Remedios y sanación The Art of Collective Healing—

A Conversation with Luis Álvaro Sahagún Nuño

María del Mar González-González

Luis Alvaro Sahagún Nuño (b. 1982, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico) is a multidisciplinary artist based in North Carolina. His practice confronts the palpable inescapability of race and transforms art into an act of cultural and spiritual reclamation. As the grandson of a curandera *(healer), and himself a practitioner of* curanderismo, *when Sahagún Nuño makes art, he conjures indigenous spiritualities to embody the aesthetics of personal histories, cultural resistance, and colonial disruption. He has a unique voice which helps him to shape, shift, and touch the world through radio, podcasts, and television networks such as MundoFOX, NBC, UNIVISION and WBEZ-NPR. Sahagún Nuño is a 3Arts awardee and a 2023 United States Artist Fellow.*

In the spring of 2024, Sahagún Nuño served as the artist-in-residence at Ogden Contemporary Arts (OCA). During that time, he engaged with the community through a range of activities, including tea ceremonies, site visits, workshops, open studio hours, and an artist talk. Sahagún Nuño's residency at OCA culminated in

a solo exhibition titled Healing Palette of Mystical Mestizaje (Paleta sanadora del mestizaje místico). *This multimedia exhibition invited the local community to explore the intricate interplay between cultural identity, healing practices, and contemporary art.*

It featured site-specific works, including a mobile botánica *studio, where Sahagún Nuño made herbs, spiritual objects, and* remedios *(remedies) accessible to visitors. This interactive element provided a tangible connection to traditional healing practices of* curanderismo.

Also included in the exhibition was Sahagún Nuño's limpia *(spiritual cleansing) portrait series, which featured sketches of local community members, including several students from Weber State University. Through this combined act of art-making and spiritual work, Sahagún Nuño facilitated paths for healing, as well as cultural and spiritual reclamation for his sitters. This ongoing portrait series illustrates how art can serve as a conduit for personal and communal transformation. By engaging participants in the creation of* limpia *portraits, Sahagún Nuño not only documented their likenesses but also captured their spiritual and emotional states. This process enabled a deep connection between the artist and the subjects, fostering a sense of empowerment for his sitters. By combining these various elements and artistic works, Sahagún Nuño's exhibition provided a rich, multifaceted exploration of how traditional and contemporary practices can intersect to foster healing and cultural reclamation.*

My students at Weber State have been enthusiastically discussing your work and their experiences during our studio visits. Today, I would like to discuss the projects you undertook in Ogden and the various communities you engaged with during your time as the artist-in-residence at Ogden Contemporary Arts (OCA). I am particularly interested in learning about your initial proposal and how, if at all, it evolved over the course of your residency.

As you know, there is an application process. As an artist, it's really important for me to connect with the space, the organization, and with the people to create something that feels right. My proposal was about finding ways to facilitate or incorporate *limpias*, spiritual cleansing, and healing to foster civic engagement and connection within the community. For the most part, I stayed true to the proposal and to the exhibition.

You frequently use the term "civically engaged" as a way to describe your work. How do you distinguish between civic engagement and social engagement in your practice? Do you perceive these terms as interconnected, or do they represent distinct approaches within your artistic framework?

I've been thinking about terms like "social justice" and "socially engaged" a lot lately. Terms like "community engagement" or "civic engagement" as a whole, for me, means interacting with the community. The easiest example of these terms is how artists get together and decide to paint a mural. Artists usually incorporate ways of listening to the community, at least a *good* muralist does. The idea is that you work together, developing the concept and the image, and then you build and create the mural—it's a beautiful way to work. I like to engage with the community through my own critical lens. However, I've worked with people who have participated in community engagement projects where an element I call "the artistic lie" emerges. People end up doing whatever the artist wants. For example, when you start work

on a mural, some people might say, "I want to buy stuff; I want to paint some beautiful flowers," or "I want to paint dogs and cats;" then, the artist finds a way to make it political and speak for a big group of people. I think sometimes there's a facade to that.

For me, civic engagement adds a layer of transparency that says that my work engages in the racial, gender, and political concerns of undocumented and Brown folks. I am asking people who can relate to those experiences to come and help me and to be a part of my project. I have a set of goals I want to accomplish together. There's reciprocity in the project. From the start, the participants are met with full transparency of what the project is going to be about. It connects back to my artistic practice. I like the honesty that comes with civic engagement. I think civic engagement is about connecting with the community in a political way, typically by engaging with the community that we live in. The question is, "What do we want our community to look and feel like? How can we participate in it?" You're not an individual until you connect with the community. There's a bit of psychology to that: when we're alone, as individuals with our ego, our self, and our bodies, that's just who *we* are. Once we interconnect, interpersonally, with the community, *that's* when we become an individual. I'm interested in transparency, honesty, and making sure that I create civically engaged work under the "expertise," for lack of a better word, that I am aware of. For me, the process is spiritual healing portraiture.

I connect to Chicanx or Latinx empowerment. When I started making art, I didn't even know that I was considered a socially engaged artist, or that I was a community engaged artist. It was a label that was given to me because I worked with the community so much. Oftentimes, I think about reclaiming that label. Something that comes up in my work from time to time—when I'm around other Chicanx artists—is that we confront a lot of guilt: the guilt of being successful, the guilt of making it in ways that our communities haven't, and the guilt of feeling like we have to give back. That's why a lot of our successful Chicanx artists are rooted in community; it's a conflict of who we are as people. I want to make it clear that I think it's really empowering to be able to say, "I'm choosing to do this because it's who I am." It's not because it's what I feel I need to do, and it's not a label that has been projected onto me.

You have a complex, multifaceted identity. You've embraced the term Chicanx to describe yourself. The "X" may be divisive within the Latino, Latine, Hispanic communities – some embrace it, while others reject it. How do you personally define your identity in light of these complexities?

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Chicanx is a reclamation of Indigeneity. Understanding the historical context of the United States, the colonial paradigm of not belonging, of not being Mexican but not being American either, helps define labels and moves us toward our Indigenous selves. The term feels political and like a rejection of the colonial paradigm. There's a new identity, like the new *Mestizo*. Until W.E.B. Dubois talked about Latinx culture, it didn't feel like it was Latino or Latina. And then, for some reason, Latinx got really popular. But, the term was also attacked because it broke up gender constructs. I find that personally interesting as someone who is in the art world and who has a certain family history.

When I say, "I'm Mexican," it's also an erasure for me of Indigenous folks in what we now call "Mexico." I can't call myself Indigenous because I'm not affiliated or registered with a tribe. Oftentimes, I like to say that it's like being a cultural shapeshifter. Sometimes, I do feel Mexican. Sometimes, I wake up and my language kind of changes—I have the accent of my family in Mexico. Sometimes, I am a different version of Luis on that particular Tuesday. I'm really just embracing my Mexican-ness—listening to Mexican music, saying Mexican slang, and feeling proud of the Mexican flag—because I grew up with it. And then, I'll wake up the next day feeling this rejection of that colonial border; I'm Indigenous, and I feel spiritually connected to the duties of different tribes and the Mexican or Maya traditions. I think one of the powers of "otherness" is that I get to decide who I am and how I choose to identify. I think that's why I lean more towards Chicanx, because it resonates the most for me.

Oftentimes we are confronted by the imposition of labels, identities, expectations, and stereotypes on us, particularly when perceived as "other" and not fully understood in terms of our identity, background, or positioning. Personally, I often experience this when people react to my PuertoRicanness with uncertainty or confusion. Therefore, I deeply appreciate your assertion that you get to define who you are. I am curious, has this belief always resonated with you, or is it something that you've grown into as you've matured and found your artistic identity?

I think that's a great question. I think it has a lot to do with age and my experiences. When

Echoes of Tlālōcān, Ogden Contemporary Arts, 2024

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I decided to become an artist, it was like opening a portal that led me to thinking critically about who I am as a human, about race, and about politics. It was a new beginning of becoming aware of societal forces that I didn't know about before. It made me ask questions like, "What the heck is patriarchy?," or, "What is white supremacy?" When I started learning about who I am, one of the first books I read was *The Labyrinth of Solitude* by Octavio Paz. I felt like I was finding my identity; it was life changing. Octavio Paz made me feel seen. But then, there was also this sense of toxic masculinity. I felt good, but there was still something missing. I went on to read Queer Chicanx writers—that felt *really* good—but there was *still* something missing. I discovered things through my elders, through books, through writers, through people who theorized in more ways than I was used to. I was in love with reading these books. I started realizing it was more about power—who I choose to give power to. When I taught students, I would talk about stereotypes, and I would say, "One of the things about stereotypes is that stereotypes are funny. Why are they funny? Because they are often true." It facilitated a conversation. I'd continue, and say, "Well, then why are they wrong?" We always landed on the reason why stereotypes are wrong or why they're hurtful: they just tell *one* story about us. And when you are "other," it makes you feel like you're not a nuanced and complex human being. By saying, "I have the power to shapeshift," I'm saying, "My identity *actually* changes." It might change by the second, by the minute, by the day. I get to feel free, and liberated, and decide how I identify at any given moment. Nobody else is going to put me in a category where I'm going to feel like I don't belong, or that I don't measure up to something. For me, it's about taking that power away from hegemonic cultures. It's about being introspective and understanding that all human beings are dynamic, and we have multiple origin stories. We can think differently, we can change our minds, we can change our bodies, we can change our spirits. It's self-awareness, and that's where self-actualization can begin. Once you realize that you have a good idea of how the world works, and how society interacts, then you have self-actualization, or at least the beginning of self-actualization.

You have mentioned various literary works that have influenced you, including Octavio Paz's The Labyrinth of Solitude *and Gloria Anzaldúa's* Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, as well as* This Bridge

Detail of the mobile *botánica*, Ogden Contemporary Arts, 2024

Called My Back, *the feminist anthology on radical women of color edited by Cherríe Moraga and Anzaldúa. In previous conversations, you also discussed concepts like* rasquachismo *– figures like Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and other Mexican and Chicanx writers – who have shaped your thinking. Could you elaborate on how you initially discovered and engaged with this literature, and how it has contributed to your thought processes?*

It was through art. In 2008, I was a successful designer; I was successful financially, but I was going through an existential crisis. I didn't know what was wrong, or why I wasn't feeling fulfilled. It was because I wasn't connecting to community; I didn't feel like I had purpose. I was really isolated and lonely. Obviously, capitalism and having money wasn't bringing in happiness. Happiness is something you have to engage with. You have to build and work toward it through connection, through selflessness, and through finding your purpose. I didn't learn that until I found art, until I found this group of people who were in love with splashing paint and drawing with pencil. In the studio, I started to ask questions like, "Why am I drawing this? Why am I instinctively drawing this bird? Why am I drawing on cardboard?" I used to draw on cardboard because I *felt* like a piece of cardboard. What does that mean? I feel discarded, but I have a lot of potential; there's a metaphor there. Why am I attracted to birds? Why am I attracted to sparrows? Sparrows are often seen as pests. These brown birds make a connection with my own Brownness; all these things were little epiphanies. I started to think I can't be the only one experiencing this. Around the same time, I went back to art school. I had access to JSTOR at school. I would search for the goofiest things. I'd search "Mexican Brown identity" or Mestizo writers like Karen Mary Davalos. I started following her on Instagram. She recently did a studio with me; she's amazing. She was one of the first people I read articles by. My mom passed away not too long ago. I went home to clean out my room, and I found a folder containing all these articles—research articles by Karen Mary Davalos and articles about Mexican identity. Karen Mary Davalos

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is an advocate for the Mestizo concept. The concept can be seen as problematic because it's originally rooted in white supremacy; it's been reclaimed through a Chicanx narrative. When I first started reading about the Mestizo concept, I was cautious about using the materials. I went to an art school where all my teachers were white. I talked about this stuff, and they just didn't have the language for it. I wish I could tell you that I was smart enough and hardworking enough to say that I was going to teach myself and I was going to be a scholar, but that wasn't the case. Somehow, I slowly crawled my way through. I say "crawled my way" because I grew up in Chicago, not L.A., where all this stuff is so clearly evident. There are so many Brown artists there, of all identities. I was in the Midwest, without mentors to be able to show me and tell me about all this stuff. I think that's how I started—knowing that there was no way I was the only one going through this.

In my Latinx art history class the majority of the students identify as Latinx, and having you meet them truly made a difference. Meeting an artist who not only shares their cultural heritage but also thrives in their artistic practice was deeply impactful. I am eager to discuss your interaction with students further, as it felt like a meaningful contribution to both class discussions and their own perspectives on who can be an artist.

I think representation matters a lot, but I also think that the ***right*** representation matters. I've seen a lot of Brown faculty members perpetrating harm in academic spaces because they're colonized in their hearts. They're in competitive and hierarchical establishments that support that kind of thinking. I appreciate you saying what you said, because as someone who works, it hasn't come easy for me. It's taken a lot of hard work to engage with students in that way, especially BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] and Chicanx students; I've been met with a lot of resistance. And it's not until they actually see me teach, or see the potential, that they start to respect or accept me. When I first started teaching college-level classes in Chicago, the first class I taught became a collective that fostered belongingness. They were a diverse group of art school students who felt they were in competition with each other. They felt that nobody wanted to be friends because of the competitive environment. The way that I facilitated this class led the students to realize that they all wanted to be friends, and that they ***could*** be friends. It was really beautiful.

The reason I talk about this is because there is an ethics of care, or ethics of love, that needs to be addressed. When I work with young students, I think of my own family, and I feel like I need to take care of them. I don't think that's widely accepted in academia. Academia can be transactional—you're the teach-

er, you give them knowledge, and you leave. That's not how I function. I care about my students. I look at them as colleagues; I don't think that I know more than they do. It's more of a horizontal relationship in an academic space. As an artist, I don't consider myself to be an *academic* teacher. In spaces like OCA, I can function a bit differently. I don't have to worry about the pressures of tenure track.

It's important to engage with the students and community in discussions about healing and about identity – they're very serious subjects. I admired how you skillfully balanced seriousness with playfulness and beauty, which seemed to encourage many students to step out of their comfort zones. By prompting dialogue and encouraging active participation through posing and discussion, you effectively prompted them to engage deeply with these topics. Witnessing this approach has inspired me to explore integrating similar methods into my teaching practice.

Something that came up for me was the energy I felt from the students. That's something that I think about on a universal or cultural level. The work I do is about going into communities that are historically marginalized, and healing them. It's not about saving anybody, and it's definitely not about looking at these communities through a lens of, "These poor kids, they need help." It's more like, "Holy shit, these students are really powerful and they're incredibly smart and talented. They have resilience through adversity." Undocumented students and undocumented people have to translate for their parents; they have to navigate uncertainty; they have to work harder than most people. They build these beautiful layers of strength and intelligence, and are persevering. All of that is just to remind them that they are already some of the strongest people. They may not believe it, because they're students and they're young, but they really are. I take pride in working with them. This work isn't just about saying these communities need healing. These communities need a reminder of the strengths they have. We live in a society that has constantly been beating on them. They need a little bit of assistance, a little bit of confirmation. They're already in academic spaces, they're already in your classes, they're already coming up with really great ideas. We just need to let them know that we are there to push them a little bit more, to be an ally to them. It's an important narrative about their strengths. You and I are people who can help them see their strengths in a world that doesn't value them as much as I think they should.

It sounds like you were purposefully disrupting conventions in a meaningful, positive way. While there's importance in cultivating an academic sense of culture, it's also essential to recognize that culture is deeply personal – resembling a familial collaboration rather than a competitive environment.

My classes had the opportunity to visit your studio, and you also worked individually with some students on portrait limpias. *Could you elaborate on what the*

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Perpetual Ceremony No. 5 (limpia for Priscilla Molina Hernandez), 2024. Charcoal, beads, beeswax, seashells, feathers, glitter, clay, maize, over cobija San Marcos, 14" x 17" x 2." Ogden Contemporary Arts

limpias *entail – specifically, the materials used and the process? Additionally, I'm interested in discussing the impact of these class visits.*

Limpia **portraits are a series of works that I started around 2021. They are portraits that merge *curanderismo*, Indigenous philosophies of healing, with contemporary art. They started through my own experiences of suffering within my spirit, suffering and feeling lonely. During COVID, I experienced a lot of death—I lost my mother, I lost an aunt, I lost an uncle. There was also another portal of pain in 2018—the portal that got me into art. It made me realize there was another layer to life that I wasn't understanding. I thought that Indigenous philosophies, or epistemology, could help me see the world in a new way. I needed to go back to old ways of seeing.**

I had three mentors who I started working with to progress toward my own healing. There is a history in my family, a gift of healing. That gift has been placed on me since I was a little kid—that might be a whole different interview in itself. I was ready to embrace that gift through my own healing, and then through contemporary art. I started mixing the two; I started working for my own healing with my mentors. My healers said, "You have this gift. We would like you to be one of our apprentices." And so I did. I felt like it was confirmation when people from different parts of the country started reaching out to me. It just made logical sense to combine these ways of healing with contemporary art. When we think of a studio as a place to discover, a place to feel safe, a place of imagination, a place of visualization, a place of manifesting, it made perfect sense to combine that with this type of healing, which also embraces those ideas.

So, I started combining portraiture with these healing modalities. First, I started with my immediate family, in order to feel more comfortable and to practice. Afterwards, once I had some success with those portraits, I began working with local community members. Ogden was the first place where I worked with folks who I had no previous connection to.

You've worked with more than just Weber State classes, right?

Yes, students from other Weber State classes and other institutions came in as groups to see my exhibition. I talked to them about the work I do and about a few cleansing techniques.

I worked with some Weber State students to create *limpia* portraits. It was beautiful that the students were willing to engage with me, and were open enough to do so. I appreciated the level of trust, care, and willingness they had to do these portraits and connect with a stranger. Getting to know the students and what they were going through was great. It

was empowering for myself, too, as I'm working to develop as an artist-healer. I loved seeing how they engaged with the final product, how happy they were to see their portraits at the opening being celebrated. It was like a final ritual, when people came to the opening, took pictures, and celebrated the work. That attention contributes to the healing for the individual, too.

Thank you for your time, for your beautiful energy, and for your investment and kindness to the students and to the community.

I appreciate you taking the time and trusting me to work with your students, and writing about my work, and for everything that you do for the community here.

María del Mar González-González (Ph.D., University of Illinois) is assistant professor of art history at Weber State University. She specializes in modern and contemporary Latin American and Latinx visual culture, with a focus on the intersection of art and politics. Other interests include socially engaged practices, decolonization, and the history of collecting and art biennials. Her work has been supported by grants from the Smithsonian Institution, University of Utah, Salt Lake City Arts Council and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), among others. González-González's writing has been published in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies, Caiana: Journal of Art History and Visual Culture of the Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte,* and in numerous art exhibition catalogs. She has also curated multiple exhibitions, most recently *Beyond the Margins: An Exploration of Latina Art and Identity* (2023) at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art and Boise State University's Blue Galleries.