¡Géntromancer! Battling Gentrification in San Francisco’s Mission District: An Interview with Josué Rojas

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Introduction

In September 2016, Josué Rojas exhibited his solo show, ¡Géntromancer! at Acción Latina’s Juan R. Fuentes Gallery in the Mission District of San Francisco illustrating the current wave of displacement affecting the neighborhood. The exhibition, which included paintings, drawings, and local poems from the community, responded to the theme of gentrification. Within the last decade, over 8,000 Latinxs have been displaced from the Mission neighborhood, which is over 25% of its community.1 From 2004–2014, no affordable housing units were built in the district, yet luxury properties sprouted up on every block.2 As part of the exhibition, a broadsheet was published in El Tecolote—a local bilingual newspaper founded in the Mission—which included poems by students, teachers, and poets. In ¡Géntromancer!, Rojas allegorically expressed a visual resistance to gentrification through the use of Mesoamerican imagery referencing the Mayan text, Popol Vuh. One of the central themes of ¡Géntromancer! were the dualities that revealed how alternative realities could shed hope on the subject of displacement. Inspired by the stories of Mayan ancestors, Rojas believes that Latinxs carry a “fire within” and have the power to resist gentrification. The art show was a testament to how collectivity, community building, and remembrance of the past can help create a vision of resilience.

A portrait of Alex Nieto was displayed at the center of ¡Géntromancer! in the painting, Amor: The Perfect Lotus (2016). (Figure 4) Nieto was 28-years-old when four San Francisco Police Department officers shot and killed him on March 21, 2014 in Bernal Heights, a neighborhood adjacent to the Mission District where he had been raised. Writer and journalist, Rebeca Solnit described Nieto’s murder as “Death by Gentrification,” because two white men felt threatened by Nieto’s presence in a park that joggers and dog walkers frequent, and that Nieto often also frequented. On the evening that Nieto was killed, he was eating a burrito and chips on a park bench before his job shift as a club bouncer, when a Siberian Husky dog suddenly approached and barked at him, curious about his food. Nieto became agitated and reached for his taser while the inattentive dog owner called from yards away. When the dog did not immediately return, the dog owner exchanged words with Nieto using a racial slur and then left the park.3 Shortly after, two men walking their dogs in Bernal Height’s park called 911 believing that the young Mexican-American man was carrying a gun. When the police arrived, they claimed that Nieto had pointed a taser at them and they mistook its red laser for that of a firearm. Nieto died during an onslaught of fifty-nine bullets, fourteen of which ripped through his head and body.4
This event caused outrage among local Latinx residents who saw the incident as an act of excessive police force that could have been avoided. Several factors were at play the day of Nieto's tragic death. For one, the racial profiling of Alex Nieto's body—as he wore a red 49ers jacket, a black 49ers cap, and black trousers—may have caused the police and these two white men to think that he was affiliated with local gangs. Secondly, the man who called the police on Nieto had only lived in San Francisco for one year, an insufficient amount of time to understand the cultural diversity of the neighborhood in which he walked his dog, yet long enough to reaffirm that police forces would protect his sense of privilege in a space where he perceived a threat. Rojas believed it was essential to pay tribute to Nieto and his story within a gentrifying neighborhood after protests and activism emerged in response to the killing of Nieto. As a result, the ¡Géntromancer! exhibition became a catalyst to create the first-ever permanent memorial to honor a Latinx victim of police violence in the United States. It is expected to be erected at Bernal Heights Park in 2020.

The Mission District, located in the southeastern region of San Francisco, became known as a predominantly Latinx neighborhood during the 1960s, as chain-migration attracted foreign-born migrants from different parts of Latin America. The large Latinx population of the Mission created a vibrant Latinx visual arts community in the 1970s, which was responding to a new Raza consciousness, building alternative institutions that reflected and served the local Latinx community. Shifra Goldman stated the term Raza was used in Northern California to refer, “to the mix of peoples from Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Brazil, as well as Mexicans and Chicanos.” The Mission barrio served as the epicenter for the Northern California Latinx visual arts scene and became the birthplace of several art community organizations, such as La Raza Silkscreen Center/La Raza Graphics (1970), Galería de La Raza (1970), El Tecolote newspaper (1970), the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts (1977), Mission Gráfica Printmaking Studio (1977), and Precita Eyes Muralists (1977). Some of these institutions have recently fought displacement due to non-ownership of the buildings in which they were established, exemplified by the eviction of Galería de La Raza. This 46-year-old institution, deeply rooted in the Mission District’s Chicano and Latinx identities of culture and art, was displaced in 2018 due to the landlord’s demand for a 100-percent rent hike and capital improvements to the space, which Galería could not afford.

The Mission neighborhood has undergone multiple waves of gentrification beginning in 1972 when two Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) subway stations were installed at 16th and 24th Streets along Mission Street, increasing rent prices and displacing longtime merchants. From 1974 to 1976, a total of 146 apartment fires occurred in the Mission District within a three-block radius of the 16th Street BART station, including 14 that were attributed to arson. The fires represented a violent manifestation of the physical displacement affecting the neighborhood. Then, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the dot-com boom ushered in new tech urbanizers to San Francisco, driving further displacement.
Francisco. Neighborhoods, such as South of Market (SOMA) and the Mission were transformed, as warehouses and factories were converted into tech offices leading to a massive build-out of residential lofts. These new housing structures displaced artists and later attracted workers in the field of technology, commonly referred to as “techies,” to live close to their workplace. This continued as the tech boom of the 2010s ushered in successful tech companies, such as Yelp, Twitter, Airbnb, and Uber. Veteran companies like Facebook, Google, and Apple also set up branches directly in the city of San Francisco. This phenomenon continues to create a substantial wealth gap between high-wage earners and low-wage earners, exponentially increasing real estate value at the expense of its long-term residents. Investment speculators, landlords, and techies saw the Mission District’s relatively low real estate prices as a bargain, making it a desired location for the new urbanizers. A majority of Latinx and working-class residents did not own their homes or apartments, which allowed for landlords to displace their tenants with impunity using the California state law known as the Ellis Act. To this day, tenants continue to face eviction and displacement, as they see the houses and apartments in which they once lived become luxury condos, thus intensifying the economic disparity of the neighborhood.

Rojas’ art is intimately shaped by his upbringing in the Mission neighborhood where he first arrived in 1981, at the age of one-and-half years, old when his mother fled the Salvadoran Civil War (1980–1992). His early passion for mural arts inspired Rojas to paint and draw. At the age of fifteen, Rojas was introduced to the Urban Youth Arts program through Precita Eyes Muralists, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing art classes and preserving mural arts in San Francisco. Rojas learned how to create community murals which allowed him to stay away from bad influences and local gangs. Upon graduating high school, he followed his desire to be an artist and went on to receive his BFA in Painting and Drawing from the California College of Arts and Crafts (2004) followed by obtaining his MFA in Painting from Boston University (2015).

Since 2017, Rojas has served as the executive director of Acción Latina, a non-profit organization that promotes cultural arts and houses the Spanish bilingual newspaper, El Tecolote. Before coming to Acción Latina, Rojas had been a multimedia journalist and videographer for the former non-profit organization New America Media where he reported on the child migration of Central Americans arriving to the United States. In 2008, he created a short documentary entitled Los Disappeared, that followed seven Salvadorans adapting to their new identities after being deported to El Salvador by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Rojas painted a series of portraits based on Los Disappeared that detailed the deportees coping with their new lives in El Salvador. His personal experiences as a journalist fueled the creation of one of his most recognized murals, Enrique’s Journey (2009) located in Balmy Alley, which depicts the journey of a Honduran boy who migrated across Mexico by train in search for his mother in the United States, based on the award-winning book by
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journalist Sonia Nazario. The following is an interview that took place in Rojas’ studio in San Francisco on October 2017 where we discussed the impact that his exhibition had on his personal life and how it led to the establishment of a permanent Alex Nieto memorial.

Mauricio E. Ramírez (MER): Let’s start with a question I’ve been curious about since the inception of your exhibition: what made you decide to name the exhibition, ¡Géntromancer!? 

Josué Rojas (JR): My art is deeply influenced by literature. In some cases, I refer to living poets like friends of mine. I wanted a literary reference, and even though it’s only in the title of this exhibition ¡Géntromancer! refers to the novel Neuromancer by William Gibson which influenced what is now called the cyberpunk genre. I wanted to take an approach that personified the spirit of gentrification and to speak to it. To be able to speak to neurology, right? To be able to speak to your body and technology, and of course, the book is about that. Even the name Neuromancer borrows from “necromancer”. Necromancy is the practice in spirituality, in speaking to the dead, so I used that title to reference the idea of a Neuromancer using the word “-mancer”, at the end of the title. ¡Géntromancer! is speaking to the spirit of gentrification. It’s fearlessly speaking to gentrification and taking a stand. I wanted to do this exhibition with other writers, so I enlisted the help of seventeen local poets whose poems were included in the broadside of El Tecolote newspaper that accompanied the exhibition.

MER: How does your exhibition ¡Géntromancer! speak to the broader Latinx community of San Francisco?

JR: I believe people will always respond to events that they participate in. My show ¡Géntromancer! was very well attended, I think less so because it was like this cool art thing or whatever it was. I think it was more so because everyone knew that they had participated in it through their poetry. Also, one message that the exhibition meant to communicate to the Latino community was that you don’t need to fear gentrification. Right around 2015–2016, when I first moved back from Boston, I realized that a lot of buildings were burning. I remember this huge fire one Saturday night, it was this massive fire over by the Ace Hardware store near 30th Street and Mission Street. It happened to burn one of my mom’s favorite’s Central American restaurants, El Paisa, a Honduran food restaurant. I remember being so sad that day and thinking of all these buildings that had burned very conveniently in the last months. And I was thinking of that fear that Latinos might feel; what happens if my house burns down? What do I do? Where do I go? It felt like violence against our community. And I just wanted us to know, don’t be afraid. I wanted to silence that fear and speak to it openly. So to me ¡Géntromancer!, even visually, you see that there’s a Victorian house on fire in the painting Two Fires (2016). From that fire
there is a tomb of smoke and there's a monster with a mouth open being formed from the smoke. Conversely, I visually wanted to suggest that there's a larger, brighter, stronger fire in the community that isn't literal, but it's the fire that we carry within. And so, as you look at some of the ¡Géntromancer! imagery you'll see from the fire of a volcano, which represents the people and the land. Particularly Central American communities’ connection to the land, so my fellow Central Americans have that point of reference. The volcano smoke symbolically represents the people’s power, that is why you see in some of the imagery a Robotech or Voltron image coming from the volcano's fire, as seen in La Imagen y La Palabra (2016). What I’m suggesting with that is that the people have the power to resist the fear of gentrification. If there is this looming, scary thing that’s trying to push you out of your city, I wanted to offer people at least a vision of resisting and effectively quelling that fire with our own fire, of shutting up that spirit of gentrification with our own needs, and with our own communication. In this case, it’s art.

Figure 1, Josué Rojas, Two Fires, 2016, Acrylic on canvas (Image Courtesy of Josué Rojas)
MER: In that sense, can you elaborate on how this exhibition speaks to the Central American community?

JR: Sure. Well, I’m going to always go to my point of reference, and my point of reference has to do with the fact that I am a Salvadoran-born American artist, right? This is where I developed this idea, actually. I went to the Whitney Museum of American Art maybe in the last year and a half before creating ¡Géntromancer! They had a collection with all of these “American” artists, but I realized not all of those American artists were born in the U.S. It was interesting for me to see that within the American experience, the Whitney Museum includes immigrants from Europe who were fleeing the persecution of World War II. There were immigrants from other nations that had become U.S. American citizens and so I got this notion. I thought to myself, “What am I? What’s it going to say if I ever make it into a museum? What’s that plaque going to say? Is it going to say, ‘Salvadoran Artist?’ Is it going to say, ‘American artist?’” Even Albert Einstein, he was born in Germany but died an American citizen. I don’t know if he felt that he was an American or if he felt like he was still a German. But there’s too much of “America” in me for me to say that I am solely a Salvadoran. That is the truest definition for me to say that I am a Salvadoran-born American artist because I do feel that I am all of the above.

That being said, to answer your question, my point of reference is always going to be that of a Salvadoran-American. So, I have to speak from my experience. I am always going to have that lens, and it’s always going to enrich my visual language. In the past, I’ve used things like kitsch art, folkloric art, or art influenced by La Palma art. Of course, there are volcanoes and Mayan imagery. It’s all stuff that’s in my visual vocabulary, my visual lexicon, and deeply Central American. I also think Central American art as a study is really coming into its own. I believe we’ve always made some significant contributions to art here in the Mission District, but I think that we do more so when we’re able to get particular. We used to be lumped in one big thing called “Latino art.” However, we are getting more particular as more young people and the younger generations are out creating art. What are the contributions of U.S. Central Americans to the American art landscape? That being said, there’s such a rich lineage of stuff that we can use, right? I am eager to continue to visually explore such a rich cultural heritage that we have.
MER: How does ¡Géntromancer! represent the current wave of displacement and gentrification affecting the Latinx community in San Francisco’s Mission district? I am asking this because looking back at the archives of El Tecolote newspaper and researching how Latinx have been displaced in multiple waves since the 1970s, I see that this current wave is primarily fueled by tech and start-up companies. How does this exhibition speak to the current wave of displacement that is affecting the Latinx community of the Mission District?

JR: This is something that isn’t new, right? I think gentrification is happening in different communities across the nation. I believe that needs to be addressed and I want to offer an alternative vision to the dominant narrative, which is like, “Oh things got expensive, I have to leave.” I think it’s important for us to stay and to take a stand and stick with the community. It’s hard. It’s hard to tell people to stay in San Francisco if the prices are ridiculous and you can’t afford it. I’ve chosen to stay here and pay this ridiculous rent, so it’s a real challenge. It is a real-life challenge and so artists are being displaced; the Latino community is being displaced.
I've noticed, there seems to be a renaissance in the Mission District. I believe young people are seeing their contributions as being valuable. I am seeing a lot of different artists, young people particularly, and they know that it’s not enough to say, “Hey I’m from San Francisco.” You have to create space for artists to continue to do this work here, and the people have taken that responsibility to heart.

That being said, the context of my work, I would sincerely hope that if artists or communities saw the ¡Géntromancer! exhibition that they would say, “Hey listen, I want to do something like that. I could probably do that. I could probably respond to gentrification as well in my own way and continue to do these activities that bring people together as a response.” I have to say, that is a true scene; when artists of different generations get together and talk to each other, even if we don’t live here anymore. When people read El Tecolote newspaper. When people “create” space for discourse, you’re really holding the space. I think artists have this unique ability to be stewards of our cultural stories, of our cultural patrimony, and of our experience. I believe artists have that spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine of history go down. To be able to understand history in a unique way because artists make it cool to understand history, you know? That being said if you bear witness to a moment you bear witness to the times. Gentrification is one of the main issues of this moment. I would also add institutionalized racism being addressed in the United States and immigration. I think that it's important for us to have hope, and artists are able to provide hope if only because their imagination can go where other fields of study can't. Artists venture and state the things that are “not yet” and create some realities there. So, they create an unseen vision and I hope that I created a vision that other artists would want to emulate — if not do better than me. I want to hear, “I can do that better. I can do that. I can top that.” I hope artists are thinking that, so we can see it build and grow. That’s real progress. That’s cultural progress, so that is always my aim with the art that I make, I want to inspire.

Figure 3, Oree Originol, *Justice for Alex Nieto*, 2014, Digital print, (Image Courtesy of www.oreeoriginol.com)
MER: Let’s segue to the Alex Nieto portrait that you painted for the exhibition, *Amor: The Perfect Lotus* (Figure 4). I noticed the portrait is filled with symbolism in the way you portrayed Nieto with various symbols such as the feathers, flowers, the lotus flower at the bottom, and Nieto’s face being divided into four quadrants. Could you talk about the meaning behind the portrait and what the portrait represents?

JR: I make no bones about it. I was inspired by a political poster that was itself inspired by a very classic photo of Alex Nieto wearing a Giants baseball cap. The artist Oree Originol created a vectorized drawing in black and white as part of his “Justice for Our Lives” portrait series. So, I was living in Boston at the time when the Alex Nieto incident happened, and so effectively, this story profoundly impacted me as one of ours was taken; a young Latino male from the Bernal-Mission area. When it came time for me to do this exhibition, I knew that I needed to do something about Alex Nieto. I did it with all the intention that I could and I took the outline from Oree Originol. He and I talked about this and I said, “You really inspired my piece.” And he said, “Yeah. I know.” Back then I was thinking about how I could turn this into a painting. I was thinking about the quadrants that you described, which speaks to the Four Directions. In Native American circles, it’s an understanding that it’s the sacred Medicine Wheel. The four colors indicate the four directions and each direction has different meanings; they’re animal, mental, spiritual, and emotional. All of this. When we do commemorations of Nieto on Bernal Hill, we pay our respects to the four directions. So, I wanted to allude to that and visually give cues that Nieto, even though he’s not with us physically in life here anymore, he is with us spiritually and he is also in all these four directions.

The lotus has to do with him being a practicing Buddhist and becoming the perfect lotus. Alex Nieto is heroic to me, and two times over. So, there are two feathers there for him; in life and in death. There is also a disintegrated American flag to show a disintegration within our justice system; there is a Mayan cross and calendar, and I included honeycombs to represent fertility. I threw in flowers as decoration because flowers in the Mayan culture also represent poetry and beauty. Of course, they deliver color, and they deliver delicacy, so I wanted to have all those elements in there. In some cases, the paint is very gruff and driven into the canvas; scraped away. In the case of the flowers, the paint is lush and moist because of the brush kind of hits the surface. I wanted to provide what interests me as a painter, with complexity within the mark making; variety of lines, variety of paints. Little did I know that it would be so meaningful to the Alex Nieto movement, and to the memorial. Particularly the campaign for a permanent memorial and it led to my meeting Alex Nieto’s parents.
MER: Can you expand on the memorial of Alex Nieto? I am also curious on how your portrait of Nieto served as the inspiration for the physical memorial that was approved on April 18, 2019, by the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Commission and the City, for a new permanent monument, scheduled for installment in Bernal Heights Park at the site of Alex’s final moments.

JR: Through the ¡Géntromancer! exhibition his parents heard there was a piece of art that was made in honor of Alex Nieto. Someone brought them to the closing exhibition, and after the closing of the show, there was a round table conversation about gentrification. At this conversation they [Nieto’s parents] let the community know they were frustrated because they had not received any justice in the criminal case against the police, and they had not received any justice in the civil case against the police. The only justice that they really had was art—the symbolic justice of having the make-shift memorial at the site where Alex Nieto was killed. The Nietos were worried about the makeshift memorial getting kicked over, turned around, and disrespected. So, they wanted something permanent. They wanted me to be the designer for their memorial, and I agreed to do it. That very night I enlisted as a volunteer-designer. At this same meeting, the Nietos met Carolyn Goosen, a representative of Hilary Ronen’s Office of District Nine, which proved to be

Figure 4, Josué Rojas, Amor: The Perfect Lotus, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, (Image Courtesy of Josué Rojas)
instrumental in us helping get the wheel rolling for the creation of a committee. The sole aim of the committee was to fulfill and create the vision that the Nieto family wanted, which was a permanent memorial to commemorate Alex Nieto. The memorial would be built at Bernal Hill, precisely at the spot where he had his final meal, which was a burrito and chips while overlooking the Mission District. So again, the essence of the memorial is deeply influenced by the four directions. If you look directly north from the point where he was eating his last meal, it aligns precisely with the north-facing Mission street, I like to think that today he is overlooking the Mission District.

The memorial became cemented when we formed the committee. I am the creative designer of it. It’s going to be essentially a small, permanent plaque on a pedestal that overlooks the Mission neighborhood up on Bernal Hill. As I understand, it is the first, if not one of the first, permanent memorial monuments in honor of a Latino victim of police violence in the United States.

MER: I believe there is a Latinx unity that exists in the Mission District. Alex Nieto was Mexican-American and his parents are from Mexico. I find it interesting that as a Salvadoran-American artist you decided to paint a portrait of Nieto. Do you see this portrait as an act of Latinx solidarity?

JR: Yeah, absolutely. There are two things that I think are important, and it’s about the image that we cast. I think it’s uniquely important that we talk about the image that we cast as young, female Latina, as male Latinos, gender-fluid Latinos, however you identify the term Latinx, but the image that we cast is very similar. If you look at someone walking down the street it’s hard for you to say, “That guy is Nicaraguan.” Or you know, “You have a very Panamanian swag.” I think it is fair to say that someone has a pretty thick Salvadoran drawl or a Honduran drawl, which is very similar in speech, but I think other than that we are very similar in the image that we cast. To borrow from President Barack Obama said- I might misquote this- but he said, “If I were Trayvon Martin’s age, then he would look a lot like me.” The point is that Obama said Trayvon Martin looked a lot like him and I think that is of high importance. So, my solidarity with Alex Nieto is not that he looks like me but he could have been me. I could have very easily been the young man minding my own business having a burrito in the Mission. I have been to Bernal Heights. I have worn a Niner’s coat. I have done all the things that he’s done, and so I feel that he could have been me. I think a lot of other young Latino, Latinx, and Latinas, also probably feel the same way that he’s one of ours, but particularly as a young, cis-male Latino man I feel that Alex Nieto exactly fits my profile. That being the case, I felt it hit home in a very particular way. There is this feeling that he is one of ours from the Mission District, that is the case for me at least. It was mandatory for me to create a response. Visual art is the way that I can contribute. Art is what I do, and so art is the way that I responded to Alex Nieto’s tragic and unnecessary death.

NOTES


2 Ibid.

3 According to Rebecca Solnit, the man did not give the precise word he used as a racial slur in “Death by Gentrification: The Killing That Shamed San Francisco” *The Guardian*, March 21, 2016.

4 Ibid. For more information on the full-length description of the Alex Nieto story.

5 Ibid. According to Rebecca Solnit, this man only lived in San Francisco for one year prior to the Nieto incident.


10 Ibid, 83.

11 The “Ellis Act” is a 1985 California state law that allows landlords to evict residential tenants in order to get out of the rental business. The use of this act often leads to legal and illegal tactics to forcefully displace long term tenants. Landlords convert their apartments into condos, or sell their entire building, reaping massive financial gains in the process.

12 La Palma is a municipality in the Chalatenango department of El Salvador. In the late 1970s, artist Fernando Llort arrived to La Palma and helped establish an artisan and folkloric style of painting that simplifies lines and uses vivid colors to display landscapes, flowers, villagers, animals, and quotidian scenes of El Salvador. Today, the style established at La Palma is recognized as an iconographic aesthetic, reproduced on crafts and souvenirs throughout El Salvador.