

GRITO IN THE WILD

A response to Jason Guzman's *Luz* installed at Bird Show, Chicago, Summer 2024

I've been away from home for too long. It takes me two flights to get there, three depending on the season. So when I catch a glimpse of a reflection of home, South Texas, it evokes an emotional response from me. My response to Jason Guzman's *Luz* has been reworked, edited, picked at, and ignored for a while. Not because the work of art isn't notable or evocative, but because my understanding of the venue and its location are compromised. Just like my memories of home, my understanding of Chicago shifts as neighborhoods change, demographics migrate, and the city evolves. Knowing that Jason Guzman lives in Pilsen, and knowing that Pilsen is iconic as a Mexicano, Latiné, Xicanx neighborhood—when I think of Jason's work I connect it to the location of its origin and the vibrant murals, food, and community of people who make Pilsen the destination it has become.

Chicago is special because there is rarely a neighborhood with no Mexicanos. Pockets form, identities evolve, neighbors make amends, and generations grow up knowing (or ignoring one another) within Chicago's amazing grid. Though, not every neighborhood is a Pilsen. Much like the different states of Mexico, each neighborhood has its own identity. Some groups live more isolated, quietly directing the lives they're constructing for themselves and their families. Others live scattered within their dwellings, apart from communities, tied up with the tasks of the everyday. Newcomers arrive and begin navigating neighborhood borders that shift the energy, acceptable volume levels, available foods, and behaviors tied to the invisible borders of Chicago's many neighborhoods.

Jason Guzman's *Luz* exemplifies this migratory movement, leaving Pilsen and migrating North for display—though the artwork has also crossed into the virtual realm, made available for viewing by Bird Show via a 24/7 online video broadcast. Through this additional avenue, *Luz* reflects the many identities we manage in contemporary society. We keep identities tied to physical, IRL places while also managing our online presence. Though, there are also the identities that are imposed upon us by outsiders, mixed in with the subtle (or not so subtle) signifiers we display on ourselves for recognition only by the cultured few. IYKYK type shit. *Luz* does it all.

Artwork Description:

Jason Guzman's *Luz* is inspired by traditional Mexican Tree of Life vessels. Instead of ceramic, Jason used MDF composite material to create the piece which holds a small bowl of birdseed at its center. Traditionally, Tree of Life, or *Árbol de la Vida* sculptures, are made



Tree of Life example from the National Museum of Mexican Art permanent collection

of ceramic and depict ornate scenes from the Christian origin story or life cycles such as death and spring. These vessels are highly decorative, somewhat fragile, and packed with intricate details that reflect the values of the artist or their community. I've never seen a Tree of Life vessel outside of the museum context, but I can guarantee that one would not have survived the household of my rowdy cousins, or any household that required packing up and moving regularly like mine did. Originating in Puebla, Mexico, the craft predates the story of Christ but took on its most recognizable form during Spanish colonization to reinforce Christian ideology. Bible motifs such as the story of Adam and Eve became common depicting intricate scenes from the Garden of Eden, whereas the craft has evolved since then to depict more modern scenarios such as Dia de Muertos skeleton figurines arranged in a mariachi band. Today, in Mexico, this craft is at risk of extinction—however, as the Tree of Life form begins to shrink in size and become more commodified, consumer goods (such as bongos made in California) pay homage to the tradition.



Luz by Jason Guzman.
Installed at Bird Show from August 12-26, 2024.

Jason Guzman's artistic practice explores traditional Mexican crafts through modern techniques. Jason's technical focus has been on the craft of Papel Picado, or tissue paper flags that feature cutouts of cultural motifs such as animals, religious icons, and words. Instead of using a traditional chisel for the production of Papel Picado, Jason employs laser cutters to etch designs into stacks of paper for mass production. He explained to me that this method makes his work more accessible to patrons, keeping costs low for those looking to purchase his work while allowing flexibility in production for the exploration of new designs that reflect our modern needs (a Chicago Flag, for example). For the creation of *Luz*, Jason used modern tools like a jigsaw and the industrial material MDF, rather than clay, which exemplifies his continued practice of reworking traditional crafts through modern methods. There's a blue-collar nature to his approach in that he skips the art supply aisle and goes straight to the hardware store for the procurement of supplies and tools. When I imagine Jason working, I envision a tío in his post-workday studio.



Grito Contest Youtube Video by Wendy Armijo.
Click video to hear examples of varying gritos.

Grito Definition:

A grito is a public cry or shout that emphasizes a spontaneous reaction to a feeling conjured by song, speech, performance, or other stimuli. Similar to the expression of *yeehaw*, the grito is a bursting of emotion that fits somewhere in between a cry and a laugh. A strong grito is something to be revered for; it has the capacity to express solidarity or Mexican pride without words. Gritos vary in length, pitch, and style. A grito is personal, practiced, tough.

Response to Jason Guzman's Luz as a Remote Spectator:

When thinking of *Luz* by Jason Guzman, "grito in the wild" is the phrase that comes to mind. *Luz* is representative of a cultural identity, a traditional Mexican craft, and here it stands out of context from its origins in the Pilsen neighborhood where Jason has his studio. Outdoors amongst the sounds of swaying branches, birds chirping, and weather shifts, *Luz* is humbly kissed by the Northside sunlight. The occasional bird stops by to pick from the bowl of birdseed held at the center of *Luz*. A curious squirrel takes a peek at the object while a strong wind wraps itself around the vessel. An ant assesses the shape for information to take back to its colony. There's a poetic coexistence here. The power of *Luz*, an object of pride, is not diminished in this context - rather, it exists within the unpredictable laws of nature. Much like yard altars that are common for devout households, *Luz* sits as an offering, a symbol of devotion not for a particular audience other than as an expression of its creator.

There is a place where abstraction and cultural identity co-exist. Rather than erasing any semblance of cultural origin which contributes to the homogenized conversation centered within the "white cube", *Luz* enters the conversation at Bird Show with a strong grito. To the unknowing eye, *Luz* is an ornate candelabra. But to those of us who recognize its shape and ornamentation, *Luz* is a symbol of pride and a reminder that we are shaping the narrative around our place in the art cannon in real time. Weaving our way into and around the invisible borders of art-speak and creative representation, *Luz* serves as a reminder that there are Mexicanos here - in every artistic avenue, just like Chicago's many neighborhoods.