growing up, she consumed media containing punk and Chicanx aesthetics and found her social circle during her college years in Los Angeles, California. At UCLA, she not only developed her artistic style but connected with others of Latinx heritage who engaged with popular British musical artists.[52] Saldamando's work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions around the country, and she has organized outreach events where she provides art education to her community.[53]

One of Saldamando's most famous works, *The Holy Cuatro,* was created in the style of prison paños (Figure #5).[54] The piece references her passion for Britpop, over which she and other Latinx teenagers bonded in L.A. in the 1990s, and features "rockers Morrissey, Siouxsie

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[51] Fleetwood, *Marking Time,* 78-80.
[52] Carolina Miranda, "Painter Shizu Saldamando puts a face to L.A.'s Latinx art and punk scenes," Los Angeles Times, last modified February 18, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-02-18/painter-shizu-saldamando-latinx-art-punk-scenes.
[53] Carol Cheh, "Transpacific Borderlands Artist Shizu Saldamando Pays Tribute to Camp Survivors in Upcoming Craft Workshop," The JANM Blog, last modified November 28, 2017, https://blog.janm.org/2017/11/28/transpacific-borderlands-artist-shizu-saldamando-pays-tribute-to-camp-survivors-in-upcoming-craft-workshop/.
[54] "Ballpoint Pen," Shizu Saldamando Art, accessed December 11, 2023, https://www.shizusaldamando.com/ballpoint-pen.

Sioux, Robert Smith, and Dave Gahan."[55] The composition of *The Holy Cuatro* is striking: Saldamando rotates the paños 45 degrees from their conventional orientations and assigns each musician a monochromatic color that bestows each with a unique and edgy aesthetic character. The portraits display significant contrasting values and show Saldamando's expertise in using line and shape to create detail and shadow. By placing these figures in the center of the handkerchief and drawing them with neutral, powerful expressions, Saldamando immortalizes these musicians, and thus their accomplishments.

Saldamando's stated reason for choosing to make *The Holy Cuatro* as a series of paños is quite different from the reason Chicanx prisoners may choose to make theirs. She justifies her artistic process for this work by saying that "The handkerchiefs make the work more delicate, sort of precious. And the quality you get is really nice, because it's so soft and easy to blend."[56] In contrast, prisoners typically turn to the paño out of necessity because it is one of the few surfaces they have on which to draw. However, Saldamando's choice of paño for *The Holy Cuatro* implies that she associates these rockers with a sense of Chicanx identity: appropriate, as she solidified her Chicana identity while listening to their music with other Latinx individuals. In this way, *The Holy Cuatro* relates to Muñoz's *Aztec Calendar Stone* (Figure #2) and the paños of countless others who use the handkerchief to showcase symbols associated with Chicanismo and the Mexico-U.S. relationship. It becomes clear that the paño itself can be interpreted as a symbol of Chicanx identity, and in this way, it becomes the perfect canvas on which to explore these topics.

Another example of Saldamando's paño art is her *Yuri Kochiyama, Free All Political Prisoners!,* an intricate assemblage of portraiture and symbols drawn with blue ballpoint pen

[55] Elina Shatkin, "Chicano portraiture meets Siouxsie Sioux," Los Angeles Times, last modified August 2, 2007, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-aug-02-wk-gallery2-story.html.
[56] Shatkin, "Chicano portraiture meets Siouxsie Sioux."

(Figure #6). Yuri Kochiyama was a famous activist who fought for the rights of all minorities in the U.S. and is especially remembered for her membership in the Young Lords and her advocacy for political prisoners in the latter half of the Twentieth Century.[57] Saldamando's paño tribute to Kochiyama is rich with details that relate to her biography. Kochiyama's portrait is central to the piece, surrounded by other smaller portraits of her in action. A sign to the far left of the paño reads, "FREE ALL POLITICAL PRISONERS," an overt reference to Kochiyama's activism in this area. A portrait of Lady Liberty with a Puerto Rican flag draped over her downturned face nods to Kochiyama's support of the Young Lords and their advocacy for equal rights. Cherry blossoms are scattered throughout the image, likely a nod to Kochiyama's Japanese heritage.

Saldamando directly references elements of art found in traditional paños. Kochiyama's name is included on the paño in a font resembling that of traditional tattoos, a common aesthetic in prison artwork.[58] The collaged composition that Saldamando chose is similar to that of Baca's *Asi Es Mi Vida* (Figure #1) in that it is highly detailed but there are still significant points of emphasis. Saldamando was intentional in her implementation of paño artwork for this piece. In an interview, she stated "For that piece I knew I wanted to use ballpoint pen on paño as the medium because so much of [Kochiyama's] work was calling attention to the political prisoners that [sic] were unjustly imprisoned," calling the paño a "good solution" to her artistic problem.[59] Saldamando takes advantage of the context of the paño, an artform born out of the confines of prison, to call attention to an activist who dedicated much of her energy to issues of prison reform. In this way, *Yuri Kochiyama, Free All Political Prisoners!* is a glimpse into the future of how paño techniques may be used: to educate the public about important defenders of civil rights

[57] "May 19, 1921: Yuri Kochiyama Born," Zinn Education Project, accessed December 11, 2023, https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/yuri-kochiyama-was-born/.
[58] Hoinski, "How Prison Art from Texas."
[59] Erwin Recinos, "Interview with Shizu Saldamando," L.A. Taco, last modified November 16, 2015, https://lataco.com/shizu-saldamando.

and to call attention to the injustices of the U.S. prison system. Kochiyama's activism may symbolize something greater for Saldamando; significant parallels may be drawn between Kochiyama's uniting of cross-racial movements for Asians, Blacks, and Latinos in the US and Saldamando's inclusion of people from multiple ethnic, racial, and social backgrounds in her masterful pieces.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the context of the paño as a traditional prison artform made by Chicanx inmates is crucial to understanding the artform's applications. Within the prison setting, the paño is symbolic of elements of a prisoner's identity, whether that be their current mental state, heritage, or familial identity. When outside of prison walls in the hands of a collector or museum curator, its original context must not be forgotten, or the plight of its artist may be forgotten or exploited. The context of the paño has applications for nonincarcerated artists, like Shizu Saldamando, who relates the paño's context to her Chicanx identity and pertinent social justice issues. A common thread that runs through these differing contexts, however, is the ability of paños to shed light on individuals and narratives that are usually invisible to others in U.S. society. When we look at paños, let us see not only intricate detail and symbolism but also original artifacts of the struggle experienced by a group of people forgotten behind bars.

Figure #1. Baca, Pepe, *Asi Es Mi Vida*, 1993, colored pencil and inks on standard handkerchief, dimensions unknown, (Collection of Rudy Padilla, the Hourglass Museum), https://online.internationalfolkart.org/panos/asi.html.

Figure #2. Maurio Muñoz ("Cat Eyes"), *Aztec Calendar Stone*, 1996, ballpoint pen on standard handkerchief, dimensions unknown, In *Art from the Inside: Paño Drawings by Chicano Prisoners,* curated by Martha V. Henry and Peter D. Joralemon, Brooklyn: New England Center for Contemporary Art, 2004, p. 20.

Figure #3. Unknown, *Happy Mother's Day: A Prayer for the One I Love!*, c. 1996, ink on standard handkerchief, dimensions unknown, In *Art from the Inside: Paño Drawings by Chicano Prisoners,* curated by Martha V. Henry and Peter D. Joralemon, Brooklyn: New England Center for Contemporary Art, 2004, p. 25.

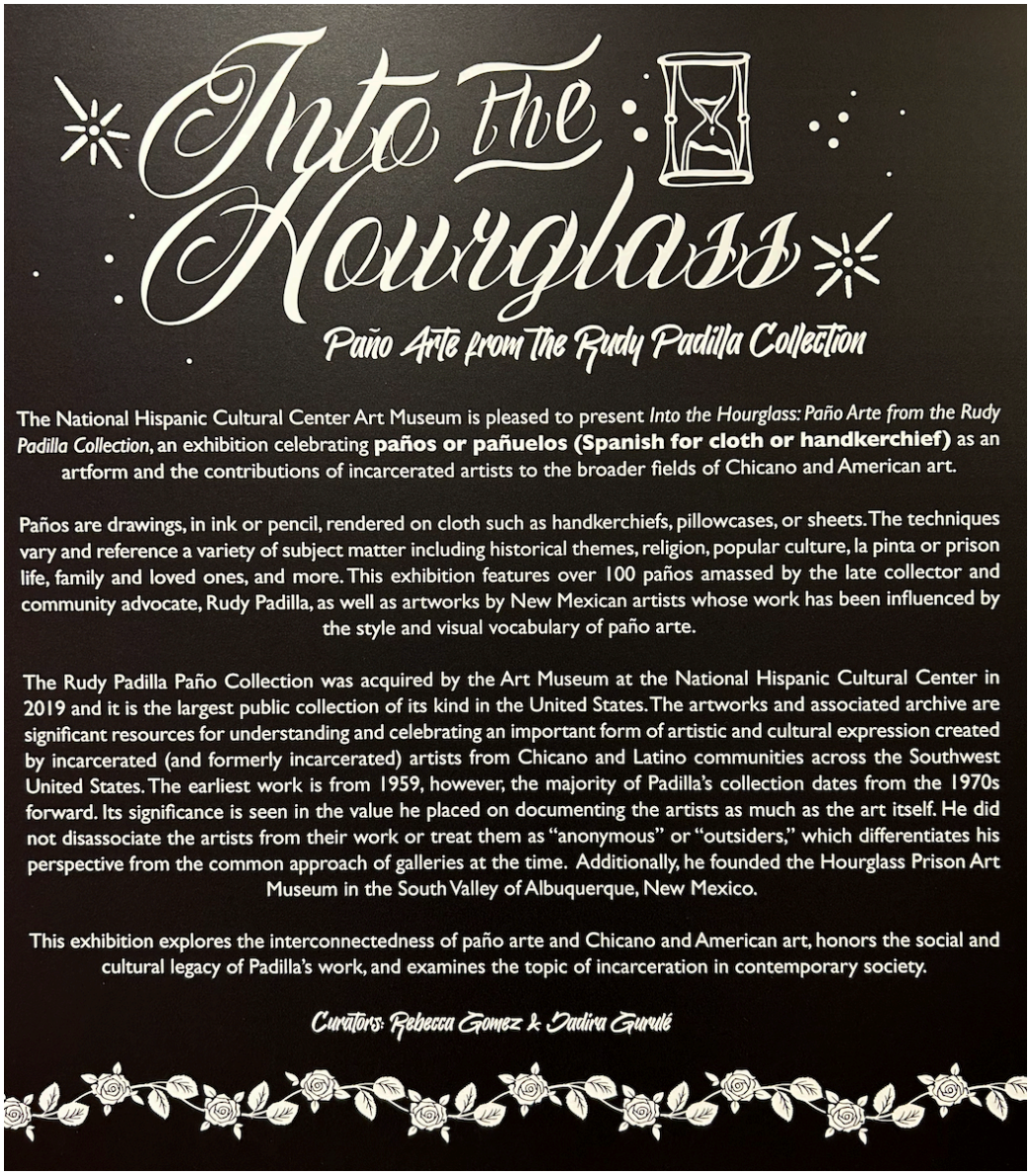

Figure #4. "Into the Hourglass: Paño Arte from the Rudy Padilla Collection," 2023, (Dr. Tatiana Reinoza).

Figure #5. Shizu Saldamando, *The Holy Cuatro*, 2005, ballpoint pen on handkerchief, dimensions unknown, (Shizu Saldamando Art), https://www.shizusaldamando.com/ballpoint-pen/fdo25s2ci93e7sha1ap5j58mwsxu5a.

Figure #6. Shizu Saldamando, *Yuri Kochiyama, Free All Political Prisoners!*, 2016, ballpoint pen on found handkerchief, 16x16 inches, (Shizu Saldamando Art), https://www.shizusaldamando.com/ballpoint-pen/2b63wmhl6pteugsa4y2qlq6n42p3u7.

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