



CLARE I. ROGAN

Curator of Prints and Drawings,
Detroit Institute of Arts

MICHAEL MENCHACA

JULIA SAMUELS

Director and Master Printer,
Overpass Projects

In 2021, the Detroit Institute of Arts acquired *La Raza Cósmica 20XX* (2019, fig. 1), a set of sixteen screen prints by Michael Menchaca (b. 1985, San Antonio, Texas) printed and published by master printer Julia Samuels (b. 1985, Portsmouth, New Hampshire) at Overpass Projects in Providence, Rhode Island. In *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, Menchaca reworks the racial categories of the *casta* paintings from eighteenth-century Mexico. In paintings such as Ignacio María Barreda, *Las Castas Mexicanas* (1777), and *Las Castas*, by an unknown painter (figs. 2, 3), the artists depicted family groups of a father, mother, and child, as ways of visually categorizing *mestizaje* or racial mixing of Spanish, African, and Indigenous people in colonial Mexico.¹ For example, the first—and highest ranked—is the child of a Spanish man and an Indigenous woman, and was categorized

as a *mestizo/a*. The last—and lowest-ranked—groups comprised those born of combined African and Indigenous descent. Within each individual print in *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, Menchaca places the *casta* terms, some of which—such as *mulatto*—today have negative meanings directly connected to the legacy of these words as pejorative colonial terms and instruments of power. The overall title, *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, quotes the concept of a “cosmic race,” formulated by Mexican philosopher and politician, José Vasconcelos (1881–1959), who argued that the Mexican fusion of races created an ideal, modern race.² By substituting skeletons and animal archetypes, Menchaca (they/ them) emphasizes the breakdown of Spanish colonial categories, and with the insertion of technology corporation logos and icons, they connect the legacy of the *casta* racial categories to today’s digital exploitation by technology companies.³

Menchaca and Samuels are longtime friends who both received their master of fine arts degrees from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2015. After graduation, Samuels founded Overpass Projects, a printmaking studio and fine print

FIG. 1 Michael Menchaca (American, born 1985), *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, 2019, set of sixteen screen prints, each 21 × 22 in. (53.3 × 55.9 cm). Detroit Institute of Arts, Museum Purchase, Friends of PDP Photographic Fund in honor of Lindsey Buhl, 2021.249.1–16. © Michael Menchaca

Making *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*

Clare Rogan in Conversation with Michael Menchaca and Julia Samuels

Below, left

FIG. 2 Ignacio Maria Barreda (active in Mexico ca. 1750–1800), *Las Castas Mexicanas*, 1777, oil on canvas, 30⅞ × 19¼ in. (77 × 49 cm). Real Academia Española de la Lengua, Madrid. (The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo)

Below, right

FIG. 3 Unknown Artist in Mexico, *Las Castas*, 18th century, oil on canvas, 58¼ × 40⅞ in. (148 × 104 cm). Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Mexico. (Schalkwijk / Art Resource, NY)

publisher in Providence, Rhode Island. Menchaca was one of the first artists to collaborate with Samuels and created four projects before *La Raza Cósmica 20XX* in 2019. In July 2021, Menchaca was awarded one of the inaugural Latinx Artist Fellowships given by the Mellon Foundation, US Latinx Art Forum, and the Ford Foundation.

On December 3, 2021, Menchaca and Samuels talked via MSTeams with Clare Rogan, DIA Curator of Prints and Drawings, about the making and meaning of this project.⁴ The conversation ranged across the sources for the project, Menchaca’s critique of the *casta* system and their experiences as a Latinx individual in the United States. In addition, the conversation explores the collaboration between artist and printmaker, the making of the series in the printing studio, from the initial digital design to the use of the color mixes possible with layers of transparent screen print inks, and how the process of making the set connects to its meaning.

Clare Rogan (CR): Let’s go back in time to August 2019 . . .

Michael Menchaca (MM): I don’t know if I had the title yet, *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, but I was already interested in reinventing the *casta* painting tradition, from the Mexican colonial era (figs. 2, 3)

I started making the designs for an exhibition in Lawndale, Houston, but I hadn’t yet composed them to be print ready.⁵ So, in August, when I arrived in Providence, Julia had set up her iMac in the print studio, and I just plugged in my files, opened Adobe Illustrator, and started getting to work on translating those compositions of the different families in some of the original *casta* paintings.

I started playing with color theory. Julia has developed this amazing process to make these rich, dense color palettes. That was the largest learning curve on my part—trying to understand what color mixing and color theory can do to these designs. I started recoloring everything using a new



palette that she had developed. I had to understand how to convert that palette into the spot colors [pure, unmixed colors used in graphic design as an alternative to printing with cyan, magenta, yellow, and black, or CMYK] that I had normally worked with for my print practice.

Julia Samuels (JS): Clare, as you know, we—Michael and I—have made several prints together before and it was always a challenge to have a level of communication between my understanding of how transparent colors layer and build new colors and Michael’s understanding of how the digital files need to be broken down to make the different stencils for the screen prints.⁶

Michael and I had talked about how we might work together on a 2019 project. They had shown me the work of *La Raza Cós mica*. Typically, how we had worked before is that they would send a design, and I would try to parse it out in terms of which colors—spot colors—needed to be printed. I would build a couple different swatch patterns that would show a handful more colors that could be used.

I have a mathematical kind of brain and I’m really invested in being super-efficient with printmaking. If you print one color, you get one color. If you print two colors, you ultimately get three colors because you get A and B and then you get A+B and so it continues to multiply as you add. If we print six colors, if you actually use every permutation, it’s sixty-four different colors.

Michael had sent me some draft designs and I was starting down the old path of trying to do ad-hoc swatches and I diverted and made this system that I now use for everything. I built this grid (fig. 4) so that I could fill in Michael’s spot colors, the specific colors Michael wanted to use, and the grid revealed exactly all the other colors we could design with. When Michael was in the studio with me I was able to show them; you can use all of these sixty-four colors, with confidence.

When Michael and I had the proof of the color palette, they went back into all of their designs. As they are separating the designs out into the transparencies that we need to make the screen prints, they are



embellishing and adding more detail and adding more colors and shades. The richness that comes out of that scientific process that we started is obvious. The older work we had done together just doesn’t have the huge gamut of color. I love this palette because I have confidence that every time I pull a channel [apply one layer of color through a printing screen] we’re getting all of the possibilities out of the color

For example, in *Español No. 3* (fig. 5), the first draft of these designs had almost nothing in the background or would have had one or two trees following one or two shades of green. But I was able to give Michael the torch and say, “You can use all these colors.” They were giddy and excited.

MM: Yes, I had reassurance that the colors that I play with on screen would translate in reality. They would materialize because you had shown me the colors that have already been mixed. Okay, so this is the color palette now. Go ahead and recolor everything. So, I just went at it.

JS: It was such a change in how we work together. Finally, we both knew we were talking the same language. Even after

FIG. 4 Annotated Samuels Screen Print Color Proving System with five of six channels used for the color palette of *La Raza Cós mica 20XX*, August 2019. (© Julia Samuels)

FIG. 5 Michael Menchaca, *Español No. 3*, screen print from *La Raza Cósmica 20XX*, 2019 (see fig. 1).



having worked together and known each other for so many years, we had so much more trust, and fun, in the process.

MM: Yes, and those backgrounds weren't developed until I had confidence that the colors that were already mixed in the studio would be applied to the designs on screen. Once that happened, then I started getting even more dense with the backgrounds in the patterns.

I had already started developing what I call my codex of designs that speak to the digital architecture that surrounds us. I wanted that to be present in this series because this is the new era of colonization. These original eighteenth-century paintings were speaking of a colonial era, and I'm trying to connect the dots to what I consider the current industrial revolution that is colonizing human attention, human behavior, for political and commercial purposes. These folks, these families, these archetypes in the images, they are being used by these invisible signals—the Wi-Fis,

the Facebooks, the Metas of the world, the Googles. I wanted those symbols to be in the landscape surrounding these folks, and to show that this is the new, current iteration of the colonial project.⁷

CR: If we look at *Español No. 3*, I see the Twitter bird that I hadn't even noticed before, because it's up in the trees.

MM: Yep, it's meant to be subliminal.

CR: Well, it was! Can you walk us through *Español No. 3* as an example where certain things are intended to be subliminal?

MM: The arrow that's smiling is a reference to Amazon and their web services, which a lot of internet companies use for computing power, storage, and content delivery.⁸ They have these contracts with different law enforcement agencies and government agencies.⁹ It's really complicated, but I wanted that symbol to be a background with an eyeball. That's a



FIG. 6 Michael Menchaca, *Quarteron No. 6*, screen print from *La Raza C6smica 20XX*, 2019 (see fig. 1).

reiteration of this Mayan eyeball.¹⁰ I think there's a generational understanding of what that eyeball is referencing. Younger folks tend to see Pok6mon, Pok6 Balls, and other folks may see the Mayan or ancient American icons.¹¹

I was doing a public art project at that time that helped me understand how to make tile designs.¹² For *La Raza C6smica*, I incorporated a tile design aesthetic to create a pattern from logos from tech companies. I applied a filter that warped that pattern to give it even more of an optical illusion. That specific pattern on the left of *Español No. 3* is referencing Amazon and Amazon Web Services.

CR: When you say it's the Mayan eyeball. To me, ideas of surveillance come to mind ...

MM: Of course. The Panopticon is an architectural solution to constantly surveil a public.¹³ You have this watchtower, you have a single officer in the center of a prison system, and then every prisoner is visible by the person

in the center. You can apply that same structure to this hyper-surveillance economy that we find ourselves in post 9/11. Before 9/11, it was "need to know" and now it became "need to share" to secure the homeland.¹⁴ Homeland Security partnered with Google and all these tech companies to create a surveillance apparatus that benefited those five companies: Apple, Amazon, Facebook/Meta, Google, and Microsoft.¹⁵ It should not be a surprise that these are some of the richest companies in the world and they're also some of those that are most connected to governments who surveil the public. I needed that to be referenced in the imagery. I wanted that to be present, to be felt.

Let me mention *Quarteron No. 6* (fig. 6). There are a bunch of blank profile symbols—which are used by someone who hasn't uploaded a picture to personalize their online presence—of faces on the bottom, acting as a floor of sorts. I wanted that to be indicative of ancestors that have fallen and are in the earth.

These are new juxtapositions from my research that I haven't yet seen people use. It's a combination of tech washing—which is labeling an old technology as something new or trendy sounding—and technoutopianism—the idea that as technology advances, humanity moves toward utopia—and the current economy of the tech industry. How this is benefiting the minority in power, who are trying to control and maintain the established racial and social hierarchies. It's a rich history that I'm trying to get at with these icons, which people may not think are connected to a colonial project.

CR: I want to pick up on a couple of different thoughts, one of which was when you talked about the Twitter symbol in *No. 3* as subliminal. Do you have an idea about how viewers might respond to this?

MM: No, and I don't let that hinder me, at least not while I'm designing anything. Usually those readings, for me, come out much later, after the work has been designed and printed, and then I've had some time to process what I was thinking at that time. Initially, I wanted that Twitter bird to contrast more with the background. Later on, I understood that there's meaning to it blending into the background and that those who look hard enough and those who may spend more time thinking about things could be rewarded in discovering the silhouette of the Twitter bird, and then they might see that the blue is very close to the same blue of the Twitter bird logo.

CR: That really strikes me as we've been talking color, and about what color allows you to do. That range that Julia has helped articulate and that the two of you working together can make visible on the sheet, that subtlety carries incredible meaning.

MM: Yes. And I want this to go on the record, that Julia is a master printer in every sense of that title. She *knows* what she's doing in the print studio. She is just a joy to work with. I have so much confidence in her output, in her production ethic. I couldn't imagine partnering with anyone else to make this project, this portfolio, complete.

CR: One of the things that struck me looking at *Español No. 3* was the density of the pattern. Then you talked about working on a tile project at the time.

MM: Yes. That was informing the project for the San Pedro Creek Culture Park.¹⁶ I was brought on to develop this set of tiles for benches in a public park. And I was looking at Spanish tile designs that had a lot of influence from mosques and Middle Eastern patterns, some of which had a religious or spiritual connection. Those designs got reappropriated or reworked in Spain and then those made their way to the Americas.¹⁷ I grew up seeing and feeling a closeness to that kind of intricate pattern work because it evoked class in a sense.

I wanted to bring my color palette and my understanding of digital drawing and repeat patterns to the project to aestheticize San Pedro Creek, that had been overlooked for so many years. The creek is actually the origin story of San Antonio being a colonial center in the Americas. The San Antonio River has so much life-giving material and that's part of what brought the Spanish settlers to that region. I wanted to have that historic Arts and Crafts aesthetic to lure people in to sit down and enjoy the park on a practical level. There's definitely a longer history to the understanding of where those patterns came from, and I felt my role was to bring a digital sensibility to that history. The color palette is more reflective of my personality growing up with Nicktoons and Nickelodeon. The project is just a big mix of my personality and my drawing style that really utilizes digital drawing tools to express myself.

CR: I'm looking at the outlining in some of the images in *La Raza Cósmica*. Are those some of the stylistic hallmarks of your digital technique?

MM: Yes, that's essential. I had a graphic design background prior to practicing as a screen printer and printmaker. That consistency of line weights and how dense things can look if they're repeated with precise spacing in between was something I wanted to expand on. When I embarked on creating a digital library or an index to

tell my story of growing up in the Southwest United States, I had all these cultural cringe moments where I was reminded that I'm a Latinx person in a white-dominated society—there were just all these moments that I felt I had to process through pictures. When I became conscious of that need for me to codify my lived experience, that's when I started working with Adobe Illustrator to develop a set of icons that express a kind of ancient Mesoamerican codex, one related to me.

Let me reference a little bit of the ancient imagery in the original Mixtec codices (fig. 7). There's a different kind of treatment of space in the Mixtec tradition; it's more of a simultaneous storytelling where things are not necessarily linear. There's no trying to represent space in the illusionistic way, no false perspective or linear perspective.

I really gravitate toward that kind of thinking—where things are happening simultaneously. You don't read things left to right; you can read it in a circle, and everything is circular. I'm more in tune with that kind of processing of information. I felt with the digital files that there was an opportunity for me to really go crazy making designs that could codify the landscape that I see in southern Texas.

I always look back to those ancient codices to try to understand how the early artisans of the Americas were trying to process information. There seems to me a spiritual reverence in the accuracy of the line work. I try to meditate on those ideas. If I'm spending all this time digitizing everything and being real nitpicky about precise corners and rounding edges, when it becomes a print that reverence transfers and therefore a viewer will receive that precision and that reverence. That's always been the goal working from graphic design on screen translated to print. That attention to detail and care is transferred to the viewer and hopefully allows them to have a different kind of experience. I think that's the joy and the complexity of me owning this Latinx identity, and no longer hiding it or no longer being ashamed of that identity. Because, for so long in Texas, we were taught to subordinate ourselves and to assimilate within the dominant white culture that that tells us



FIG. 7 Mixteca/ Aztec, Page from the *Codex Fejérváry*, before 1520, gesso, paint, and deer hide, each page 6⁷/₈ × 6⁷/₈ in. (17.5 × 17.5 cm). National Museums Liverpool, M12014. (HIP / Art Resource, NY)

that we are not worthy of expressing ourselves and we're only valued as a cheap source of labor. Either we join the military, or we join the police force, or we end up in jail. I never saw any of those as my path. So, I've opted to take the risk and try being the artist. With Julia's assistance and expertise, I think we've really made something special for the viewing public.

CR: I appreciate you explaining that. I agree, and that's why it's here at the DIA. These questions of representation, of who gets to represent, of who is represented, of who gets to be their full selves?

I've got up on the screen the Ignacio María Barreda *casta* painting (*Las Castas Mexicanas*, 1777, fig. 2) that you mentioned was one of your key sources.

MM: Yes. Those poses are more closely tied to the way I reinvented the family poses, both in the outfits and the situations that they're depicted in. The poses in part indicate class status or superiority or inferiority and I played with that.

I was looking at both of those paintings, Barreda's *Las Castas Mexicanas* and *Las Castas* (figs. 2, 3), to get at how I wanted to depict this current industrial revolution [technological revolution] and tie it to this specific colonial history of the Spanish *casta*



FIG. 8 Michael Menchaca, *Mulato No. 5*, screen print from *La Raza Cós mica 20XX*, 2019 (see fig. 1).

painting tradition. It really helped to find that because in the Barreda painting there's a lot more red. Using red is one of the ways to get people to pay attention. Barreda's *Las Castas Mexicanas* (fig. 2), compared to the others, has more of that vibrancy that I wanted to bring to this project. The red comes from the outfits and speaks to a regal nature of some of the families. That was my motivation for pairing *La Raza Cós mica* closer to that painting versus some of the other ones. The other ones had some reds, but they're more neutral tones and I wanted more contrast and brightness.

CR: As I'm looking at the whole group of prints in *La Raza Cós mica 20XX*, there is a shift in color palettes from the orange reds at the beginning and then you end up with these pinks by the end. You have those last three identified as the lower-class *castas* and their colors are quite different from the first three.

MM: Well, I want to correct myself in that document on my website¹⁸ because I recognize that I had a different understanding of caste hierarchy when I wrote it in 2019. I don't want to characterize them as lower class, but lower-casted folks. It's a status that has been placed on people of a certain genetic makeup, and that's an inherited feature of the European colonial project across the globe—to separate and categorize people according to perceived "racial" traits. For me there's been a big shift in my understanding from 2019 to 2021 in the relationship between different casted families.

CR: So noted. If you start the grid at the top, you're in these orange reds and we've just been talking about red, not only in this project but elsewhere. As you move down the grid, that bottom row has these incredible pinks. I'm wondering if that shift in color palettes across the work expressed something you were working on.

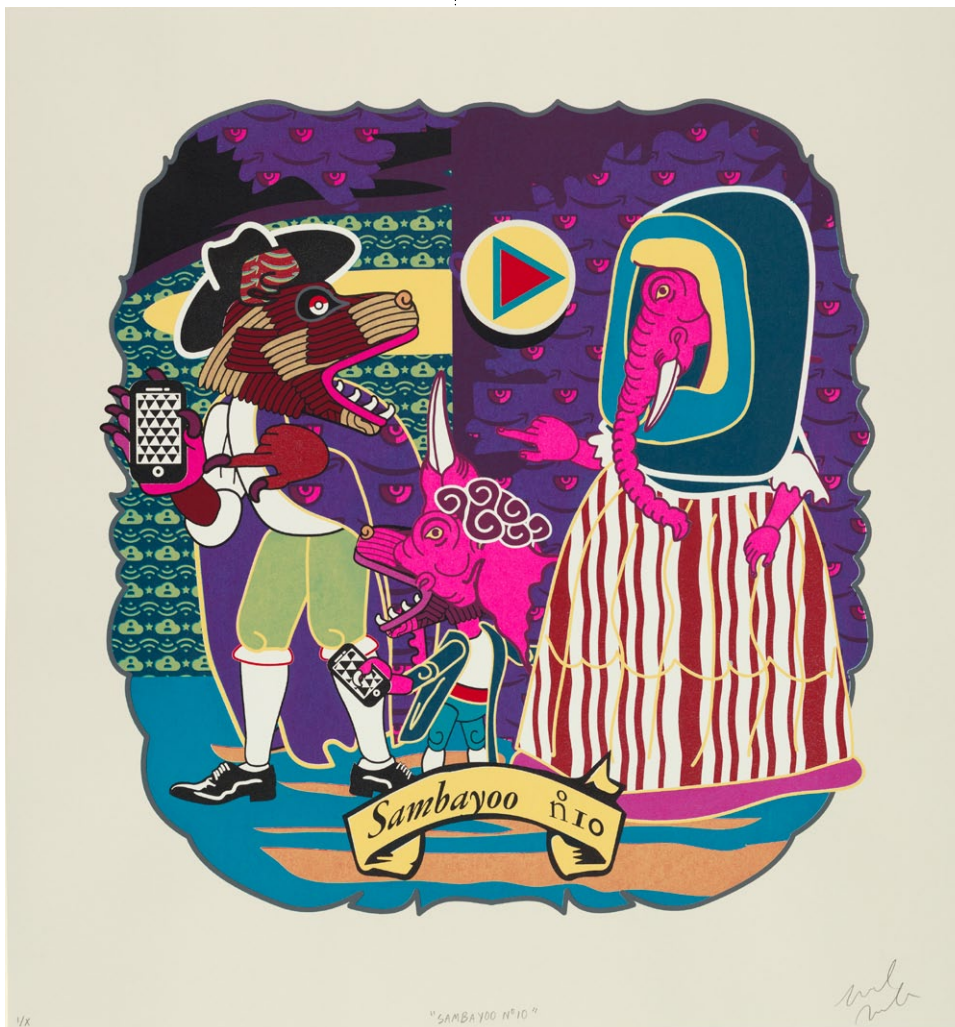


FIG. 9 Michael Menchaca, *Sambayoo No. 10*, screen print from *La Raza C6smica 20XX*, 2019 (see fig. 1).

JS: Each print has six colors plus black. The color palette has a red layer, cyan, white, gray, a color that Michael and I call “Spanish yellow,” this lighter yellow, and then a golden yellow. So, if you’re looking at *Mulato No. 5* (fig. 8) the hair on the person on the left and the yellow on the bottom of the dress, that is going to be that pure channel yellow.

I believe you had a design element, Michael, where you really wanted it to be purple.

MM: Yes, I wanted to work with more secondary colors for the second half of the of the families.

JS: Yes, and I have a special love for purple and when Michael said “I wanna do purple,” I couldn’t say “no.” So, we took out that golden yellow and we replaced it with a hot-pink or magenta layer. If you look at *Sambayoo No. 10* (fig. 9),¹⁹ the magenta of the elephant face is the new channel color

that’s replacing the golden yellow. That has an effect on all of the other colors in that individual print that you can achieve. There are a handful that have that hot pink alteration instead of being that golden yellow.

MM: It was definitely a conceptual understanding of what color can bring to this series. It also spoke to the complexity of the interracial mixing that was happening historically as the families continued to coalesce. I wanted to show visually the departure from the color palette of the first group of screen prints, which depict more Spanish-dominant genes and this miscegenation of the *Castizo* and *Español* families versus those of the *Ahi te Estas* [No. 16] and *Calpamulato* [No. 13] and *Albarazado* [No. 14]. They’re more secondary. Conceptually, I was thinking about primary colors indicating class status and secondary colors indicating subordination or a lack of



FIG. 10 Detail of custom frame made for *La Raza Cós mica 20XX*.

social status. I felt there was a visual way to indicate that through this psychedelic secondary color palette.

Also, the figuration becomes more abstracted as they take on more elements of different animal archetypes that indicate the different genetic origins. You have an African elephant paired with a bird. Or there's a snake coming out of the bird's mouth and the snake has blonde hair referring to the first print in the series. There's a circle of influence that's happening across the series, and I felt color could bring another layer of theorizing.

CR: I like this metaphor between primary colors and secondary colors and distance from power represented by distance from primary color. One of the things about this project is the use of the frame. First, you have the framing within the image—this elaborate filigree—and then you have the actual frames with all the tech logos on them. Can we talk a little bit about the idea of framing both conceptually and then also the actual making of it?

MM: The original frames within the prints themselves, that vignette, comes from those original *casta* paintings. I use a few variations. In some they're not symmetrical and then in others I began to cut the vignette in half and mirror it on the other side, so it became a symmetrical vignette. It was an opportunity to create a frame that I could break and have objects that go outside the frame,

which became a playful way to think about the matrix of the conceptual one frame.

In printmaking, we try to register things within a box or within the information that you're trying to pass ink through. It became another level of play for me, and I think for Julia maybe a challenge to register those objects and have the colors still fit.

And then on the outside frame, the actual wooden frame (fig. 10) . . . Shortly before the prints initially made their public appearance for the E/AB Fair [Editions/Artists Books Fair] in New York, Julia asked me if I would consider designing a pattern to place on the frame itself. I said, "Of course, I would love to have that. I just don't know how to do it. Doesn't that cost money? Don't you need vinyl or a digital printer?" No, she just decided to screen print them, and she said, "Let's use the same color palette that we already established," and I said, "OK, great, I'm going to do another version of the patterns that we're using already in the prints, but they will act as a frame and speak to the current industrial revolution of tech washing." It would be a playful way to lure people into this conversation about colonial history in the Americas.

JS: You know, printmakers live in this world where work on paper isn't finished. In order to be hung or to be installed, it requires another step, the frame. A lot of my grad school investigation was devoted to "what's the perfect frame for the print?" It should speak to what's inside the frame.

At the E/AB Fair one of the rules simply says that "work must be in frames." Running my business, framing stuff is almost half of the work I do. With Michael's work, sticking it in the standard gallery clear ash frame just didn't make sense; it just wasn't enough. It always just seemed to me like dead weight to put it in some bland, normal frame that everybody has.

I had curated a show including work from a bookmaker friend of mine, Shannon Kerner. She had done this beautiful little drawing with hand marbled paper wrapped around the frame. I just thought, "This is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." I knew I had to do this with Michael. If you could imagine *La Raza Cós mica* in the standard gallery frame it just wouldn't make any sense.

When clients purchase the work, they say, “Well, how would you frame it?” Now I have a good answer to that. I do think it’s additionally special because it’s harmonious, because it’s utilizing the same color palette that we worked on. It’s also adding more attention to those little glyphs of the thumbs up and the thumbs down, the little Amazon guy, the Wi-Fi signal. If somehow the viewer missed what’s being referenced *in* the print, when you pay attention to the frame you simply can’t miss it. I do feel people notice those elements in the frame, and then they go back to the interior image and look at it with new eyes and targeted attention to that surveillance capitalism that Michael keeps talking about.

MM: Yes, I’m always trying to subvert the status quo in art spaces and I’m trying to assert myself and trying to depart from the white cube.²⁰ Any chance I have to cover up the white cube or put prints around the frame, I’m going to do it. If I have the support, then of course I want to wrap my art around things, because that’s a way of me making space and claiming space for myself and for my ideas.

As I was mentioning earlier, I haven’t felt like I’ve had that authority, or that ability to claim space for myself. I’m trying to claim intellectual space and conceptual space through this pattern-wrapping mentality. Yes, I’ll cover up the walls of a gallery with my prints and if it is vinyl that means I have a bigger budget and we get commercial printers. It totally makes sense, because I wouldn’t want to follow the status quo of the traditional print hanging on the wall. Even with heights, I try to hang things lower on the gallery walls because, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, some Latinx folks aren’t as tall. You know, the standard sixty-inch convention for the height for works in exhibitions, I don’t know who came up with that, but that’s one of the “norms” I’m trying to disrupt. I think that is just a colonial symptom that has to be challenged and deconstructed. Project by project, I’m finding ways to do that and try to reclaim space for myself and folks that may align themselves or see themselves in me and my work.

CR: I love connecting the sixty-inch centerline to all of this. That’s just perfect! I usually hang at fifty-eight inches centerline because I’m five foot four inches. To me it has a gender connection too.

MM: Yes, I don’t want people to struggle. I’m trying to minimize the barriers of access to these experiences of looking and of seeing art and experiencing it and then having it transport you to somewhere else for as long as you want. But you shouldn’t have to struggle and tiptoe to look at the details of a print.

CR: This is all wonderful. Can we just spell out, step-by-step, the physical making process? You start with your design, that’s been bubbling up. Then you’re in Adobe Illustrator. Physically, how does it get from Illustrator onto the paper?

MM: I have this digital drawing practice that I do in Adobe Illustrator. The transfer process begins with creating the swatches in the digital file to be output as stencils that are just black information. Then, using the CMYK of an inkjet printer, I print out a solid stencil that is going to block out light.²¹

For this series, you have six different stencils with the information that will be color mixed. Then you have these sheets of transparency with the black ink printed on them and that gets exposed to a screen for printing.

JS: We’re talking about mixing colors. If I have red and I have blue and I overlap them, then I get a third color. So, we’re combing out the whole red layer from Michael’s design into one black-and-white image. It’s not just red, but it’s also the oranges, the brick reds, the browns. And so we print that out. The digital file is black and white. We print the black on a clear transparency and we take that to the exposure unit where the screen has been coated with a photosensitive emulsion. The light penetrates where the transparency is clear and it doesn’t get through where the image is black. The emulsion protected by those black areas washes out from the screen and the ink can push through the screen. The emulsion on the part of the images that are clear or white gets hardened so the ink isn’t pushing through.

I suppose it would be typical for somebody to print lightest to darkest, but in this situation we don’t adhere to that rule. There are different levels of transparency in the ink so the ink can be very opaque or transparent, allow other colors below it to shine through. We definitely printed from most opaque first, up through to most transparent, and then

black being the final absolutely opaque layer on top of all that.

And registration,²² it's too much...

MM: I was just going to add that there's not a lot of wiggle room for the registration. You have to be very precise in trapping—as it's called in the print world—the layers underneath with what becomes a key outline black layer.

And that's a very tedious process that I have endured throughout my print practice myself. But then putting that onus onto a master printer that I'm collaborating with... I wish you the best because I know it's a pain in the ass to print my designs. Julia did an amazing job.

JS: Michael and I definitely share a tendency toward perfectionism. We both really want to get it right, even when it's almost impossible.

MM: We try to get as close as we can to the digital file, but ultimately that's impossible, right? We have to have some flexibility.

JS: We have to remind ourselves that this is a handmade object.

CR: And I think that's the beauty of it. You're moving between the digital and the handmade. This has just been such a deep and fascinating conversation. Is there anything that either one of you wanted to add?

JS: I definitely want to go on record in saying that I find a lot of reverence in my job as a printmaker. I find a lot of responsibility in the idea that as a publisher, being able to create multiples of work, being able to disseminate work, I have responsibility as a certain type of microphone. I take it very seriously who I help with that microphone or who I lend that microphone to. And it's always been very important to me to work with Michael specifically. Especially when they are telling me stories about trying to find the authority and ability to claim space.

As a white person, it's extremely important and special for me to be able to work with somebody like Michael and be able to help—in any small way that only two individuals can—to start to rectify some of the historical colonialist and racist wrongs that we are

still suffering from. I choose the artists that I work with very carefully. Michael was the first artist that I chose to work with for a lot of really important reasons, and I want to make sure Michael knows that.

MM: Thank you so much, Julia, of course I know that and sense that. It's been a joy ever since working with you on *Gotta Catch 'Em All!*

I think we work together really well because you have this scientific understanding of the print process and color mixing and I feel I'm more lost in the clouds with conceptual ideas and digital drawing practice. Sometimes that isn't a good fit for the print studio. I realize my limits. It's just been such an honor to know and work with you on this and I hope to make more prints together. We have more work to do. You know this isn't over, yeah?

JS: We have more work to do. To add to that, my practice has changed because of working with you. This grid system and developing the palette, I made it to work with you. But I use it for literally everything now. Every artist that walks in the door now, it's, "OK, we have to use the Menchaca palette system so that we can figure out what we're doing."

MM: That's so cool.

JS: It's changed the way I work, and even helped me to get better at screen printing. I built that whole exposure unit, and I've made improvements to the studio in order to be able to do what we need to do together, and the micro registration. You don't stop learning, right? I've always had to expand my ability to be able to meet your expectations, in a good way.

MM: Thank you so much.

CR: It's been wonderful to hear the two of you talk about making *La Raza Cós mica*, 20XX in terms of process, content, and your experience working together. I am especially moved by Michael's comment on "claiming space" and the way that printmaking has been a vehicle for that.

Thank you.

- 1 For a summary of the scholarship on *casta* paintings and a comparison to Menchaca's work, published while this essay was being edited, see Erin Benay, "Casta State of Mind: Michael Menchaca and the Graphic Revolution of Caste," in *Art Journal* 8, no. 4 (Summer 2022): 54–74. On the *casta* paintings see Ilona Katzew, *Casta Paintings: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) and Magali M. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).
- 2 José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. and ed. Didier T. Jaén, with an afterword by Joseba Gabilondo (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). See also Benay, "Casta State of Mind" (see note 1): 67–68.
- 3 Benay, "Casta State of Mind" (see note 1): 64–67.
- 4 This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.
- 5 Exhibition titled *Michael Menchaca: The Codex Silex Vallis (The Silicon Valley Codex)*, Lawndale, Houston, Texas, September 21–December 22, 2019.
- 6 Four earlier screen prints printed and published at Overpass Projects: *Gotta Catch 'Em All!* (2016); *Hasta La Casta* (2017); *America First* (2017); and *Grand Migration Caravan* (2018).
- 7 On their website, Menchaca has a "Statement on Social Media" summarizing their boycott of "commercial social media platforms for violating global democracies via invasive surveillance capitalist trends." They recommend reading Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019) and Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019), last update June 4, 2021, accessed August 2, 2022, <https://michaelmenchaca.com/artwork/4596979-Statement-on-Social-Media.html>. See also Benay, "Casta State of Mind" (see note 1), 72, and 72, note 65.
- 8 For an overview of Amazon Web Services see John Herrman, "What, Exactly, is Amazon Web Services?" *The New York Times*, February 9, 2021, accessed August 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/09/style/amazon-web-services.html>.
- 9 For a list of US Federal agencies with contracts with Amazon Web Services, see Amazon's website, accessed August 3, 2022, <https://aws.amazon.com/contract-center/federal-contracts/>.
- 10 On representations of the eyeball in Mayan culture, see Virginia E. Miller, "The Disembodied Eye in Maya Art and Ritual," in *Making "Meaning": Precolumbian Archaeology, Art History and the Legacy of Terence Grieder*, ed. James Farmer and Rex Koontz (Houston: University of Houston Libraries, 2022), pp. 299–355, accessed August 23, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.52713/ZADG2991>.
- 11 Compare the eyeballs in *Español No. 3* by Menchaca with the examples from Central Mexican and Mixtec codices—Nuttall Codex and Borgia Codex—cited by Miller, "The Disembodied Eye" (see note 10), pp. 306–7, fig. 8.7.
- 12 Installation at Plaza de Fundación, San Pedro Creek Culture Park, San Antonio, Texas, 2018.
- 13 The term "panopticon" as a metaphor for surveillance was introduced by Michel Foucault in his analysis of the nineteenth-century panopticon prison models by Jeremy Bentham. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977). See a summary in Dino Felluga, *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Dino Felluga, "Modules on Foucault: On Panoptic and Carceral Society," *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, 2015, Purdue U, accessed August 8, 2022, <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/newhistoricis/modules/foucaultcarceral.html>.
- 14 Menchaca is citing the changes following 9/11 in government policy discussed in Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (see note 7), p. 114.
- 15 In this, Menchaca refers to Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (see note 7).
- 16 For more on Menchaca's project at San Pedro Creek Park, see the San Pedro Creek Culture Park website, accessed August 8, 2022, <https://spcculturepark.com/learn/art/plaza-de-fundacion/>.
- 17 For an introduction to the history of Mexican tiles, see the special issue "Azulejos: 2A Edición" of *Artes de México* (1999), *Nueva epoca*, no. 24. An evocative summary is Alberto Ruy-Sánchez Lacy, "Tiles: An Indelible Skin," translated by Jessica Johnson, in *Artes de México*, no. 24 (1999): 64–80.
- 18 "A Guide to *La Raza C3smica 20XX*," see Menchaca's website, accessed August 8, 2022, <https://michaelmenchaca.com/section/486227-La%20Raza%20C%C3%B3smica%2020XX.html>.
- 19 *Sambayoo* is an alternate spelling of *Zambaigo*, used in the *casta* system for individuals of mixed African and Indigenous descent. For a list of the wide variations in *casta* terminology, see Thomas C. Barnes, Thomas H. Naylor and Charles W. Polzer, "Racial Terminology," in *Northern New Spain: A Research Guide* (University of Arizona Press, 1981), pp. 90–93, see <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1mq848r.16>.
- 20 The term "white cube" refers to the twentieth-century practice of displaying modern art in a gallery with white walls. See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, expanded edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- 21 CMYK is the abbreviation for the color printing process using cyan, magenta, yellow, and a key (black).
- 22 Registration refers to the careful alignment on each sheet of paper of each color as printed in sequence from the screens.