

Oral History Interview
with
Mirella Martinez

Interview Conducted by
Julie Pearson-Little Thunder
April 30, 2021

Oklahoma's Immigrant Women Artists
Occupational Folklife
Oral History Project

Oklahoma Oral History Research Program
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Oklahoma's Immigrant Women Artists

Occupational Folklife Oral History Project

Interview History

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Project Detail

This project is supported by the Archie Green Fellowship of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

The purpose of the *Immigrant Women Artists* Oral History Project is to examine the occupational folklife of first-generation immigrant women artists living in Oklahoma and the networks of support that allow them to pursue their vocations in a new environment. This series of interviews examines not only the cultural and occupational traditions that these artists nurture in straddling multiple cultural identities, but also the translation of an artist's occupational life between multiple cultural and physical spaces.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Mirella Martinez is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on April 30, 2021.

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About Mirella Martinez ...

Photographer and mixed media artist Mirella Martinez was born in Mexico and came to Stillwater, Oklahoma, as a child, when her parents immigrated to America. Because her mother worked on campus, Mirella and her family lived in Oklahoma State University family housing, which allowed Mirella to engage with other international children who lived nearby and went to the same school, and the exposure to other cultures opened her eyes to her own history and ancestry. In high school, she became interested in visual arts and photography, and she bought herself a digital camera with her own savings. She enrolled at Ringling College of Art and Design to study photography and digital imaging, and after earning her degree, she spent the next few years traveling up and down the West Coast, and between the Coast and Oklahoma. Along her journeys, she produced a collection of photographs that can be seen in her series *American West* and *101-2018*.

Eventually moving back to Stillwater, Mirella continued her photography and mixed media pieces, and she started creating handmade books, as well. Among her projects are *Preserve/Decay*, *Still Life*, and *Wavering Recognition*, along with the book *Hey Buttercup* and a series of portraits. In 2021, the Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition selected her project *Payne* for Art 365, a unique honor, offered to only five Oklahoma artists every three years. In her interview, Mirella discussed her photography and artwork and how she searches to capture some of the smaller moments in life that often go unnoticed. She also shared feelings of her Mexican heritage and how it, as well as emotion, human connection, and life perceptions, influence her projects and pieces.

Oklahoma's Immigrant Women Artists

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Mirella Martinez

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Julie Pearson-Little Thunder

April 30, 2021

Remote interview



[00:00:00]

Little Thunder *This is Julie Pearson-Little Thunder with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at Oklahoma State University. Today is April 30, 2021, and this is a remote interview with Mirella Martinez for the Library of Congress' Occupational Folklife Project funded by an Archie Green Fellowship. I'm in Tulsa, and you're in Stillwater, Mirella, where you are a photographer and mixed media artist. I'm looking forward to learning more about you and your work. Where were you born, and where did you spend your first childhood years?*

Martinez I was born in Mexico and...I grew up in Oklahoma, in Stillwater specifically. That's where I was raised. I was raised here for the whole part and went away for college, and then came back after, and spent some years in between now and college, post-college traveling between Oklahoma and the West Coast.

Little Thunder *What did your folks do for a living as you were growing up?*

Martinez Growing up, my parents, well, they've had almost the same jobs ever since I was young. My mom works in food dining services at OSU. Since Stillwater's a college town, she works there. She's been working there since I can remember, and my dad works maintenance at a golf course and then has his own business outside of that, as well, with lawn care.

Little Thunder *Okay. What was your first experience with art, however you would define it?*

[00:01:48]

Martinez My first experience with art, really going back all the way back as early as I can remember, my first experience with art was seeing these picture frames my family members had made in Mexico. They were carved and painted,

and I had a small.... One of my uncles, I believe, is the one who made it. It was a small little picture frame. Of course, it had a religious image in the middle. On the outside it had my name at the top and some flowers carved around the edges, and it was painted. I held on to that picture frame for years, you know. I think that was my first experience with art, and at the time, I didn't recognize it as art. It was more classified in the religious little knickknacks that I had.

Little Thunder *Right. So you grew up bilingual and bicultural. What were the expectations of your family for you to adjust here, and what were the expectations that the public school had from you? How were they different?*

Martinez I think the biggest one was the language expectations of how I was expected to communicate. At home, it was Spanish-only from a very young age, and I remember.... I mean, it's a combination of remembering and what I've been told because we would have my grandmother come and spend months with us. I remember as a child trying to tell her something in English because I was so used to going to school and communicating in English. My dad sat me down, and he told me, "Your grandma doesn't understand English. We need to speak in Spanish here." That was kind of a big realization of, "Oh, I need to communicate one way at home, through Spanish, and then at school I'm expected to communicate through English." That was one of the big expectations and, you know, differences that was between home and school growing up.

Little Thunder *And your school environment was a little bit different from, maybe, the typical Oklahoma public school at some point.*

[00:04:24]

Martinez Yeah, I was fortunate. I was fortunate. I think I was really fortunate in this sense. We had an international student body. The way the school districts were drawn at the time, the family housing for OSU, all of the people that were in the family housing had their kids go to the elementary school I was in, so that was a really good.... It was really comforting and a really good way to grow up and not be so isolated, being from a different culture that was the majority at the time, you know. It was really kind of reassuring, but also at the same time...kind of had to figure out my way of where I fit into. Not only was I international and bicultural, but it was also specifically Mexican versus, you know, my friends were Ethiopian, from Cambodia, all these other places. It was an interesting experience definitely.

Little Thunder *Right. What experiences did you have with art in public school?*

Martinez In early...I would say basic, very straightforward up until, I think, high school. Before then, it was very much just art class. Either you take art class,

or you have PE, you know, your traditional curriculum setup. It wasn't until high school where I kind of had that freedom of, I was in the arts, I was in orchestra, and then I kind of gravitated more towards visual art. That was my experience from then. Once I discovered visual art and photography in high school, that just opened up a whole new world for me. It's like, "Oh, this is essentially another language, another way to communicate." That's what I think drew me in really, was discovering it, discovering photography as a medium and a language, another form of communication.

Little Thunder *How early did you try to get your own camera?*

[00:06:49]

Martinez It's funny. So the tradition is you have your *quinceañera*, and that's a coming of age. I remember telling my parents, "You know what? It's okay. I don't have to have that big party. I would rather have a camera." (Laughter) They were very much set on letting me have that experience of having the whole, you know, *quinceañera*, big party, everything. They didn't like that idea very much. I remember being upset, like, "It'd be so much more economical," trying to convince them that, "It's okay. I would rather have a camera." As late or as early, at the age of fifteen is honestly when I really started doing photography in a more serious form.

Little Thunder *Because you got both? You got a camera and your quinceañera?*

Martinez I got the *quinceañera*, and I remember being upset because I didn't get a camera for my fifteenth birthday.

Little Thunder *Oh, okay. (Laughs)*

Martinez I saved up my own money after that. It was a combination of birthday money and my own saving up that I finally got a camera, a fancy camera, as I would say, a digital camera.

Little Thunder *You went to school at, you went to college at the Ringling [College] of Art and Design in Florida. How did you end up there, and what was your major?*

Martinez I actually ended up there, I would say, by chance, intentionally but by chance. I was actually surprised. My parents were very supportive and taking me to [National] Portfolio Day down in Dallas. You know, it's a whole bunch of art schools come together. Students go and present their portfolios, and you get feedback. I remember being in line. I had a list. I had a mental list of where I wanted to go, and, of course, there were places in California, New York, big cities. I remember being in line, and I left.... You know, this is a packed, big line with families. I remember leaving to go off

to either—I don't remember why I wandered off. I came back, and my dad said, "Hey, the family ahead of us is going to look at Ringling. You should go ahead and go check it out because it seems to be a really good school." Of course, at the time I was like, "Dad, okay sure, sure." I went there, and I got the feedback. The more I learned about the school, the more, you know, I thought, "Maybe this is where I want to go." One of the things that drew me to that school in particular was their curriculum. It was kind of, you had your foundation classes, but you kind of hit the ground running with your major. Being the stubborn person that I was then, I was like, "I don't want to wait. I want to hit the ground running with photography." So that was kind of how that went.

Little Thunder *Oh, okay, so you had your focus from the get-go there, too.*

Martinez Focus, yeah. Their department was photography and digital imaging. That's what I studied there.

Little Thunder *What kind of a base did you get?*

Martinez Base, as in education?

Little Thunder *Well, in photography. What sort of base insights did you get that you could use later on?*

[00:10:17]

Martinez I think at the time what I really needed and I really got from it was the history of it, but more knowledge, more of how photography fits into the world of art because up until then, I knew it was a way to communicate, but I wasn't aware of how much communication had been done with photography. It really put it into context of this isn't just.... There's so many little facets of it. The snapshot aesthetic, the portraiture, that's where I learned that it had so many different.... You had so many different things you could do with photography, and that was kind of what, you know, kept me intrigued with the medium. Of course, with that, I took other classes, as well, which expanded my practice and everything which would lead into bookmaking.

Little Thunder *What did you do after you graduated?*

Martinez After that, I spent some time in Florida. Eventually, I think not even a year after graduation, I came back to Oklahoma. After that, I wasn't sure where I wanted to be. Of course, that whole finding myself and finding my purpose after college, and so I took some time to travel. I traveled. I ended up traveling for the next four or five years or so, back and forth from the West Coast to Oklahoma. I think that's why I've been here. I've stayed in

Oklahoma. It's a good middle home base, and so I spent.... There was one year where I spent almost a good portion of the year traveling up and down the West Coast in an RV and experiencing that whole transient lifestyle.

[00:12:30]

Little Thunder *You know, when I think about traveling and then when I think about photography, it's like, well, you know, you've got to set up your equipment. You see a place maybe you want to photograph, but you've got this process to set up. You're already on the move, and you maybe don't know how long you're going to be in that particular spot. How did you handle all that?*

Martinez I think the way I make it work is very much trying to capture that ephemeral fleetingness of everything. I think that the way I approached photography in general really blended itself to travel. I mean, I did have the big film camera with me, and sometimes I did make those slower images where I did set up the film, camera, and everything. A lot of the times, it was just catching those fleeting moments of the window, outside the window. That, in itself, was really, I think, why I kept traveling to make those images of those moments that, you know, were fleeting.

Little Thunder *And you said that series is called AmericanWest. Am I right?*

Martinez It's broken up into a couple different bodies of work because, I think, I just made so many images. I think when you're in that headspace and you're constantly traveling, you're constantly on the move, you constantly want to capture. I did, anyway. I constantly wanted to capture things I was seeing, from small details to portraits to the landscape. It's broken up into a couple different bodies. *AmericanWest* is one of them. That one is mostly from the last trip I made from Seattle down to Oklahoma. Then there's another body of work, the *101-2018*, which involved traveling up and down the 101.

[00:14:47]

Little Thunder *Cool. Talk a little bit about how you approach portraiture. You do do a lot of portraits but unconventional portraits.*

Martinez Yeah. That's one of the things I think I like about photography and the way I approach it. It's much more an abstract form. Usually, when you think about a portrait, it's very straightforward. You're seeing the person's full face. When I think about what a portrait is, it's capturing someone's essence, those little details that you don't see when you look at their face. It's more about the little components or little mannerisms, their work if I'm photographing an artist. It's their workspace. When I was traveling, it was the person. When I made portraits of when I was traveling, the person

wasn't the main focus. It was more of them in relation to the landscape or their vehicle that they were traveling in.

Little Thunder *You have some wonderful mixed media pieces, too, that are done on panels with image transfers. One of them is called Preserve/Decay. I wondered what gave you the idea for that series and how you choose your objects for it.*

Martinez Yeah, I'm pretty excited about that body of work. It is image transfer, and then I obscured some of the image purposefully with acrylic paint, with paint, and then overlaid objects on top. The basis from that is using the photography as a portal in the background and then layering all the images on top to give more of a sense of the exact time and place. It was kind of a structural approach to photography and kind of thinking about why we photograph things at the exact time that we do, and then kind of building off of that. All the objects I put on top of the image transfers are usually decayed or dehydrated fruit, things that people consider past their prime, gross, things that aren't beautiful. You generally want to capture and photograph things at, you know, the perfect moment. I thought, "Well, why is that? What is the beauty in preserving something after its 'prime'? How does that mirror the effect that photography has when we kind of selectively photograph things and selectively remember certain aspects?"

[00:18:01]

Little Thunder *The other thing, your still lifes I think are so striking, partly for some of those reasons. I mean, you're not taking pictures of conventionally beautiful stuff. You're taking pictures of things that are kind of routine or really well-worn. What attracts you to the objects you choose for your still lifes?*

Martinez I think it is that sense of trying to preserve that little moment after the perfect moment because, you know, we often idealize and romanticize this one big moment and that's not usually what makes that moment special. It's usually at the moment surrounding that. I think a lot of what I photograph is oftentimes considered gross, but I think that there should be a focus in that. There is beauty in that. It's only gross because it was beautiful at one time. It's still beautiful, just in a different, more detailed, more used way. There's some beauty, too, in the small traces that we leave.

Little Thunder *Yeah, you do feel that strongly that they're beautiful in that way. What were your impressions of the Oklahoma art scene when you got back to kind of stay?*

Martinez I was surprised, honestly. I was surprised and intrigued at the way it had been evolving since I left. At the time, I think, when I left, I was also in a different point in my life. I had one idea of what art should be and what I

was exposed to. Having had the experiences I had up until then, I only saw one particular kind of art. When I came back, I kind of got to know people more, got to know the community, and got the opportunity to see that there's a lot of art actually being made, a lot of different kind of art being made. There is a real growing community here. I think that was kind of the—I was surprised and intrigued by what it can be, what it is becoming, and how, yeah, how it's all coming together.

Little Thunder *A good time to be here, maybe.*

Martinez Yeah, it is. Lots of opportunities, I would say, for growth.

[00:20:44]

Little Thunder *What do you consider one of your first professional breakthroughs?*

Martinez Honestly, I really consider one of the books, an [audition book] I made, one of my first professional breakthroughs. I think it was...not one of the few times but one of the first times I really took something personal, something really personal for me, and made it into a work. Everyone says you have to find your voice. I didn't know what that meant. I was like, "Well, I'm talking. I'm showing this is my voice," but I think after I made that work and showed it to people and saw the way people resonated with it, that kind of clicked in my head. I was like, "This is it. This is what—I'm on the right track. Like, this is what people mean when they say 'find your voice.'" I think that work really was one of a breakthrough, a professional breakthrough. Of course, when you have a piece or work like that that really resonates, people want to see it. You get to share it, and that leads to more opportunities. I would say that was a big one.

Little Thunder *How have you tried to connect with either the Mexican community in Oklahoma or the Mexican American community in Oklahoma?*

Martinez I don't think I've particularly tried. It's not something that I intentionally did. I kind of just realized one day, I was in it. It was more of a, "How can I better serve it? How can I become a better member? Especially throughout this past year with everything that's been going on, what does it mean to be a member of this community?" A lot of times, it's just showing up. Simply put, it's just being there and holding space really. It's, yeah, being there for when your community needs you, and what that looks like, and, yeah, finding that space between how do I just take up space but also give back.

[00:23:09]

Little Thunder *How have you approached marketing your work?*

Martinez That's a tricky one. (Laughter) I'm still trying to figure out what that is. I think the best marketing I have is just reaching out and making those personal connections. Yeah, it's just putting my work out there and finding people whose work I like, or who are, you know, part of the communities that I'm in and putting my work out there, letting it be known that I am here. That's kind of my approach. It's more—it goes back to the way I photograph. It's a much more subtle, interpersonal, one-on-one kind of marketing.

Little Thunder *As a bicultural bilingual artist, have you run into any preconceptions or stereotypes?*

Martinez Yes and no, I think, because a lot of my work up until now, especially apart from this project, with the *Payne* project, a lot of it has been more on my other interpersonal relationships. It's more on the emotional side rather than the cultural side. I do think there is, you know, there is some—when people think of cultural Mexican art, they do have this idea of what it is. I do think, yeah, it's hard to marry those two. It's why I think I've recently kind of meshed what it means to be a Mexican artist or an artist that happens to be Mexican. There is a lot of other...that emotional side that people think about, but it's not necessarily a part of all the work I make. It just happens to be a part of who I am.

[00:25:23]

Little Thunder *Over the years, I know you and your nuclear family have gone back and forth to Mexico and kept in touch with family and extended family. How has that shaped you personally and professionally?*

Martinez I think it's shaped—it's played a big role in the kind of work I make because I think a lot of the work I do, the photographs and images I do put out there, is kind of questioning where I belong. I think growing up here in Oklahoma, growing up here, it was always, I felt comfortable, but I never felt like a hundred percent this is my culture. Growing up Mexican American, going back to Mexico, it's also kind of the same. I do feel connected because they're my family. It's where, you know, my family is from. At the same time, there's that little bit of dissonance where I'm not exactly one hundred percent there, either. It's neither here nor there, and it's being an outsider but also having a little bit of yourself in there, as well. That's kind of shaped and kind of reflected back into the work that I do, of being there but not actually taking one small step back.

Little Thunder *Kind of the position of the artist.*

Martinez Yeah, yeah.

Little Thunder *You got what is called the [Art 365] grant from the Oklahoma Visual Artists Coalition. Can you explain what the grant was for, what your project was for that grant, too?*

[00:27:16]

Martinez Yeah, so the original project proposal was different than what it eventually came to be because I was.... Overall, it is a look at the Mexican Latinx culture in this small region, in Middle America essentially. I had one vision for it, but the way things played out with current events and the restrictions we have, its final form is slightly different. You know, people are uneasy with having me in their personal spaces, so I've kind of had to readjust. It's also taken some time of also reflecting, going back to where do I fit into the community, or how can I best serve, make these portraits that will show the story I want to show and share without actually being able to be super close in people's homes. That's kind of how that project has evolved. It's essentially just kind of how everyday life looks like, and being a Latinx identifying person in Middle America, because, you know, you think of Mexican American culture in California, and you have a very strong image. You think about it in the East Coast, you get another very strong image. It's kind of what does it look like, you know, where you have some.... We're close to Texas, but we're not exactly Texas, either. Yeah, it's kind of an exploration of what it is in Middle America.

[00:29:10]

Little Thunder *Aside from your grant project, what other ways did the pandemic affect your work or you?*

Martinez Oh, I think the *Preserve/Decay* series was really a good example of how the pandemic affected my work and the way I think about things because I wasn't able to go out and photograph and, you know, be out there, essentially. I had to kind of take a step back. It made me think, going back to that series, of why we photograph the things we do and what is an image and how to use what I had. That's kind of—it made me think of the photograph as more of a portal and build it up from there.

Little Thunder *Photography has this long history in Western culture and, of course, these power dynamics, which you're aware of. I wonder how you think about them in your own photographing work.*

Martinez Yeah, I do. I think I approached it in a much more.... Generally, when you think of the traditional photographer, they're invading someone's space or, you know, they're setting up in someone's life. Kind of the way I'm approaching it is more of I'm not setting up in, you know, making this big setup and coming in as a visitor. I'm trying to incorporate more of a

subtleness to it and the small nuances, not so much making a big event of setting up a portrait. There are times when I do. I mean, you have to do the whole thing where you set up lightings and portrait and the film, get your film ready, but I think the way I approach it has a much more natural, easy subtleness to it that I try to incorporate when I do that.

[00:31:26]

Little Thunder *And a lot of times you're your own subject. What are the challenges when you photograph yourself? (Laughter)*

Martinez The pro is, you're always with yourself, so you're always going to have a model. That's always a pro, but, you know, it's also a self-reflection kind of thing, like, "How do I relate to this? Why am I photographing myself?" Usually, it's trying to make that connection with other people, too, that no matter how unique or singular experience you may think you're having, there's always that emotion sentiment that other people can relate to.

Little Thunder *You're involved, I guess with an Oklahoma City Art Collective, or have been for a while. Can you talk about that?*

Martinez Yeah, so, yeah, it's the...Art Group Oklahoma City. I actually came across them while I was traveling on the West Coast. You know, it was on social media. At the time, I was curious as to what the Oklahoma art scene would look like, and I really had no experience with it. That was one of the things that kind of, you know, drew me back to Oklahoma. It's a very, very supportive community of recent graduates or people who are just kind of shifting into art. We do studio visits, and it's a very supportive community that I found. That's kind of what made me realize that there is this opportunity to make art, that there are people who want to see it, who are supporting it in Oklahoma that I hadn't previously been aware of. That was really reassuring and comforting and helpful, too.

[00:33:28]

Little Thunder *Right, right. So what projects do you have coming up that you're excited about, or what are you sort of looking at?*

Martinez Well, for the next couple of months, I have OVAC's [Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition] Art 365 show is coming up.

Little Thunder *Oh, cool.*

Martinez I have that. Yeah, that'll be at Living Arts in Tulsa and then [ARTSPACE at] Untitled in Oklahoma City. There's other—it's a group of artists, not just me, so that's pretty exciting. Beyond that, I've been working on some other

works, making more work. I recently made a trip to Mexico last year for family matters. Of course, took that opportunity to photograph, make some more photographs, so I have some more images on those coming out.

Little Thunder *Oh, neat, I look forward to seeing those. Is there anything we forgot to talk about that you'd like to mention?*

Martinez I don't think so. I think we've pretty much covered it. I mean, photography and bookmaking, I think we touched on both of those.

Little Thunder *Yeah, that's such an intriguing idea to me that a book format would be so appealing and would be a nice form of expression for you.*

[00:35:01]

Martinez Yeah, I think bookmaking I found, actually, I think it was the last semester (if not, the last year for sure) of school, I found that bookmaking and having things in a very tactile form, because often now today, especially with digital photography, there's some kind of disconnect there where the images do exist. Then seeing them in print form but then taking another step and actually having them in book form and having made the book itself, there's another level there that people can connect and relate to. You know, when you flip through something, I think it adds another tactile feel and sensory.

Little Thunder *For sure, becomes a whole body kind of experience that way.*

Martinez Yeah, yeah. I think especially with the *Hey Buttercup* book that I did, it's very much in a more personal journal format. I think that's what really helped it be relatable to some people, where they felt like, "These could be my memories. I could have written this."

Little Thunder *And mostly, that particular one mostly revolving around past relationships, right?*

Martinez Yeah, yeah, that's where I, you know, when I was making it—when you're making things, the way I approach it, I was like, "No, I don't know if people are going to connect with this. I don't know if this is just my personal experience." After showing it to people, and the studio visits, getting that feedback of people saying, "Well, I've received messages like these," or, "I've been the one sending these messages," that's always good to hear that, you know, people can relate.

Little Thunder *Right, well, I wish you the best of luck and appreciate your time today, Mirella.*

Martinez Thank you.

----- *End of interview* -----