



## Interview with the Artist: Michael Menchaca

1. Hi Michael and thank you for taking the time to answer a few questions! I am honored to curate your show and chat with a local artist that is making such a big impact in the contemporary art world. I first saw your work in the 2018 McNay exhibition, *100 Years of Printmaking in San Antonio: Michael Menchaca*. The walls and columns of the Lawson Print Gallery were covered in a repeating black and white motif with your prints colorfully, powerfully breaking up the space inside. As a printmaker myself I was immediately drawn to your patterning, which we can see here in the background of the virtual exhibition *Hermano Grande*. Would you speak to the role of repetition in your artwork?

That's a great question, I like to use repeating patterns to dazzle the viewer and transport them into a different kind of experience in terms of looking at art. In my 2D work, patterns commonly function as backdrops for a particular scene. Often these patterns carry with them coded symbols that describe the actions taking place. In recent years, I've attempted to recreate the pattern heavy environments of my 2D work into real space. Screenprinting provides me the most efficient way, and also the most inexpensive way, of bringing a digital pattern that I drew on a computer into actual physical space to create an environment that changes the way a body relates to that space. I'm interested when high tech meets low-fi SFX.

2. This exhibition, *Hermano Grande*, is about technology and how it is transforming Latinx families. Will you elaborate further on this idea and why it is important to your work?

Well, I used to buy into the whole techno-utopian vision that Big Tech would help solve humanity's most pressing problems as their CEO's would have us believe. But as I researched the history and ethos of the industry it became clear that at the end of the day these are companies run by business tycoons primarily looking to maximize their profits and defeat competition. What they have managed to accomplish is to create the illusion of upholding democratic values while simultaneously eroding these very same values. I have watched how this invasive business strategy has affected my relationships with my family and friends. How tech devices now possess their attention. As members of a society connected by a handful of companies, there is no choice for opting out if you are to participate in any meaningful way. I am interested in the ways I can express this concern in my practice.

**3. How did you choose the colleges you attended for your BFA and MFA?**

Practical reasoning led me to Texas State University for my BFA, it was the school where my credits from SAC would transfer over the most efficiently. Also, I thought a BFA experience outside of San Antonio would be helpful for me. For my MFA, I wanted to experience life on the East coast to gain some added perspective on my upbringing in SA. Also, when I visited RISD's campus and met with the printmaking program, I instantly connected with the group that would become my upperclassman peers.

**4. Is there feedback you received as a student that has stuck with you?**

There is life after thesis.

**5. What was it about printmaking that drew you to the medium during college and graduate school?**

I studied graphic design at SAC and went into that job market before deciding to pursue my BFA. I grew tired of having all of my time and labor remain on a screen and not having the ability to express myself with that kind of workflow. For me printmaking was my ticket to escaping what I considered to be the confines of what any good graphic designer does, which is to please the customer, and enter into the production of art while maintaining my graphic design sensibilities. My design skills were no longer tied to a screen. They could be converted into stencils and when combined with physical labor I could produce multiple, beautifully crafted objects that people could marvel at. For me that workflow was more satisfying because I had creative freedom in every step of the way. I could become a self-publisher of my own ideas and these ideas were not restricted by commercial motivations. I could connect my thoughts to art historical precedents.

**6. For many artists, the personal is political. Do you find this to hold true with your art?**

Sure. I don't think there's anyone out there that would disagree with that. My art is a continued expression of my lived experience.

**7. What are some of the major themes in your art and how do you visualize them?**

Assimilation, Caste hierarchy, Colonization, cultural racism, internalized racism, Eurocentrism....etc. I created a language of symbols that help me break these issues down to their simpler parts.

**8. You have been an artist-in-residence across the country. Can you tell our students about artist residencies and how they have shaped your creative practice?**

They are the best thing you can do as an artist. You get to build a supportive community in new locations. Depending on the residency, you are often assigned a studio and an apartment to stay in while you are in working in residence. I've learned more about myself at each residency. It is a huge privilege to be able to participate in them and they are so worth the time, effort, and money.

**9. You were the recipient of the National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures (NALAC) Fund for the Art Grant 2018 to create a body of work. Tell us about this grant and the body of work you created with it.**

I applied for this NALAC grant when I started increasing my research into the tech industry. This was a \$5,000 grant that allowed me to begin my work on the *Silicon Valley Codex*, a series of works that explores how

Silicon Valley is currently transforming the lives of Latinx families in the United States. These works are included in this virtual exhibition and were made with acrylic paint, digital drawing, screenprints, and animation.

**10. How did digital art and animation get introduced to your creative process?**

The work always began digitally, ever since I learned Illustrator at SAC. I would find vector tutorials in graphic design magazines and free online tutorials that helped me develop my digital drawing skills. For me, the big creative transitions have been from digital to physical, and then plugging in those two creative outputs into motion graphics. The latter got developed at RISD. Animation had always been an intended destination for my work but I didn't reach that point until I had the necessary resources around me.

**11. You work in a variety of media, including installation art (this exhibition was originally planned as an installation at NVC). How has transitioning to virtual exhibitions impacted your work?**

It's a lot less labor for me, so that's refreshing. It has also presented new opportunities to collaborate with web designers to create customized virtual spaces for my work to be presented in.

**12. Walk us through how you make a work of art-how do you approach an idea from its inception?**

It depends on several factors, really. What am I trying to express at the moment? What materials do I have available? If it's for an upcoming exhibition then: Who is my audience? What's my budget? When is the deadline? These things become motivating factors. Then I put my time and energy into making something that fulfills me. Whether emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, etc. The most important part of this process for me is making a space for myself to think and make the work. It really can be anywhere so long as I know what my goals are. Then I make drawings, sometimes on the computer, until I figure out what the final medium of the idea will be. Then I schedule out a plan for completing the work.

**13. You have some curatorial experience as well, having co-curated the 2020 show XicanX: New Visions at the Centro des Artes. How did you choose the theme for the exhibition and how did you select artists to participate?**

For Xicanx: New Visions, Suzy González and I wanted to curate a show that put a spotlight on a new generation of emerging artists that we wanted to put a name to. This generation was defined by the "X" factor in Chicana identity that retained the socially engaged character of the movement but was more inclusive of a wide range of Latinx identities not historically associated with the Chicano art movement. These were artists challenging stereotypical representations and definitions of Latinidad, embracing their African and Indigenous historical roots, and had wide-ranging artistic practices and identities. We sent a survey out to a shortlist of artists we were interested in inviting. This survey allowed us to see how the artists self-identified. A smaller version of this show traveled to the Clemente in New York City so we gained some experience with the challenges that come along with curating a traveling show.

**14. What artist(s) do you find inspiring and why?**

Women artists, non-binary artists, artists of color.

Because of their courage to create art in a society that does not fully recognize their humanity.

**15. Who are you currently listening to in the studio?**

Audiobook of “Stamped From the Beginning” by Ibram X. Kendi

**16. What advice do you have for students who want to pursue a career in art?**

Work hard. Apply to every open call you qualify for. Make art for yourself. Pay attention to your critics. Follow your gut. Take care of your health. Respect your peers. Listen to your elders. Read. Delete your account(s).