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# Translocation and Memory: Cultural Experiences as Artistic influence

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Translocation and Memory:  
Cultural Experiences as Artistic Influence

By

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A THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

I construct two dimensional and three dimensional collages where the idea of identity and memory are conceived through the use of cultural signs. This paper discusses how reciprocal cultural experiences in different geographic locations like Calgary, Alberta and Antioquia, Colombia, have nurtured creative art production. Drawing on multiple theories of signs, I interrelate cultural memory and identity in response to my experience in a new location.

Personal development through the experience of travel is a source for artistic inspiration. Through making collage, whereby materials and images are combined from different contexts, I establish a communication via cultural signs that derive from personal associations with geography and culture. As a “detective“ of my own identity, the evidence of semantic memory in my artistic practice, reaffirms the communicative function of art.

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## **CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION (Environment)**

When formulating the research question for this paper, I questioned how and why the experiences in different locations are so important in my artistic practice. Through the process of making art in Iowa, Georgia, and now in Calgary, I realized the importance of using cultural signs as a testimony to my memories in response to my process of adaptation. The vitality and energy of Antioquia, Colombia is significantly important to my artistic production because cultural signs and their interpretation define both, personal and artistic memory.

My first international living experience outside my home country of Colombia was in Iowa, United States. As one of Midwestern states, known as the “American heartland”, Iowa was the place where I first became aware of how different cultural experiences changed the way I engaged the subjects for my art. The term “heartland” is actually associated with a socially conservative evangelical and Protestant location. Language, ethnicity, architecture and customs, were significant aspects that represented an obstacle to my interaction, particularly in a place with a lack of cultural diversity. My cultural background was decisive in my gradual adjustment to a new cultural location, which was a difficult process.



Fig. 1.1 *Spanish Lessons*

My M.A exhibition titled “Tropical Iowa” was a response to a new understanding with regard to cultural parameters. For example, in the painting “Spanish Lessons” a black figure of Juan Valdez, the promotional Colombian coffee figure, appears as a hidden and lost element in the composition (see fig. 1.1). On the left side of the painting, there is a figure of a fish that seems to interact with the black shape. The narrative of the painting alludes to the difficulties of understanding and communication as result of cultural differences.

Iowa, “The Corn State”, redirected my memories to Antioquia, the province where I come from, where corn also constituted a very important part of my daily diet. The use of cultural signs became a vehicle through which metaphor and narrative was expressed. In the painting “Spanish Lessons” figures and colors function as signs that modified each other.

Antioquia, the region where I was born and spent most of my life, is located in the northwest part of Colombia. It is partially surrounded by the Caribbean Sea and partly by mountains. Historically,



families settled in this province remained isolated for years, due to the geographical access difficulties (Rivera and Becerra 239). As the culture and economics evolved, people from Antioquia became traders. Commerce, agriculture and mining represent particular historical activities that characterized their idiosyncrasy and culture. “Paisas” is a nickname used in Colombia to identify both metropolitan and rural people from Antioquia.

The name Antioquia derives from the Hellenistic Greek-Syrian city of Antioch of Orontes. This is one of the theories that explained the name Antioquia to denote the coffee region of Colombia where people have a strong Hispanic influence (Erreka). Americo Castro’s *Spana en su Historia* (Spain in his own history) describes Hispanic culture as the mixture and interaction between three religions (Christians, Muslims and Jewish) in the Iberian Peninsula (Gil Cuadrado 38). Arab – Jewish ethnicity from Spain was reflected in the architecture in rural and urban areas of Antioquia through consistency of typology. Having an important repercussion in Latin America during Spanish colonial times, architecture in Antioquia has its own particularities in the use of color, decorations and geometrical shapes. As a part of my cultural experiences, urban elements such as architecture and color shape my artistic direction. As part of daily life these visual urban elements are stored in my mind as disjoined fragments extracted from reality, hovering in the unconscious waiting to be summoned. These memorable residuals of life and culture become more evident as they activate my cross-cultural memory. Through artistic creation, memory establishes new aesthetical parameters with the geographical context.

Color has formed my artistic eye as a cultural component in my creative process. Passion and vigor are reflected in bright painted surfaces in both city, and surrounding areas. Medellin, the capital of

Antioquia is known as “the city of the eternal spring”, a name commonly used to refer to its mild temperature, which resonates with color.



Fig. 1.2 Chiva



Fig. 1.3  
Balcony in Jardin (Antioquia, Colombia)

As a significant visual element, color is present in rural and urban locations. Traditional buses called “Chivas” and architectural facades in small towns in Antioquia, exemplify how flat paint is applied to surfaces, complementing in the environment. “Chivas” (see fig 1.2) are buses that have a vibrant and strident presence. These buses are utilized in moments of celebration, as well as for tourism. Primary and bright architectural colors generally have an appearance that establishes vivid contrasts. In the image of the balcony from Jardin, Antioquia (see fig 1.3), for example, yellow, orange and red are connected with blue patterns and long geometric shapes to create a dynamic rhythm. The conjunction of segmented color surfaces create ornament that is seductive and attractive, functioning as a type of “urban cosmetic”. One color next to the other allows a more intense visual experience. Houses in small towns like Jardin, Sonson, Rionegro, Guatape and La

Ceja are decorated with rectilinear and geometric figures. As a major signifier of Antioquia's appearance, color is a synonym of cultural folk identity.



Fig. 1.4 House in Guatapé (Antioquia, Colombia)

The colors are presented generally in squared shapes (see fig 1.4). The configuration of the architectural composition references some of the ornaments (*Mudejar Art*) used in Spanish architecture. As one of the most important Muslim influences in Spain, *Mudejar* architecture is a representative eclectic mixture which combines Islamic and Christian traditions. Geometric figures and patterns serve as decorative elements and their multiple interaction allows a sense of immediacy and impact.

Color is not the only significant cultural element in Antioquia. Architectural design and urban configuration formulates a cultural expression. Architecture in Medellín is constituted of brick buildings and old colonial houses. Architecture in Calgary differs in its prevalent use of materials such as wood, aluminum and glass. Colors such as cream white, grey and blue are more predominant in the landscape of Calgary because of the manner in which the city has been

constructed and designed through subdivisions. Calgary has a more modern and futuristic look. As an important financial industrial and commercial epicenter, Medellin with an estimated population of three and a half million, is the capital of Antioquia and a very representative city of Colombia. (Aburra's Valley).

The valley became an important region of Antioquia due to its rapid industrial development and prominence of working class. Nowadays, as in any other city in Latin-America, there is a social and economic contrast.



Fig. 1.5 *Casa Zea* (Medellin, Antioquia)

Multiple social interactions facilitate urban space to become a visual place where the contrast between graffiti interventions and traditional architecture is evident (see fig 1.5). Graffiti and street art are contemporary artistic and social manifestations that immediately capture people's attention by revealing marks and colors. In the downtown area, the contrast between the ruins of the colonial antique houses with urban expressions result in chaotic and extravagant combinations that usually influence each other. As modes of appropriation, the old and the new become eccentric. Graffiti is an important art expression that artists such as Banksy have used to create satirical and political messages. The presence of stencils in graffiti art is very common today. I have used the stencil

technique to reference urban environments. I appropriate this graffiti drawing technique using notation that discusses the presence of urban residuals and collective memory.



Fig. 1.6 Museum of Modern art of Medellín



Fig. 1.7 Mural by Stink Fish

As one of the interesting examples of urban projects that integrate people from different social spheres, “Ciudad del Río” (City of the River) is a prominent urban referent. Constituted mostly by green zones, it provides a social place for cultural exchange as one of the most important gathering points in the city. Restaurants located in the surroundings, art exhibitions and picnics, are some of the attractions people can enjoy in this meeting place. Office towers, apartment buildings, and a spacious park that connects intermedia areas are urbanistic structures. “Ciudad del Río” (City of the River) represents an environment of culture and life where different urban groups such as hip hop singers and skateboarders frequently meet. The conjunction of diverse group of people has influenced my thoughts.

This particular sector shows different facets and visual contrasts of the city itself. For example “Talleres Robledo”, an old factory remodeled to relocate the actual Museum of Modern Art of Medellín (see fig 1.6), contrasts with contemporary urban expressions of street art (see fig 1.7) Once again, both old and new appear and establish a relationship in the same location.

The absence of seasons and the tropical humid mild climate offers Medellin the opportunity for an outdoor community. The constant mild weather and the influence of Hispanic culture have influence on the gathering and communication habits. Chatting and sharing public spaces are part of daily situations that define different socio-economical classes.

As a principal cultural center in Colombia, important celebrations such as “The Feast of Flowers” and the “International Poetry Festival”, take place each year in Medellin. These events reunite people from different regions of Colombia and offer exotic attractions for hundreds of tourists. Showing different flowers and decorations in a parade, the Feast of Flowers is a cultural icon of the city, similar to the Lilac Festival in Calgary and the Calgary Stampede. Interacting directly with local people, poets from different countries visit the city during the “The International Poetry Festival” that takes place in parks, neighborhoods and nearby municipalities. These festivities are present as a part of a collective memory.

Through my own artistic experience, the richness and different contrasts of the city allow me to recognize the urban environment as part of my memory and artistic creation. These celebrations also became immediate cultural references of location and culture when I experience new cities. The absence of my own cultural variables in a new location, equivalent to ethnicity, language and urban references, has put me in a cultural limbo of confinement. In a way, my identity is disarticulated by a new reality because my own cultural parameters are disassociated with my actual circumstances. My cultural parameters are less effective in terms of communication and connection with people from different cultures. As a result, these elements become part of my compositions where time and space are constellated in a dissonant system of signs. Spectators discover their own cultural individuality through images of different contexts and locations.

I always wanted to discover how life in the United States (U.S.) and Canada was. My experience determined that relationships between individuals are strongly determined by cultural parameters. The way people interact and understand each other is associated with colloquialisms and particular language expressions that allow for closer relationships.

Since 2008, I have had the chance to live in different places such as the states of Iowa and Georgia in the U.S. and in the city of Calgary, in the province of Alberta, Canada, and I found that my cultural identity was a destabilizing component in terms of adapting to my new environments. The concept of identity embodies ethnicity, culture, and language (185), providing social interactions that establish relationships and processes of communication between people from different countries and cultures. People face misunderstandings and difficulties in terms of social connection because different ethnical groups with different cultural parameters are integrated in the same location. Considering how my cultural circumstances are defined in a new location, the inclusion of regional aspects into my work are fundamental to both concept and form. By incorporating local visual elements in the form of fragments from urban and rural contexts, I introduce images that become dreamlike components of personal memory. The manipulation and the different formal operations create a mysterious atmosphere connecting these elements into a mental landscape. A moment in mind that engages the viewer in an unfamiliar experience, connects him or her, not only with a geographical location and culture, but also, with a process and method. These reconnected fragments have an aesthetic function as they are reorganized into constellations of memories.

Challenged by experiences in other places, with different social conventions and rules, social circumstances have provided me with a deeper understanding of my condition. Actually, the

opportunity to travel evokes fragments of memories of my hometown province, Antioquia. However, the memory of my own culture creates problems of adaptation when it comes to experiencing another culture because a way of rearticulating my identity is determined by my ethnicity, language, and references of geographical space and location. Memory establishes my own individuality and sense of existence. The notion of Calgary was fundamentally important to recognize a place in my memory. In fact, the notion of memory becomes a living entity vanishing from reality in a constant mental voyage. My body is in Calgary but my mind remains in Colombia.

The coexistence of diverse people from different countries and nationalities, and the interaction of languages and cultures, is the reality of life in Calgary. In the contemporary world, cultural identity is affected by processes of mobility and immigration leading to mixtures of races, customs and beliefs (Canclini 20). Through the intensification of social interactions, identity has become a concept to understand transformations (Kearney 548). New customs, ways of living and traditions represent a new social panorama. The feeling of disconnection is a consequence of how my cultural background and identity have impacted my actual circumstances. Identity, by relating memory and culture, affects our mutual social relationships, and constitutes a way of recognition and self-acceptance.

Displacement and immigration affects people from different geographical peripheries, and questions such as “who I am?” and “where do I come from?” become fundamental in the recognition of my cultural memory (Sauhuquillo 812). The idea of using cultural signs, in the form of graphic elements, contextualizes my experiences in a broader sense. Signs such as photographs, stencils, and marks of paint are representations that I have integrated into my work as fields of culture and social values. Cultural signs and symbols from advertisements, construct their own



reality imputed through urban media conventions. Representations of signs in my art are related to memories and cultural identity.

## CHAPTER 2: LANGUAGE

### Signs, Fragments and Memory

In the previous chapter I mentioned the importance of my experiences outside Colombia. I also alluded to how color and architecture are ways that define my cultural identity. Color is also a sign which has become an important visual element of my work. The language of color is the way signs acquire a chromatic meaning in specific contexts. In the urban and rural areas, colors influence cultural memory. They become visible in memory when I experience different locations. The multiplicity of vivid colors in my work is the result of the interaction with the environment of Antioquia, Colombia. In my collages, color signifies the influence of a culture engaging the audience through dissonant combinations. The immediacy and *contrast* of the different colors reconfigure and influence a part of memory. Fragments of colors are evidence of my own search and connection with a geographical place condensed of fragments hidden in my mind. Colors from Antioquia are translocated and incorporated into my Calgary work.

Language is related to collage through the manipulations of colors, shapes, images and textures. Language is understood as a system of signs that facilitate communication between people. Alphabets, for example, are constituted by letters with a syntax to convey messages determined by rules and principles. Defined as an object, phenomena, or material action, signs substitute for another object or phenomena. Signs become an expression that allows us to have a sense of the world through different hierarchies of visual ordering. Signs are the fundamental structural component of my collages as colors, surfaces and texts.

C.S Pierce states signs are comprised of three basic categories: icons, index and symbols (Burks 673). One way of examining collage and their relative function as a sign is to apply C.S Pierce's basic categories. Represented in paintings and photos, icons substitute and portray characters, actions and objects, maintaining a similarity with reality. Forms represented in icons suggest meaning and clarity; and symbols suggest ideas as replicas of the world more distant to the actual perception (Maggio 237). Indexes are particular features that lead to conclusions. Indexes as traces, marks and prints establish connections with actions. Icons and indexes with their high expressive qualities offer an entry point between the image and the physical world.

Icons and indexes are fundamental components of collage; and as an artistic representation, collage is also a language and similar process defining itself through media of communication. Offering a connection between the sender and the receiver, collage as an art object, establishes a relationship between the author and public. Collage becomes a message that relates my experiences with a new audience. My artwork becomes a channel that manifests itself in the form of reconnected fragments. Particular physical characteristics signal a moment in mind, a presence or a memory that commences a search for a greater identity. When referring to collage as a language, organization and structure, such as texture, colors and scale become important elements within a visual system. Art as a language, and particularly collage, entails the manipulation of images and objects, which manifest their own presence as images. Their proximity creates new metaphors and language. Collage is a signifying system where visual elements evoke meaning. In "Claude Levi Strauss" Bertholet explain how abstract art direct mind to the landscapes and ports in Joseph Vernet's paintings (252).

Similarly collage can be understood as an artistic language providing change through new connections and disconnections between elements apparently disassociated. Yuri M. Lotman describes signs as part of cultural and tangible world, where text as an artistic element generates new information. Signs as structures defined within the fabric of culture, function as catalysts that construct new messages (2).

As one of the most significant artistic inventions of the twentieth century, collage was implemented by George Braque, Pablo Picasso and Kurt Schwitters, pioneering a new configuration that combines languages with constructions and deconstruction of form through material surface and language, manifesting social reality. The methods and techniques of the collage medium suggest the manipulation of “fragments” or “residuals” that appear as signs, in the form of compositional and linguistic elements. Through rearranging various elements of cultural memory, collage creates new visual vocabularies.

Derived from the Latin “frangere” which means to “to break”, the idea of the fragment emerges continental thought, particularly in the work of Walter Benjamin. From a linguistic point of view, the piece and the *gestalt* establish communication and balance through a cyclical shift from part to the whole, and whole to part: the meaning of one component influences the other and vice versa. A synecdoche, for example, is a rhetorical literary device that helps to explain the relationship between the fragment and the physical world. For example “Suits” refers to “businessman” or “boots” for soldiers, where the part refers to a greater whole.

The idea of fragment is also understood in different fields. A fragment is a temporal rupture and represents a dividing act deconstructing the whole. In “accidental and fractal geometry”, the fragment becomes another system establishing new relationships in its continuous separation

(Calabrese 90). Fragments invite a particular aesthetic engagement, establishing reciprocal relationship on multiple planes of forms and values.

Additionally, the idea of fragment is used metaphorically in some novels to describe three types of memory. Umberto Eco's *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* is the story of a sixty year old man Giambattista Bodoni, who after suffering a severe stroke, forgets everything. One day he wakes up without knowing who he is; and his own life is an empty vessel. After leaving the hospital, Bodini starts the process of recovery where books, billboards, acetates, newspaper cuts, publicity and movies help him to discover his own personal memory and identity. In this novel, Eco refers to the notions of fragments in the form of signs of popular culture as a significant part of memory. The character that Eco portrays in his novel becomes a "private investigator" and the subject of his enquiry is himself. Through the reading of these series of signs, Giambatista Bodoni reconstruct his memories to try to find out who he is. (Prada Londono).

Three types of types of memory are described: the implicit memory that allow us to remember simple things such as brush our teeth or turn on a radio, the episodic memory that allow us to recognize who we are (autobiographical) and the semantic or public memory, that allow us to form general categories like woman, car or dog (Eco 12). In the novel, Bodoni tries to make connections with his episodic memory through his semantic memory. In fact, he remembers episodes and characters from the Second World War such as *Tokyo*, General Mc Arthur and Hiroshima, but he is unable to remember who he is (Ibid 13). Consequently, an observer of works of art acts like a detective, analyzing signs in the production of "meanings" looking for connections as if solving a crime.

The idea of “fragment” can also be traced in the first half of the twentieth century related to the nature of historical evidences. For Walter Benjamin, the German philosopher and cultural critic, the idea of fragment as “ruins” is understood as a vital structure of human language and knowledge. Showing a condition of desperation, the idea of fragment is immersed in a “catastrophical present”, as something miserable, but full of mysticism (Duran Chaparro 9). For Benjamin, the magic of the fragment is also connected with a methodological notion of “searching in the city”, as an archeologist who tries to find sense in the world.



Fig. 2.1 *Watchtower*

In the painting “Watchtower”(see fig 2.1), German artist Sigmar Polke includes an element of the German collective memory that directs people minds to tragic episodes in contrast with the commercial fabric patterns of flowers. Polke clearly contrasts the social historical circumstances of Germany through the juxtaposition of techniques and materials. In this painting, the stencil functions as a metaphor that references German collective memory of interment and prison camps. The stencil serves as a metaphor for confinement.

Signs are also identified as codes to decipher meaning. In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes speaks about signs, while travelling in Japanese civilization that are clearly evident in urban experience. Japanese calligraphy and language are social components, which are assimilated and understood. Being in a foreign culture, signs acquire specific communicative function: “Hence, in foreign countries what a respite! Here I am protected against stupidity, vulgarity, vanity, worldliness, nationality, normality” (9).

The collage medium has influenced the concept of painting and its organization of space. Fragments are vital elements of the collage medium, which have contributed to the development of art through the second half of the twentieth century. One of the most important artists, Kurt Schwitters, conceived the *Merz Method* based on free association without logical ordering. Mixing graphic material derived from found objects, design images, and promotional material (Schmalenbach), expressions arose of the devastation of the First and Second World Wars. Schwitters envisioned that new things had to be made by reassembling fragments of daily life (Jacobson).

Collage was used to provoke and challenge old traditions. With the intention of destroying all literary and artistic conventions, artists used *bricolage* to elaborate a new vision of the world, while at the same time creating satirical metaphors (Molesworth 178). In art, bricolage has represented a way of expression combining mass produced two and three dimensional objects. Understanding the historical and contemporary references of collage contributes to the establishment of notions of cultural identity. The viewer tries to make connections with references in a search for meaning harvested from these hints and inklings. There is an attempt to discover their origins. In my work, particular references present a visual riddle.

Nowadays, cultural expressions such as *graffiti* and *street art* have become extensions of assemblage and collaging practices through the use of stencil marks, stickers and newspaper billboards (Keys). The appropriation of images and the use of stencil and collage techniques, allow artists to express situations of discomfort in the city. Graffiti stenciled marks, painted walls and tear posters, become signs of the urban landscape, whose presence has influenced my artistic quest. I have incorporated these elements to create my own art, and to show how urban environments, as receptacles of identity and memory, have affected me.

Initially conceived by the Dadaists and Surrealists to create images without an apparent logic (Ades, Cox, Hopkins 133), collage has represented a media of expression and communication. I want to situate cultural signs used in the collage medium to demonstrate how these techniques are capable of influencing memory and identity in contemporary society. The images I have incorporated in my collages are living proof of my own experiences and processes. These fragments as cultural signs function as synecdoches or metonyms for Antioquia. Cultural signs are interwoven in a visual totality that subsequently refers to memory and identity.

Magazines, images of publicity, comic books and graphic design are sources that I use to represent fragments of civilization, territory and society. Through collage, these juxtaposed remnants act as signs in response to the experiences of the environment that surrounds me. By incorporating these “parts of the world” into my art, I create connections with the time and reality that I live in. Through the use of collage, I also incorporate visual relationships between geographical places, which give meaning to my own experiences.

Collage is a way to manifest my presence through visual signs that substitute actions and relationships, dependent on my own cultural location. Associations of transition, mobility and



dislocation are manifested through the mixture of images where memories, as cultural signs, are resituated in a new time and place. Juxtaposing images and surfaces, closely connected to my culture, enables viewers to establish new associations. In the following section I will integrate notions of collage with visual referenced to cultural icons and symbols.

### Cultural Contexts in my Artistic Practice

A collection of photographs represents an interesting example of iconic references. Old photos of Medellin document the changes in population and urban structure throughout the twentieth century. Printed in large sizes, these series of photos known as “Memory in Images,” are displayed around the city. The majority of these photos portray society at the beginning of the twentieth century and also depict interesting old buildings and architecture that no longer exist. The Pilot Public Library of Medellin houses 22,000 digitalized images that can be accessed for consultation. Used for different projects, these images constitute a photographic archive declared by UNESCO as a “regional register of memory of the world” (BBP).



Fig. 2.2 *The Step Album*

*“Memory in images: Photographic Archive from Medellin for Latin America and the Caribbean,* documented the history of Antioquia that the local people have shown interest in, particularly in recent years. Thus, by contrasting the old with the modern city, this collection of photographs put the spectators in a mental space, whereby memory affects their sense of reality (see fig 2.2). The images are immersed in an atmosphere of nostalgia revealing cultural identity.

Similarly, coffee also constitute a memorable icon of Antioquia. This is reflected in the engagement with agriculture in the rural areas which is a very important cultural reference in Colombia. Coffee from Antioquia is shipped to markets around the world. Not only is coffee an important part of the Colombian economy, it is also a source of income for subsistence farmers. Colombian coffee is renowned and known for its quality and freshness and has been a traditional product in Colombia. Coffee, as a product of exportation, allowed the development of a regional economy in Antioquia, giving the western part of Colombia a local stronger identity (Posada Carbo).

Flowers are another significant icon in Colombia. To illustrate this, every year in August, the capital of Antioquia, Medellin, celebrates the “Feast of Flowers”. This large celebration constitutes a cultural and historical icon in the region, similar to the Carnival of Rio de Janeiro, the celebration of Oktoberfest in Germany and the Calgary Stampede in Calgary. Feast of Flowers evokes beauty, happiness and optimism, and attracts a diverse group of people. Flowers are signs of beauty and are used to represent many different notions such as gratitude and sympathy. The cultivation of flowers is also a very important for the economy in Antioquia. The Feast of the Flowers is an event celebrated every August and unites the Colombian people through a colorful parade (see fig 2.3).



Fig. 2.3 Feast of Flowers

Through direct interventions, printed images of coffee, flowers, and old photographs become indexes, which are evidence of cultural identity. Fragments are positioned in very strategic ways to configure a sense of translocation. In a way, these images are also indexes of a reconfiguration of my memory propelled by my reality. Giving signs a new visual significance is a form of appropriation. Cultural signs have different context and function. By adding discontinuous words referencing location, I evoke an interrupted and abstract process of communication. Using fragments of images is a way to give cultural signs a sense of connectivity towards my cultural background and artistic practice.

The process of reorganization of these signs functions as part of the commercial world where surfaces are seductive and also possess immediacy. By reevaluating their significance through formal operations and gestures, I allow these material signs to have another level of communication based on my reality. In a way, these collages are a new cosmetic, reconfiguring a notion of communication and aesthetics within a new order related to the notion of cultural living memory. Although there are coincidences and similarities regarding the appearances of the figures with other places, the objects and images I incorporate, emphasize the region of Antioquia and its culture. This is the location where I have lived most of my life. These signs travel through memory in time and space and resurface in a new location as a part of my identity.

The way in which people think and act, is determined by language. Spanish, for me, and for the majority of people from Latin-American, also offers a most profound sense of soul.

In a way, Spanish is a communicative component that allows me to understand who I am, especially when I experience it in non-Spanish speaking locations. For example, when I communicate in Spanish in Calgary, it redirects my memory to Colombia. Through the use of

language in the form of segmented words such as ANTIOQUIA, I evoke the cultural experience as language interacts with images from Antioquia. Therefore, through the use of segmented stenciled words, I transpose meaning through dislocation as new image placement is influenced by context.

However, when it comes to cultural experience, language becomes problematic because signs are articulated and understood differently in different cultures and different languages. Spanish or any non-English can be quite unfamiliar and strange. Moreover, signs in Spanish can lead to disorientation for non-Spanish speakers.

The words I have incorporated throughout my work signify places where I grew up and where I feel a sense of community. By incorporating words, I indicate a place and the idea of a memory. These series of words also have connections with found objects and provide a sense of language and place. In this particular case, I encountered sacs of coffee in a woodshop that activated a sense of culture and memory through the physical experience of the object itself. The words “Medellin Supremo”, for example, inscribed on the sacs, represent a source of energy and a sense of place. These found coffee sacs not only define a product of major exportation of Colombia, but also speak through textures, marks, and surfaces that represent the memory of place and people. In a way, these cultural sign functions as a “presence” and “absence”, and the inscribed language expands its significance as a pictorial element.

Stencil is a technique that allows me to invert these commercial signs to give them an artistic context. Language and signs, as a result of these formal operations, gain other levels of

significance, as inverted figures. In same way, stencils configure simulations of real experiences by reversing the words and changing their direction and sense.

### CHAPTER 3: STUDIO PRACTICE

In this section, I would like to analyze aspects of my studio practice which are examples of my linguistic approaches to art making. In *Supermodels*, a series of collages and *Mr. Zed and the Real People*, I have used the notion of cultural signs formulated as fragments in conjunction with the concept of sematic memory. In this way, the construction of the notion of culture becomes a solid art object. In these compositions, the two dimensional space becomes a stage for conflict and interrogation.



Fig. 3.1 *Supermodel 1*

*Supermodels* is a series of collages, created in September 2013. Composed of photographs, photocopies, and marks of paint, the series was initially conceived with previous photographic compositions of magazines by juxtaposing other objects to create a mysterious impression (see fig 3.1). I pasted these photographs on flat surfaces, combined with black and white images that were altered in Photoshop. As a conclusion to this process, I modified these Photoshop illusions of surfaces with actual brushstrokes of pigment. The resulting combination of fragmented images generates a conversation between dissimilar elements which creates intrigue for the viewer, as it

also provokes. Expressionistic marks are reduced to simple cosmetic place holders playing ironically with the components of the composition.

How we identify cultural signs and how identity changes through “cosmetic” interventions are relevant questions that need to be acknowledged as part of my work. Signs as images, are modified through different operations, specifically cutting, pasting, overlapping and painting. Using mass produced identifiable objects and found textures allows me to play and construct a scenario of disruption and confusion. The images I create emerge from backgrounds confined in a defined space, where compositionally the appearance of the figures are compressed. Appearance as part of identity, is redefined and adapts its meaning through different contextual relationships. Through formal operations, relational aspects within the surfaces become apart and create networked conversations.

The concept of beauty is framed within the idea of the cosmetic through painting that is sensually attractive at a glance. The decorated painted surfaces engage the aesthetic experience. Similarly to the surfaces of the architecture in Antioquia and the “Chivas”, decorative elements work together to make bodies and faces more attractive. This aesthetic experience is related to the different combination of forms and elements resulting in either unity or disjunction.

In the supermodels series, visual constructions from fantasies are contrasted, placed beside one another in order to create new fantasies. The distortion of images establishes a new reality through similarity and difference. In contrast, there is a continuation of marks of black paint that separate the mules head. A Photoshop augmented mule establishing its own unique identity is depicted at



the bottom of the composition. The mule framed in a yellow square serves as a countpoint to the supermodel image. The head of the mule separated from her body represents cultural and physical disconnection. As icon of Colombian coffee, the mule represents disassociation or interference between two cultural elements from opposing contexts. The supermodel and the mule are a metaphor of a collective consciousness defined via components of semantic memory.



Fig. 3.2 *Nicole Kidman*, Channel No5

The image of the white slender female is frequently reproduced in fashion magazines and posters, establishing a stereotypical conception of an idealized woman. The effect of global marketing and publicity have an influence on cultural identity by establishing canons of beauty all over the world (see fig 3.2). Images of supermodels are located in every city in the world and represent normative view of beauty. The idea of beauty represents a cultural element that determines the way we construct physical value.

The influence of American models in the media have affected the ideal of the feminine figure in Medellin. This has led to women having an obsession with beauty, and surgeries and cosmetic implants are now part of notions of aesthetics and glamour. The contemporary French artist Orlan has critiqued these practices by altering her body through different surgical procedures.

American cultural products have also affected me throughout my life. For example, comic books, music videos, magazines, and TV series have had a great influence since childhood. Despite growing up in Colombia, a country with different realities from North America, American media export continually influences our perception of idealized beauty. This disjunction has been particularly significant for me in terms of aesthetics and artistic approaches. Therefore, the words *foreign*, *national*, *artificial*, *natural*, as opposing terms, are implicit in the concept of cultural identity. For me particularly, these contradictions seem to be the basis of visual discussion in my work. In the *supermodels series*, cultural experiences resulting through the sensation of instability and dislocation challenge the stereotype. My life experiences in Iowa, Georgia and Alberta reaffirm my Colombian idiosyncrasies through my artwork by establishing a presence of Colombian cultural signs.

In terms of cultural and social experiences the notion of “taste” can be problematic by creating demarcation windows that can constrain how the viewer might experience the work. In the supermodel series, the identity of the mule which is characterized as a force of labour, is elevated to the status of the perfumed supermodel, competing with an image of sophistication and elegance. Both are opposing signs that contrast cultural sensitivities and social conditions.

The “in between spaces” of being caught in between a foreign culture and outside of one’s familiar culture creates what Walter Mignolo, Argentinian professor at Duke University, calls the “conscience of frontiers.” Mignolo notes that this has been deeply reinforced by globalization and mobility that provides a catalyst for change (33). The contrast of elements immersed in a visual dislocation, offers significant contradictions that generates new meaning. The *Supermodel* collage series is associated with appropriation and social identity, where real circumstances collide with idealizations.

The supermodel series was photographed in Colombia. The complementary image of the mule, was subsequently incorporated into the series. The image of the mule, was then incorporated into my further work in Canada. The elements of the composition are reconfigured to transform their original identity into new contextual relationships that become another extended identity. By contrasting these images, I open the possibility for the contradictions of how real cultural encounters lead to conflict, where the iconographical referents are recontextualized by placing them compositionally at the same level.

One’s perception of the world varies as a result of new cultural and social encounters and traveling experiences. By modifying fragments of images through the use of the photocopy process, the identity of these fragments are consumed and reconfigured as new forms. In this way, I wanted to explore my cultural condition, using referents such as “global” and “local” to express the constant collision, conflicts and alienation of people as they adapt in present experiences in foreign territories to create new meaning.



Fig. 3.3 *Mr. Zed and the Real People*

*Mr. Zed and the Real People* is a series of paintings designed during spring 2014 (see fig 3.3). In this series of paintings, stencil and pasted texts are combined texts with images of characters related to the society. Here, Disney, coffee, pre-Columbian statues, Punk Boys with bombs and segmented texts are confined in a constrained space. The bar codes and the numbers are just random configurations that reference painting as a merchandise product alluding to identity through referential signs. The colors of the series impute a tropical atmosphere. The vibrancy and luminosity of the flat acrylic evoke similarity to the colors used in houses in the small towns in Antioquia. The consecutive panels are shown as if they constitute a graphic novel. These paintings are structured in a similar sequential read to the narrative of a comic book story.

In this series of stencil- collages the viewer plays the role of an investigator trying to link the meaning and the connections between images. The compositions display connections between the physically fragmented cultural signs that serve as a catalyst for new visual stories to be discovered. The saturation and agglutination of these pictorial components demonstrate how cultural signs present in the “Chivas” and the architectural facades have a similar design configuration.

These images and texts function as disconnected signs that modify conversations in a nonlinear organic communication network. For example, the Punk Boys allude to the idea of an outsider from society, the antiestablishment figure that at the same time, is vulnerable and fragile. The two letters *co* allude to the different meanings of this word and its association to words like cocaine, Colombia, coffee and company. These words are also components of Colombian memory and identity.



Fig. 3.4 *Valdes*

In the painting *Valdes* (see fig 3.4), the image of Mickey Mouse is merely suggested and is located in the upper right corner. Disneyland is actually presented in the media as a *Magical Kingdom* a place of fantasy, and in this painting it is confronted with the image of Juan Valdez, who represents the Colombian coffee farmer image created by the Doyle Dane Bernbach ad agency. A fragment of the map of Colombia is shown in the upper left corner of the painting. This is the southern part of Colombia, but has the inscription “north” as a contradictory element. The word “Medellin” is inverted as a symbol of direction of return and discontinuity.

Boxes and sacs of coffee as found objects have also allowed me to create an atmosphere that conveys a particular notion of translocation through cultural signs and symbols. Boxes and sacs, as daily objects used for packaging and transportation are constantly removed from corridors, hidden in storage rooms, or just thrown in the garbage. Boxes and sacs are constantly moved from one place to another, thus acquiring the ambience of the new location and place. Boxes are containers for all type of products transported as part of our daily lives. They also function as containers of cultural signs.

There is also transmigration of people from Colombia to Calgary, who are in transition from one place to another. This transition represents the displacement of a cultural collective memory. Functioning as “containers of culture” which travel long distances, cardboard boxes convey the idea of temporality and transformation. The feeling of dislocation as consequence of cultural adaptation motivated me to construct “fragments of urban memory” using cardboard, wall paint and photocopies. These materials are mostly used in urban contexts and locations, having a temporal and ephemeral characteristics.



Fig. 3.5 *In Transit* (Lateral view 1)

In my *In Transit* installation, different scales and colors are characteristics of these stencil boxes, which have an overloaded visual appearance. The conjunction of different flat surfaces painted with pastel and wall paint colors, incorporating stencils marks, references the sense of an urban landscape (see fig 3.5). The juxtaposition of old photographs of my province Antioquia, combined with stencil inscriptions of words and patterns, creates a sense of space and atmosphere particular to Colombia.

The contrast between old images explained in Chapter 2 and the marks of paint and graffiti in these boxes offers a visual conflict between past and present, old and new. In fact, the wall paint pastel colors used in the boxes, are similar to ones used in the architectural tradition in Antioquia. The intervention of this series of boxes represents a moment of shift and transposition where cultural signs act as a protagonist in a journey. Incorporating stencil texts from locations in Colombia and Canada, forced images become indexes of identification.

Situating viewers in a scaled urban scenario of confusion and disorientation, these series of boxes mixed with images, texts and marks, show the condition and cultural implications of dislocation and mobility in new urban settings. In fact, by having three dimensional qualities, the installation opens the possibility of dislocation to be experienced in different ways. Cardboard boxes recreate an urban context characterizing the “marginal” condition and a pervasive consumer culture.



Fig. 3.6 *In Transit* (Lateral view 2)

The images of an old urban setting in Medellin, mixed with fragments of sacks of coffee, are incorporated into the boxes. Words such as “ANTIOQUIA” (see fig 3.6), reference geographical places are repeatedly inscribed. They function as traces of locations, and as unknown territories in Calgary. They become geographical memories in the form of places that only exist in one person’s mind.



## CHAPTER 4: EXHIBITION AT THE NICKLE GALLERY

For my final show, I will be exhibiting two bodies of work, collages, and silkscreens. The collages “Yambo,” and the silkscreens “Translocations,” combine painting with printing processes and address saturation, change and movement. Others concepts such as gathering, removal, texture and depth are also included as part of the content.



Fig. 4.1 *Yambo*

“Yambo” defines itself through different collages composed of old photographs from Medellin combined with other materials and textures. These old printed photos are complemented by imagery pasted on cardboard boxes (see fig 4.1). Cardboard as recycled material is the raw ubiquitous material of products for consumerism, used for containment throughout the world. The idea of using cardboard boxes represents commonality between products that connect different cultures and territories. Cardboard boxes are also part of the international market.

Boxes are present everywhere and are the containment and rudimentary infrastructure of everyday life. As in the body, where muscles and bones define human anatomy, boxes define human culture. Commerce and trading are vehicles of culture; and boxes are the containment of cultural products. Cardboard boxes and sacs are also both vessels of containment. Coffee, the product of Colombia, is shipped in sacs which functions similar to cardboard boxes. Sacs and boxes that are continuously relocated, have an ephemeral sense of temporality. Interventions through text, stickers and labels on the surfaces record a history and schema of place and time.

As an installation composed by collages, “Yambo” represents the reconstruction of a personal identity through images of semantic memory. Consisting of three dimensional qualities and constructed with different materials, “Yambo” represents the notion of painting, which is shown in a new configuration of form and image. By establishing empty interconnections in the gallery through fragmentation, the spectator moves around the work experiencing the physical sensation of translocation and unity. Moreover, the viewer discovers links within the work in the form of fragments. “Yambo” is located on different walls and represents a totality and conjoining in the different signs used. This is similar in nature to the character in Umberto Eco’s novels “The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana”. The representations in the different printed material are signs of memory that travel and deposit information over long distances. The conjunction and juxtaposition of old photographs painted with pastel and charcoal on cardboard, and the *mudejar* patterns and names of locations created with stencils marks combined with sacs, function as modifiers that create a new language and metaphor.

The old photographs of Medellin explained in Chapter 2 represent cultural signs reconfigured in the present as icons of cultural identity. This series of photographs are printed on paper and interlaced, fragmented, recomposed and pasted with the intention of reconnecting place and memory. The black and white photos painted with charcoal establish contrast in a complementary relationship to vibrant colors.

Here, there is a constant dialogue and push/pull between presence and absence. The vibrant colors contrast with the stark black and white surfaces, via variations in scale. Synthesized materiality connect these elements, reinforcing both progression and network from one memory place to another.

Through the introduction of pastel colors and patterns onto the different surfaces, the notion of “decoration” is incorporated, as another shroud extracted from the fabric of my hometown of Antioquia. Often the information is presented through stencil application. Specifically, the imposition of painted colors in the boxes using a vertical configuration are signs of the urban aesthetics of Antioquia. The painted surfaces suggest a sense of movement and change by deconstructing and reconstructing areas of color by mixing tones such as orange with green. The use of different supports such as canvases with several dimensions reinforce a sense of dynamism and relocation. Compositionally, the sense of fragmentation through signs, represented in the different images and textures, is an index of a process of recognition.

The different images through fragments are used to rebuild and provoke new defining notions of culture. The artwork question the process of identifying cultural signs that define locations. The

spectator plays the role of investigator in his or her search for the signification of the images and objects in the installation.

The title *Translocations* (see fig 4.2) refers to the mutation of cultural signs. This particular body of work was conceived during my experience in London at the Royal College of Art in 2015. Having a multicultural and cosmopolitan experience, the idea of an extended fragment of memory was fundamental in conceiving this series of silkscreens. By using particular signs of Colombia, I trace a trajectory from Colombia and Canada to England. The notion of semantic memory defines my local identity in the urban and multicultural scenario of London where people from different places with different nationalities unite in cultural exchange. London represents an open city to the world where I could easily identify my own cultural values, as defined relation by iconic cultural images.



Fig. 4.2 *Translocations*

The process of layering within the silkscreen technique juxtaposes elements to create an integrated non sequential via of symbols such as the orchid, the old photo, and the texture of the sac. By

mixing the different images these elements are reconfigured, and acquire a different appearance. Through overlapping, the sense of the original image changes through the use of the different silkscreened stencils. The printmaking techniques allow me to locate the images strategically to reconfigure the sense of this iconography. The word *Translocation* identifies the process of elaboration and appearance of the final compositions. Using radiant and expansive colors such as orange, yellow, and red through consecutive series of images positioned next to each other, I contrast different combinations that define a common identity. The two dimensional quality of the prints reference also an index as a method of recognition and identification. The compositions, originally made in London were conceived from the fragments of previous collages and exhibited in Calgary. Hence, the series of prints establish a connection and disconnection, a presence and absence of translocated cultural signs.

The repetition of these images such as the old photos from Antioquia, the texture of the sac, the orchid and flowers establish a exploratory process of comparing different combinations. The different combinations create diversity among cultural icons that are seemingly the same. They represent that no matter where you are, the local has the same quality. These images acquire a particular presence and their combinations, constitute an extravagant popurri of local images from Antioquia creating a more abstract visual impression. The different coordinated and organized combinations of colors have a particular aesthetic effect. Through the process of juxtaposition, the original meaning of the images acquires a different level of interpretation. The colors are vivid and have a sense of festivity.

The word *GENUINE* plays with different connotations contextualizing the idea of repetition in a new time and place. The word AN can also suggest the location (Antioquia) but also the word Antique, or antiquity as something old and out of date. Viewers plays with the significance and the intentions of words: What does *An* means? Is it truly genuine“? as hints to reconstruct.

The following section will examing the key influences that have shaped my artistic development.

## CHATER 5: ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

### Mimmo Rotella



Fig. 5.1 *Marilyn*

Mimmo Rotella was an Italian artist well known for using decollage techniques. He tore layers of film posters and attached them onto canvas. Rotella's subject addressed the ephemeral glamour of the modern city (Masters).

The art of Rotella is also related to Psychogeography, defined by Debord as "the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals". In this form of art and expression, an individual responds to a place through engagement with popular imagery printed in graphic material such as billboard posters that become part of the urban landscape. His famous "Marilyn" decollage is an interesting example of how fragments of collective memory define notions of reality (see fig 5.1)

## Robert Rauschenberg



Fig. 5.2 *Canyon*

Introducing components from the real world, Rauschenberg integrates objects in his combined paintings, modifying their original function. Newspapers, tires and dissected animals are part of his visual repertoire (fig 5.2). By engaging expressive marks in different elements, Rauschenberg alludes to the limits between art and life.



## Beatriz Gonzales



Fig. 5.3 *Suicides of Sisga*

Beatriz Gonzales is one of the most important Colombian painters from the sixties. The dissonant and vivid colors in her paintings evoke the contrast between tragedy and comedy of Colombian reality. Her creative process based on extracted fragments and images from local magazines and newspapers are directly linked to Colombia's collective memory. Gonzales also includes three dimensional elements such as furniture as support for her paintings (Martinez Rivera).

Consider one of the pioneers of Pop art in Colombia, in the painting *Suicides of Sisga*, (see fig 5.3) from 1965, Gonzales creates a composition based on a newspaper headline of two lovers who decided to end with their lives tragically. Emphazing the popular, and framed by the idea of love and drama, the composition evokes the design of publicity and posters, based on flat contrasting colors (Pini)

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

Experiences such as communicating in a second language, interacting with people from other ethnicities, and experiencing different customs and values, have affected my artistic production. Through constant interaction with people from different cultures, and the intense work in my studio, I reconnect cultural signs in the form of collage to contextualize my creative process relative to different geographies. I respond to experiences by using the elements of urban context that are transposed via parallel cultural exchanges between locations.

The living experience outside my country, have given me a sense of humanity. I consider cultural signs fundamental principles linking the local and global cultural, and demographics through direct references to places. Cultural signs situate me through memory, defining my condition as an individual residing in a new location. By living in a new culture and contrasting experiences with the place where I come from, I probe notions of translocation, memory and identity in our globalized contemporary culture. I visualize who I am and where I come from by reconstructing and manipulating cultural signs. As a “detective“ of my own identity, the evidence of semantic memory in my artistic practice, reaffirms the communicative function of art.

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