

Lauren Moya Ford

Un detalle

Yesterday I entered an old church that happened to be open during the *siesta* hour. Statues of Mary and Joseph on the altar were surrounded by gilded arabesques and angel heads. Tall white candles flickered soft animation into the carved forms while clusters of chrysanthemums withered below, turning the scene into *tableau vivant*. Like the altar, Ashley Thomas' meticulous, large scale drawings are also containers for contemplation and meditation. Made for long views, her works create a space to slow down and hold. And like this scene of slow wax, petals, and shadows, the objects in Thomas' work are mechanisms of meanings and memories that move and shift.

I remember him... with a dark passion flower in his hand, seeing it as no one has ever seen it, as though he might look at it from the twilight of dawn til that of evening, a whole lifetime...

-Jorge Luis Borges, "Funes the Memorious," 1942

In Spanish, the word *detalle* means detail, but it can also mean an unexpected gift or thoughtful act. Like so much women's work, the execution of detail in Thomas' drawings is both painstaking and generous. Drawn at life size or larger, the works recenter traits that women have been taught to invest in the people and things around them- patience, focus, and care- into the precision of her work. And so the drawings constitute a visual document of her labor, a register of beauty and effort. Representing subjects in this hyper-focused manner reconfigures their function and connotation inside and outside of the picture, what Gabriel Orozco calls "analyzing the economics and politics of the instruments of living" (2003).

The objects that Thomas portrays are carefully chosen, and the artist's hand and attention lends them new meaning. As Thomas' subjects cross from materiality to two dimensions, they also cross conceptual, geographic, and temporal borders. In several pieces, monarch butterflies appear. This endangered insect's annual immigration from the United States to Michoacán, Mexico remains unobstructed despite ongoing border control debates. In other works, a single rose may signal a number of Mexican American tropes, from Juan Diego's rose-filled tilma in the legend of Our Lady of Guadalupe, to Selena Quintanilla Pérez (1971-1995), a fellow Corpus Christi native who continues to play a fundamental role in *tejan@* identity, to popular tattoos and others. Femmy and firm, natural and man-made, here and there, Thomas' subjects function as beautiful objects while they also link to a specific place and experience- the narratives that propel environmental, personal, and political lives between the US and Mexico.

A fringed leather cowboy vest, a pumice *molcajete*, and votive candles are all familiar objects to those from Texas, especially to those who grew up in Mexican American families. The objects are proofs of the female labor that we have observed in the daily lives of our mothers and grandmothers, but may not repeat faithfully in our own. Still, we hold onto these relics (clothing, utensils, and candles) and rituals (dressing, cooking, and praying) as talismans of something close, like a ring that we don't wear but will not allow ourselves to lose. We grow up hearing stories about our mothers' and grandmothers' lives, lives that were harder and more Mexican than our own. But memories are shapeshifters. The stories become so ingrained in us that they begin to blur. Which of us didn't go to the dance because we knew we wouldn't be allowed in?

Which of us ate rose petals out of hunger? Which of us was hit by that hand? Thomas mines the memories that exist between our female antecedents and our own present realities. These stories form a personal archive that she translates onto the subjects of her drawings. Her gracefully drawn arrangements evoke an empowered imaginary space where meaning is opened, events can shift, but remembrance remains a strength.

*Where do my artists go
with the beautiful treasure
of the Aztec monarchy?
You all have the sap
so that immense knowledge
does not rust.*

-from Consuelo González Amezcúa, *Artistas de Talento (Artists of Talent)*, date unknown

Votive candles are found in the grocery stores, *botánicas*, and altars of Texas. The candles exist in a loose relationship to the Catholic faith, but they increasingly function beyond the bounds of dogma. Unlike the unmarked candles found in churches, these votives' glass exteriors display saints, good luck charms, and other iconography, along with Spanish and English prayers. The images show the candles' intended purpose- bestowing positive energies (blessing, protection, peace), attracting material entities (new lovers, jobs, money), or even inflicting revenge or malice on others. Regardless of their aim, these candles serve as containers for and executors of the holder's wishes. As time passes, their disappearing wax marks the increment of the votive's operation and the stamina of the holder's devotion.

It is fitting that Thomas depicts the candles in triptych, a format tied to the material shifts between god, flesh, and spirit. Produced by bees and ignited by fire, candles embody the natural and the corporeal as they mark the passage of time. Wax has long been a sacred stand in for the human body. Indeed, at a church in the Portuguese countryside I saw a cabinet full of life-sized wax body parts, and another time I found a Spanish cave with wax figurines of body parts hanging from the ceiling. Like the votives in Texas, these wax figures represent human afflictions that require or have been granted divine intercession. And since the votives depict holy figures and prayers, their proper disposal, like a human body, is by burning or burial.

The votives in Thomas' drawings belong to the domestic sphere, where memories are kept, things are made, and prayers are said. Lighting these candles is an act of faith that puts the holder in direct engagement with the power of objects. To light a candle for someone or something is to keep it in your thoughts, to hope or wish for it, or to simply show that you remember it. Thomas' votives are body-sized, a scale at which their life spans would far surpass hours, days, and even weeks. As long as the candle is lit it's alive and working. We see that Thomas' candles will protect for a long time.

There are many that I knew and they know it. They are all of them repeating and I hear it. I love it and I tell it. I love it and now I will write it... This is now a history of the way I love it.

-from Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*, 1925

Thomas' practice is based in a lineage of women- makers, mothers, writers, thinkers, sisters, and singers- who act as catalysts in her work. Consuelo "Chelo" González Amezcúa (1903-1975) is one of these women. She and Thomas share a geography- the South Texas Borderlands- and a fascination with the layers of identity they experience as women, artists, and *tejanas*. Like Thomas, Amezcúa was a maker of detailed drawings. She was also a poet. Thomas treats one of Amezcúa's poems as the subject of her recent work, *Consuelo González Amezcúa's Handwriting* (2017). In the 1965 poem, Amezcúa proclaims herself to be a "Mexico Texan / Raised in the city / of Del Rio Texas / Citizen of the U.S.A." This first line evidences the confluence of identities that Amezcúa and so many others like her continue to navigate in today's fierce and uncertain political climate. Later on, Amezcúa credits a list of encouraging teachers who are mostly Anglo, something my grandmother also did when asked about her too-brief encounter with institutional education. This recognition parallels the tribute that Thomas pays in her 2017 drawing by placing another woman's words and life story at the center of her own work. Thomas' piece amplifies Amezcúa's poem to body-size, so that the words hang like the text of a banner or flag. As an additional offering, Thomas has drawn daisies and roses around the edges of the poem, a nod to the flowers that one leaves at an altar.

Amezcúa has been labeled as an outsider artist, and her artwork and especially her poetry is not widely seen. Thomas discovered Amezcúa's work in a book at an antique mall, and then investigated further at the Special Collections of the University of Texas Benson Library. The artist excavates Amezcúa's text from the archive and re-presents it at a large scale, re-figuring it in the context of a visual artwork in which Amezcúa's handwriting is a disembodied stand in for the poet herself. By making Amezcúa's words a pictorial subject, Thomas foregrounds Amezcúa's writing practice and autobiographical voice, returning agency to this lesser-known figure of Texan art history. And so there is a continuity in this work, not only because both women are meticulous drawers from South Texas, but also because one woman's experience and outlook is grafted onto another through the creative works that Thomas and Amezcúa produce decades apart. A dialog is transmitted back and forth between past and present, between drawing and writing, and between Thomas' and Amezcúa's hands.

The artist's relationship to *antepasadas* (female antecedents) like Amezcúa is a close one- she engages their ideas and personae through research, reexamination, and commemoration in her work. For Thomas, memory is an ongoing, ever-widening site. She keeps vigil for the women who came before. She does not forget. She lights a candle for them and keeps it burning.