



# puro corazón

THE ART OF MELANIE CERVANTES

# puro corazón

Melanie Cervantes (Xicanx) has never lived far from the California Coast. Born in Harbor City, California and raised in a small city in the South Bay of Los Angeles Melanie now makes her home in the San Francisco Bay Area where she creates visual art that is inspired by the people around her and her communities' desire for radical social transformation. Melanie's intention is to create a visual lexicon of resistance to multiple oppressions that will to inspire curiosity, raise consciousness and inspire solidarities among communities of struggle.

In 2007 she co-founded Dignidad Rebelde, a graphic arts collaboration that produces screen prints, political posters and multimedia projects that are grounded in Third World and indigenous movements that build people's power to transform the conditions of fragmentation, displacement and loss of culture that result from histories of colonialism, patriarchy, genocide, and exploitation. and Dignidad Rebelde's purpose is to illustrate stories of struggle, resistance and triumph into artwork that can be put back into the hands of the communities who inspire it.

Melanie has exhibited extensively nationally and internationally including at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (San Francisco); National Museum of Mexican Art (Chicago); and Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY). Her work is in the permanent collections of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, the Latin American Collection of the Green Library at Stanford, and the Library of Congress and the as well as various private collections throughout the U.S.

She holds a BA in Ethnic Studies from the University of California, Berkeley.

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**The Latinx Research Center**, an interdisciplinary and transAmericas research center at University of California, Berkeley, a new, more expansive iteration of the Center for Latino Policy Research, is proud to host a one-woman art exhibition of Melanie Cervantes, of Dignidad Rebelde, throughout our Shorb House research center. We consider art a vital social laboratory for thinking about our society and our world, for presenting alternative understandings of these, and in doing so, supporting views that are necessary to human, social, and even environmental well being. This exhibition catalog inaugurates our commitment to documenting Latinx arts of the Bay Area and California, providing knowledgeable and sensitive essays regarding the same, and making available to people all over the world the cultural wealth of Latinx artists.

—Laura E. Pérez

Chair, Latinx Research Center

February 5, 2019



**Mother's Milk**, 2011



**"our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge"**

**our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge, 2017**

# PURO CORAZÓN

## The Heartwork of Melanie Cervantes

EDITED BY ANGELA AGUILAR

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The latter half of the 20th century in the United States was characterized by a series of successful social and political movements that sought to contest the conditions of marginalized peoples in the U.S. and abroad. In addition to the emergence of a growing political consciousness, this period saw the proliferation of the poster as a politically engaged tool. As Cary Cordova notes, “the affordability of the technology, both in terms of production and distribution, along with a poster’s capacity to synthesize a movement’s objectives, spurred production globally”<sup>1</sup>. To this day, the poster remains an essential tool for raising awareness, fostering unity, and inciting action.

I first encountered the work of Melanie Cervantes on Facebook in 2014. I came across an image of Assata Shakur with the text: “HANDS OFF ASSATA!” At the time, President Obama had just announced the restoration of diplomatic ties with Cuba, which incited questions regarding the extradition of Shakur, who was granted political asylum in 1984. Unlike the articles written and the images circulating on the news, this image moved me; I felt personally responsible for ensuring Assata remained safe. I felt empowered. I was not the only one. I soon encountered dozens of Cervantes’ pieces in social justice spaces, the streets, and book covers. Distinguished by the use of vibrant colors and social justice messages, this is just one of the many effects of Cervantes’ work.

Born in Harbor City and raised in the South Bay of Los Angeles, the Xicanx artist first moved to the Bay Area in 2002 in pursuit of a B.A. in Ethnic Studies from UC Berkeley, where she was able to work alongside Norma Alarcón and Celia Herrera Rodríguez. In 2007, a year after learning how to screenprint, Cervantes and Jesús Barraza co-founded *Dignidad Rebelde*, a graphic arts collaborative that produces screen prints, political posters and multimedia projects grounded in Third World and



**Hands Off Assata, 2013**

indigenous movements. Advancing the legacies of cultural producers like Emory Douglas, Yolanda M. Lopez, Rupert García, and Juan Fuentes, Cervantes has emerged as one of the most prominent and important contemporary visual artists. In her first solo exhibit, *Puro Corazón*, Cervantes beautifully highlights the inextricable connection that exists between art, spirituality, activism, and the body. Curated by Cervantes, the selected works of *Puro Corazón* function as *remedios* confronting and contesting legacies of colonialism, genocide and exploitation. Spiritual activism and curanderismo lies in the heart of Melanie Cervantes’ extensive oeuvre.

Chicana feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa defined spiritual activism as “spirituality for social change, spiri-



**Tumbling Down the Steps  
of the Temple, 2009**

tuality that recognizes the many differences among us, yet insists on our commonalities and uses the commonalities as catalysts for transformation"<sup>2</sup>. Guided by the principles of Xicanismo and Zapatismo, Cervantes harnesses art to build people's power, amplify people's stories, and put the art back into the hands of the communities who inspire it. As Dylan Miner notes, the work of Dignidad Rebelde, "challenges notions of heterosexist and patriarchal Xicano visualities...contest[s] settler-colonial normativity within the field of Chicano art history, while also queering settler-colonial notions of the nation-state"<sup>3</sup>. Thus, Cervantes operates from a decolonial pedagogical praxis and this is *felt* through the title and layout of the exhibit. Puro corazón roughly translates to pure heart, pertaining to purity of the heart, but also connoting an amount of heart being put into something, like this exhibit. Heart and love are essential to the work of Cervantes. Putting corazón into something is an act of resistance. It is an exchange of energy and as bell hooks has pointed out, a verb<sup>4</sup>. It is an act of resistance because it challenges the capitalist notions of labor, productivity, value, and knowledge. A capitalist praxis values



**Rigoberta Menchu, 2009**

quantifiable data and deems non-western modes of knowledge production and distribution as less valid. Furthermore, this is racialized as it is used to discredit the underground and creative economies created by marginalized communities.

Writing about queer latinidad, Juana María Rodríguez, discusses how as Latin@s and queers, what has come to define us is our dramatic gestures.<sup>5</sup> Yet, she points out that our racialized excess is already outside the norm of what is useful or productive and thus must be contained. Thus it is this excess, this expression and carnality of gestures, sexualities, desires, and knowledges that are a threat to the accepted modes of knowledge. Cervantes rejects the idea that passion or emotion is not rational or that it needs to be contained. We can see this in the bold vibrant colors that aestheticize her work and her body. The first time I saw Melanie, I was coming out of BART on 12th Street. It was a warm summer afternoon almost evening and as I made my way to my bus stop, I caught glimpse of bright pink lipstick, a yellow sweater and black and white checkered pants. Embedded within the word corazón is the word razón, which is spanish



### VIVXS NOS QUEREMOS, 2018

for reason. Thus, as an analytic deployed by Cervantes, *co-razón* is a re-membering of reason and passion, of the body and the mind.

Along the stairwell we are greeted by images of various activists including Joaquín Murrieta, Magdalena Mora, Gloria Anzaldúa, Berta Cáceres, indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú, and political activist Marielle Franco. In the image of Rigoberta Menchú, only the top half of her body is visible. She is positioned off center to the right facing the audience. She wears a textured magenta *huipil* with a matching head wrap and neck piece. Behind her are a mountain and the visible blue sky. In the image of Marielle Franco, Franco looks out into distance. Her head and hair take up the majority of the frame. The background is composed of a collage of images of Marielle's community activism. In both of these images, the background is just as important as the subject in the foreground. Through the use of layer and texture, Cervantes creates symbolically layered political images. For instance, in the portrait of Menchú, the sky and the mountain stand firmly behind her, almost as if she is protecting them. In 1992, Menchú was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her activism and prompting awareness of the genocidal acts against indigenous people. At the same time, the mountain and the sky are positioned as if in support of her. The mountain protects her back and the sky guides her path. This demonstrates a decolonial understanding of the relationship between humxn and land; that is, one that is symbiotic and based on mutual respect.

Similarly in the portrait of Franco, the background is made up of the various causes Franco believed in. Franco was a councilwoman from Rio de Janeiro who was assassinated in March. She

was a queer black Brazilian woman from one of the poorest favelas in Rio de Janeiro. Her voice in government and in the streets was important to a lot of people who, traditionally and contemporaneously are silenced and ignored by the State. Cervantes beautifully captured this by constructing a collage of the various communities she belonged to. By creating this background, Cervantes compels her viewers to engage with the image on a more personal level. In order to visually grasp the series of images that make up the background, one must get close to the image, to linger and be face to face with Marielle, face to face with her communities. The collage of Marielle's work allows us to interact and confront her legacy up close.

In the same way that the veins pass blood and oxygen to a beating heart, the images on the stairwell pass the vital components of our activism, or heartivism. Ending the series on the stairwell with a stunningly beautiful image of a *corazón sagrado*, Cervantes reminds her audience to lead with our hearts. Each of the activists featured in the stairwell series, were committed to bringing justice to certain communities. Cervantes' decision to begin the exhibit with these images is an honoring of the leaders who have led with their heart to combat systemic forces of oppression and a reminder that our activism must be for the people and come from our heart not our ego. Like Marielle's, our search for justice must be intersectional. Like Menchú's, our activism must also center indigenous peoples and protect the Earth. And essential to our activism and to dismantling these forces is our community.

Essential to Cervantes' practice is using art to inform and transform. Through her art, Cervantes illustrates stories of struggle, resistance, and tri-



### End the Occupation of Palestine, 2016

umph. In "End the Occupation of Palestine" (2014), we are presented with the image of a young woman wearing a *keffiyeh* with her mouth open as if she is shouting. In the background, among other things, we see the words "end the occupation" appear to come out of her mouth. Contrasted against the red background, in white text is the word Palestine spelled in Arabic, Spanish, and English. This image speaks to the Israeli-sanctioned occupation of Palestine as well as the need for other marginalized communities to be in solidarity with the struggle for liberation in Palestine. This is emphasized through the compositional techniques of Cervantes whose enlarged image of the woman takes up the left third of the poster, a contrast from the very little attention mainstream media and politics pay to the Palestinian struggle. Additionally, the use of red both speaks to the violent atrocities occurring as well as the urgency felt in the region by Palestinians. In this way, one can *hear* the piece.

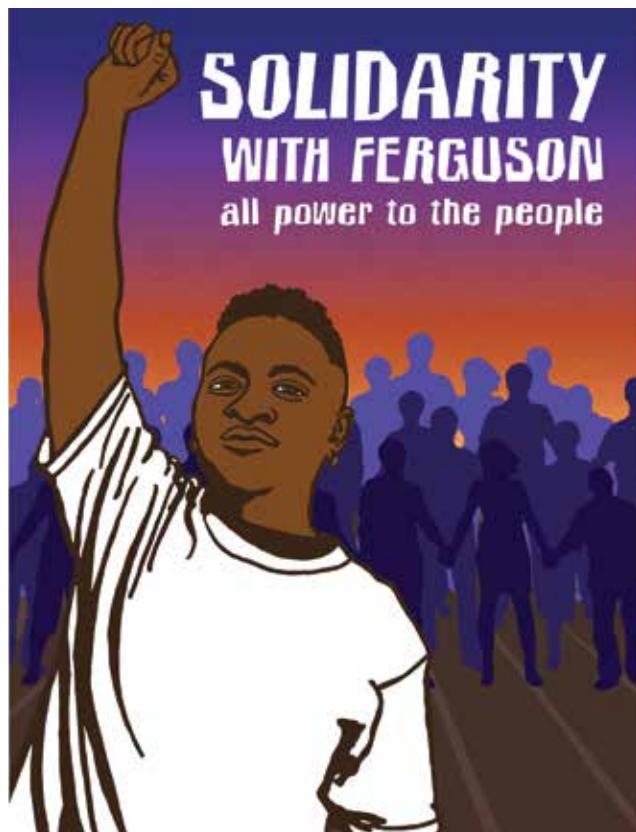
The theme of building solidarity and cross-cul-

tural understanding is also present in Cervantes' "Solidarity with Ferguson," which features a young Black activist with their fist up in the foreground. The background is composed of the silhouettes of people walking hand in hand toward the audience in solidarity with the young person in the center. In these two images Cervantes underscores the importance of solidarity as well as the personal responsibility she feels as an artist to create art that produces "knowledge and conocimiento"<sup>16</sup>. Rather than solely focus on the struggles and triumphs of the Xicanx community, Cervantes instead opts to use her skill to combat the divide and conquer tactics used by the state. In "Solidarity with Ferguson" the use of orange in the background imbues the piece with a sense of potentiality. As the sun rises, so do the people. Silhouettes emerge from the horizon. Upon closer inspection, one can see what appear to be stars. Combined, these elements ignite a sense of hope and support. They tell the people of Ferguson that they are not alone and remind them

that protesting and demanding justice is not futile. Cervantes presents these movements as sites of possibility; the possibility for connectivity, for justice, for change.

Central to her work is underscoring the personal as political, which she executes in Room 1 of her exhibit. The images lining the walls of this room are of women activists. Utilizing written text and bold colors, Cervantes creates a vivid archive of women who have contributed to making the world a more just place, yet are often erased from history. Among the images in this room is Sylvia Rivera, who along with Marsha P. Johnson, initiated the Stonewall Uprising. Commonly regarded as the birth of the Gay Rights Movement, the Stonewall Uprising occurred after police raided the Stonewall Inn, one of the few establishments that welcomed openly gay people in New York. Yet this history is so often erased that in the official trailer for the 2015 film, *Stonewall*, it is a cisgender gay man that is portrayed as throwing the brick that incited the riot. As Martin F. Manalansan IV notes in “In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma,” the globalization of a gay identity and with Stonewall as the point of liberation for gay and lesbian people, has not benefited everyone in the same way and instead left some people in the “shadows.” Despite the increase in positive LGBT representation and legislation, queer people- and trans women of color are some of the subjects the rainbow does not extend to. The biographical film about gay rights activist and politician, Harvey Milk (2008), had won two academy awards, by 2015, ABC’s *Modern Family* (2009-present) had already become a household name, having seven successful seasons as well as multiple awards. Two years after *Modern Family*’s premiere, Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) was repealed. The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which prohibited married same-sex couples from collecting federal benefits, was overruled.

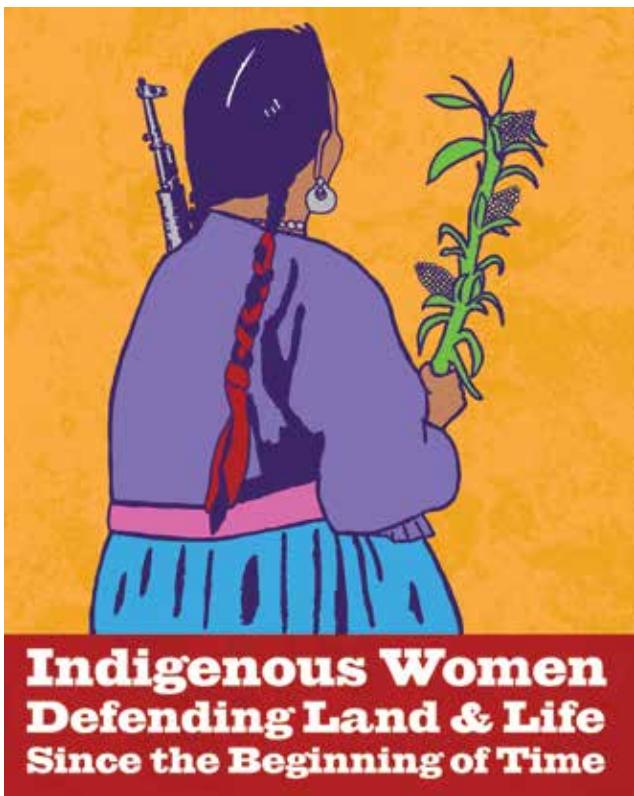
While these legislative and representational strides were important, the reality is that they met the needs of white middle class cisgender gay and lesbian Americans, not the needs of queer and trans people of color. 60% of LGBT hate crime victims are people of color. 2017 was the deadliest year on record for transgender people, with a majority of the victims being women of color. Thus, Cervantes’ image of Rivera creates an alternative archive. Through the use of bold colors, Cervantes



**Solidarity with Ferguson, 2013**

reclaims the colorful imagery associated with the mainstream gay movement, pointing to the ways in which the voices and efforts of and by transgender women of color have been louder, bolder and not parallel with the traditional gay and lesbian movement. At the bottom of the image, Cervantes includes a quote from Rivera: “we didn’t take no shit from nobody. we had nothing to lose.” This quote contextualizes the socio-political positionality of the trans women of color and calls into question who has truly benefited from the LGBT movement, while highlighting and honoring the tenacity of the women of color who have fought with all of their might and heart in the face of various obstacles.

In the second room, Cervantes honors the indigenous women who have fought to defend land, life, and livelihood. In one particular image against a luminous yellow background, an indigenous woman stands in the center, wielding a stalk of corn and a rifle. Her back is to us and in the foreground is the text, “Indigenous Women Defending Land & Life Since the Beginning of Time.” The image honors the legacy of indigenous women defending land. The text, written in white and placed on a red background within



### Indigenous Women Defending Land and Life, 2009

the larger color pattern of the piece, firmly states the resilience of indigenous women throughout history. This is further emphasized with the corn stalk she is holding as a weapon; as a mode of survival, demonstrating that she will not back down or be intimidated. The use of the corn stalk is important because corn or *maíz* is more than a crop, but it is a symbol of quotidian life. Not only does *maíz* provide food security, but it also sustains indigenous people at the economic and spiritual level. Thus, corn is inextricably linked to survival and the indigenous fight for sovereignty. As an audience, her back is to us and we are, in a way, able to see things from her perspective.

Cervantes' art is strongly tied to her background

as a Xicana and this is evidently seen in her "Viva La Mujer" image in the third room. "Viva La Mujer" is a collaboration between Cervantes and Barraza. In the center is a portrait of a Xicana drawn by Cervantes mixed with a pattern Barraza created from an ancient Olmec stone stamp. The joining of the past and the present combined with the declaration "Viva La Mujer" affirms the belief that *muxeres* must be at the center and forefront of transformational social change. Cervantes doesn't limit the means by which that change must be achieved, though.

In the fourth and final room of the exhibit, along the walls are various images of other cultural producers such as Lila Downs, Chavela Vargas, and James Baldwin. To me, this room was a powerful end/beginning of the exhibit as it challenges the toxic mentality that activism has to look a certain way. By portraying other artists in the exhibit, Cervantes marks the importance of pop-culture as a didactic site of resistance. Furthermore, it presents creativity as a powerful weapon to challenge systems of oppression. This is further emphasized with the text pieces Cervantes included displaying quotes about revolution, resilience, and our ancestors. In this way it is Cervantes' call for her audience to nourish and harness their creativity because it is the greatest weapon at their immediate disposal.

Like artists who came before her, Cervantes uses art to transform. Taken as a whole, the selected works demonstrate Cervantes' spiritual approach to art that sets her apart from her predecessors and contemporaries. In *Puro Corazón*, Cervantes takes us through the four chambers of her heart, demonstrating the creative production of following her heart's lead; the remedio brewed from intention and cariño. Harnessing her heart as a remedio, a muscle, an organ, an instrument, a weapon, an armor, a vessel, a home, Cervantes takes on Gloria Anzaldúa's call to action and "lights up the darkness" one beat/squeegee run at a time.

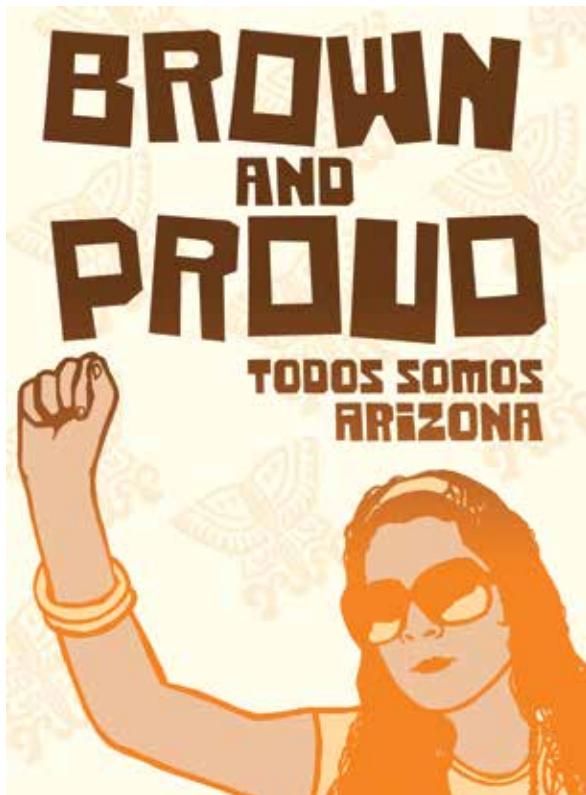
### NOTES

1. Cordova, Cary. *The Heart of the Mission : Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
2. Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Light In The Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Duke University Press, 2015.
3. Miner, Dylan. *Creating Aztlán: Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding Across Turtle Island*.
4. Hooks, Bell. *All About Love: New Visions*. William Morrow Paperbacks, 2018.
5. Rodríguez, Juana María. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. NYU Press, 2014. 2.
6. Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Light In The Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Duke University Press, 2015.

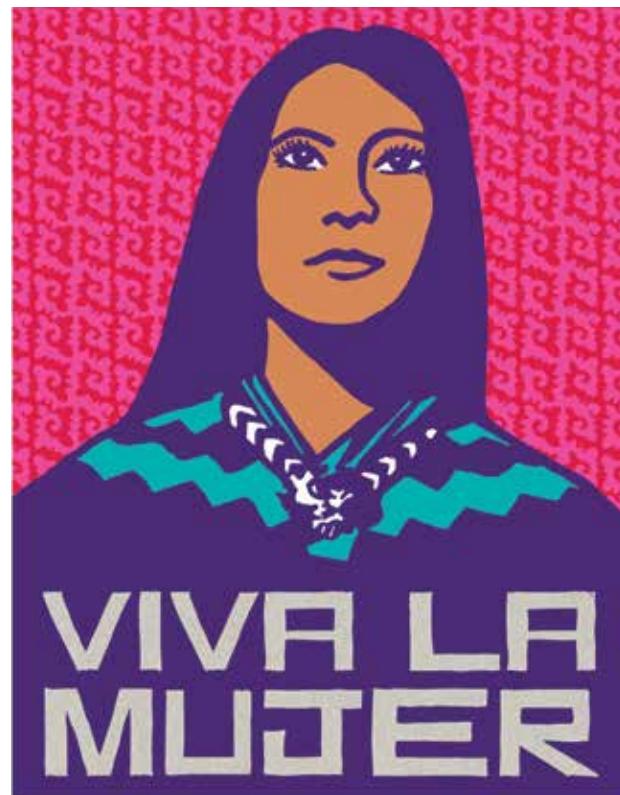


**"we didn't take no shit from nobody. we had nothing to lose."**

**we didn't take no shit from nobody, 2018**



**Brown & Proud**, 2010



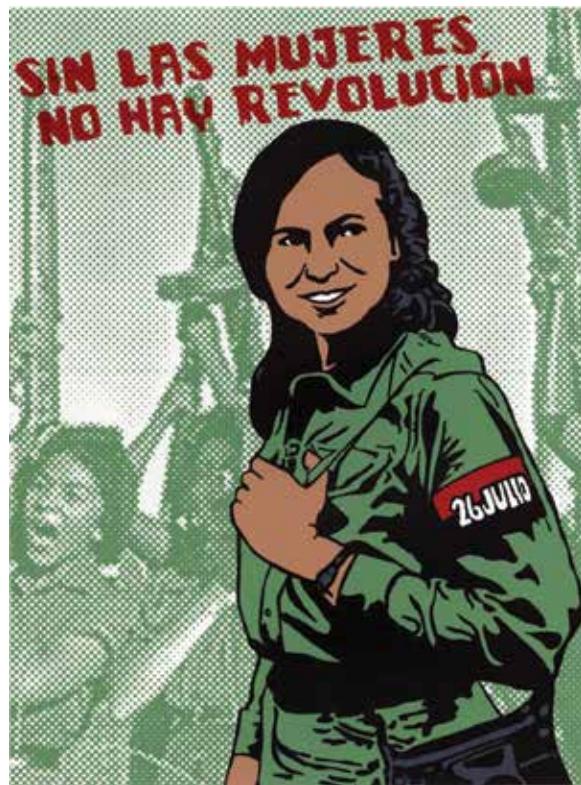
**Viva La Mujer**, 2017



**¡Ya Basta!**, 2018



**La Paloma**, 2017



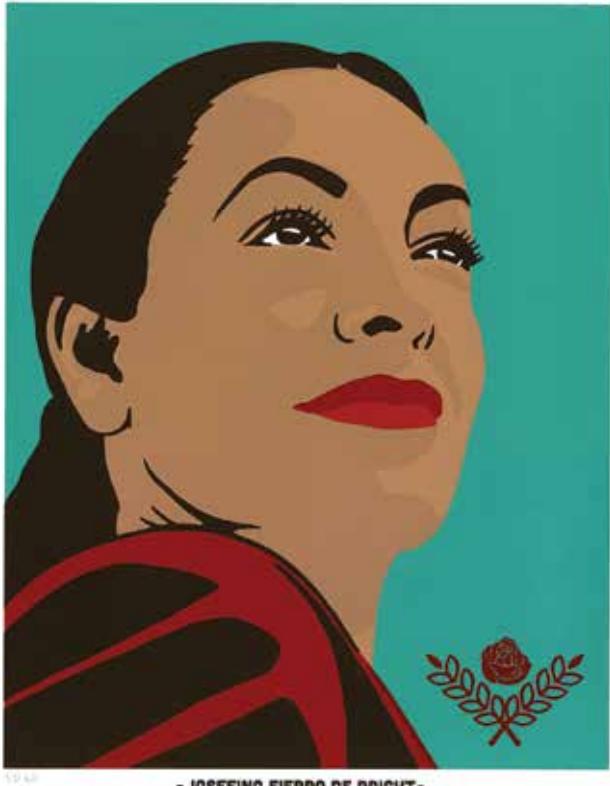
**Sin Las Mujeres No  
Hay Revolución**, 2017



**Between the Leopard  
and the Jaguar**, 2015



**Tejiendo el amor  
y la justicia**, 2014



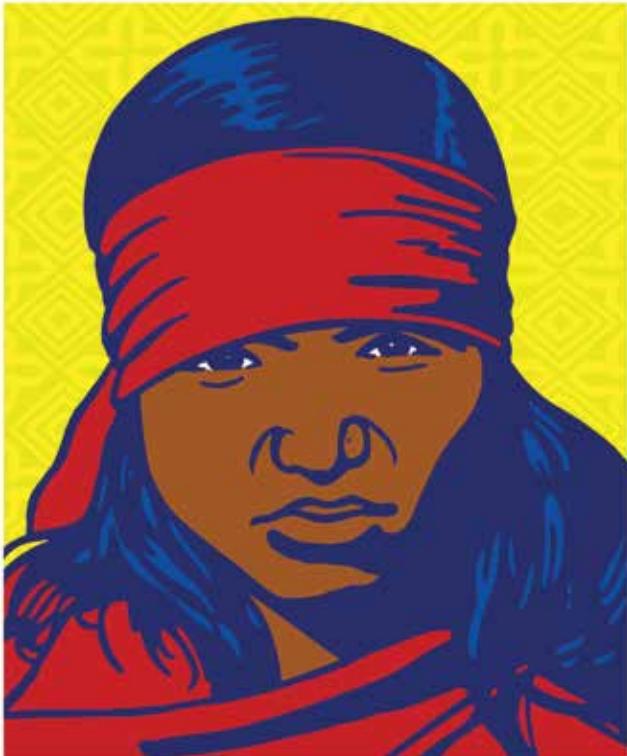
\*JOSEFINA FIERRO DE BRIGHT\*

**Josefina Fierro de Bright, 2018**



"remember that consciousness is power"

**Consciousness is Power, 2017**



"what others called a crime, I called justice"

**what others called a crime,  
I called justice, 2018**

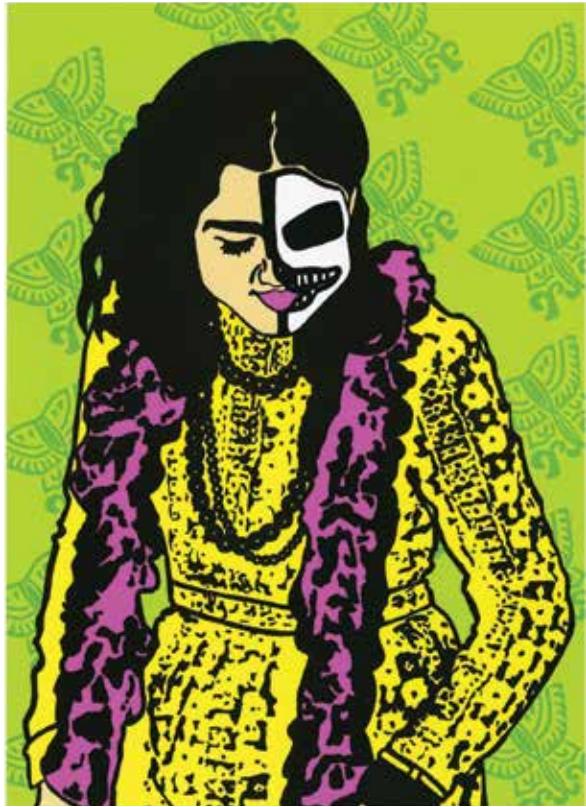


**NOBODY'S FREE UNTIL EVERYBODY'S FREE**  
- FANNIE LOU HAMER

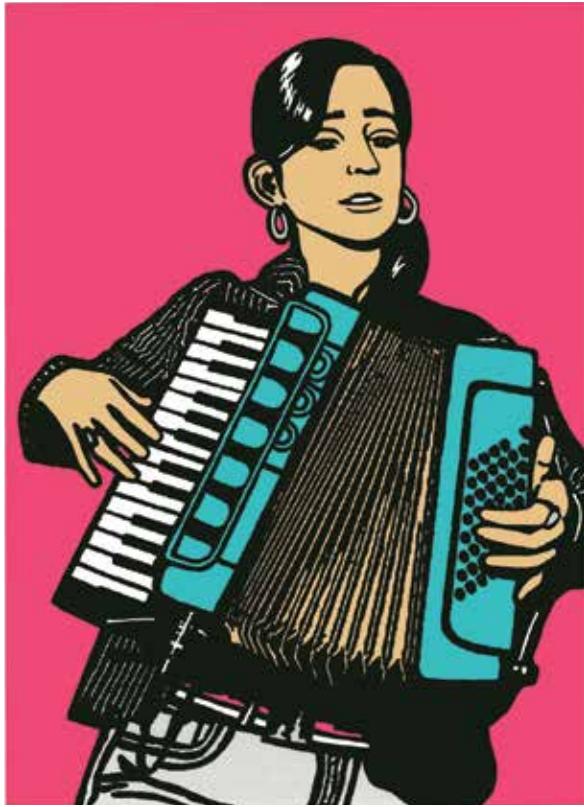
**nobody's free until  
everybody's free, 2018**



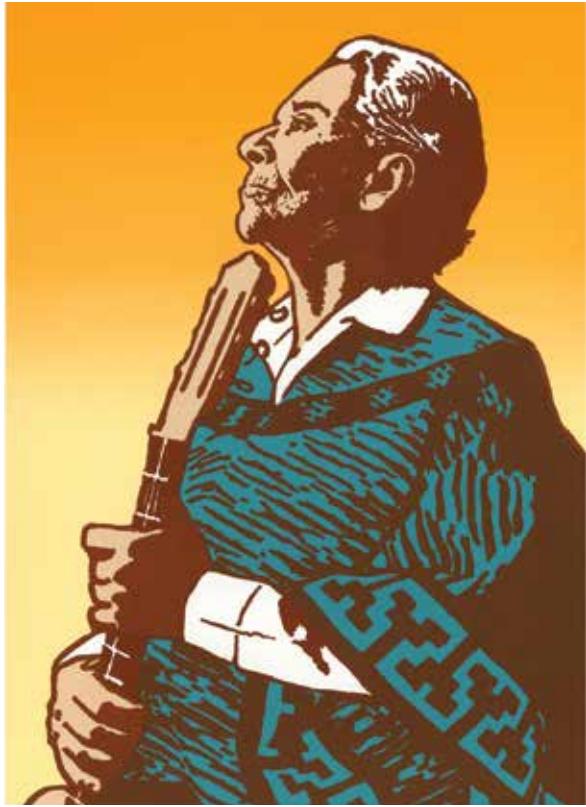
**Canciones de la Tierra**, 2010



**Zapateado de los Muertos**, 2010



**El Acordeon del Corazon**, 2011



**Cantando Al Pueblo**, 2011

**PROTECT YOUR  
SPIRiT  
BECAUSE YOU ARE IN A PLACE  
WHERE SPIRITS GET EATEN.**

**-JOHN TRUDELL**