

ARTIST STATEMENT

Carmen Mariscal 2013

Days before she died, my great-grandmother gave me her wedding dress. The dress stayed in a cardboard box for nine years until it became the inspiration and central element of an artist's book, a series of photographs and installations. I used the dress to question the traditions passed down from generation to generation, about what it means to be a mother, a daughter and a wife.

Ever since using a dress to inspire my early work, I have used heirlooms and meaningful objects as central elements in almost all my projects.

Memory, family history, fragility and confinement are themes that have echoed through my work for almost twenty years. These themes are expressed in many forms including installations, photography, video, sculpture and theater set designs.

At the age of 22, while studying Art History, I was in a serious car accident that left me bed-ridden for months. When able to, I would sit up in bed and paint subjects related to extreme pain, frustration and isolation. I was struck by the fragility of the human body, and by the way it can be broken and mended. Being confined in a hospital bed also made me think about the concept of imprisonment.

Years after I recovered from the accident I photographed my own body, as well as those of my family and friends, in a study of the experience of being trapped. My photographs were influenced by the x-rays I had seen in the hospital – extreme close-ups of fragments of body parts which I printed on a translucent surface.

My work expanded from being two dimensional to three dimensional when I began creating wooden boxes, the size of medicine cabinets, with metal sides, glass fronts and with mirrors inside. I put the semi-transparent photographs on the front and objects inside the boxes. The materials I used evoked the hospital: metal, glass, white walls, veils, and photographs reminiscent of x-rays.

I wanted my boxes to evoke the hospital experience of being trapped in an antiseptic space one cannot escape. But the work was also about the human experience of being trapped inside our own bodies and minds.

These boxes were also reminiscent of vitrines, like the ones used in the 19th Century to contain precious objects. By placing images of the body and objects inside the boxes they become precious but also unreachable. The use of white veiling in my work refers to the hospital but also to the bride who has to be pure, trapped behind her veil, separated from the others.

These boxes are the origin of everything I have made since.

When creating a box I start with an object that has a history or is plucked from nature. This can be an antique book, article of clothing, heirloom, feather, bone or shell found in a special place. The viewer has to peer through the translucent photograph to see the object and then, behind that he sees his own reflection in the mirror.

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I wanted the experience of peering inside the box to mimic the layers of emotions that humans experience, emotions that are sometimes hidden, trapped, or veiled by other emotions.

Now, I often make boxes in parallel with installations so that the intimate space of the box grows large enough to contain the spectator who experiences the piece from inside, rather than just peering in. I work here within an architectural space.

Recent work includes photographs of heirlooms projected onto the bodies of people living now and then photographed. The objects I choose possess an emotional and historical value for the subjects. These superimposed projections trap the body behind the objects. These photographs show how the past marks our bodies in the present and are part of collective memory.

We all walk around bearing the weight and power of memories. My intention is to show the power these memories have over us, to make the invisible memories visible.