



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Layqa Nuna
Yawar, 2020 August 18

This interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool,
administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Layqa Nuna Yawar on August 18, 2020. The interview took place at Yawar's home in Newark, New Jersey and was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Hello, Layqa. Thank you for joining me for this interview. Uh, today is August 18 of 2020, and this is Fernanda Espinosa interviewing, uh, artist Layqa Nuna Yawar for the Pandemic Project at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Uh, and, yeah, welcome, Layqa. Can you just introduce yourself and also, uh, tell me how you're doing?

LAYQA NUNA YAWAR: Uh, thank you for inviting me. My name is Layqa Nuna Yawar. I am an immigrant artist, born as Lenny Correa in Ecuador, Sur América. Um, I am part of diaspora Andina, and I live in the U.S., and I make murals and, uh, visual art and, uh, public artwork based around the idea of organizing people of color to amplify our messages on a large scale. And I am doing well. I have been drinking my coffee, and I'm excited to talk to you. Thank you for the invitation.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Awesome. Uh, I'm also drinking my coffee since it's morning. Um, and—um, so, as you know—as I—as I mentioned, uh, we like to know more about how artists have been experiencing all of these changes, um, in these last few months. Can you just start by telling me a little bit more about your experience, uh, personal and as an artist, over these past few months?

LAYQA NUNA YAWAR: Okay. When, uh, al principio, I was in Ecuador. I'd just come back from Ecuador, Estados Unidos, when the pandemic started to, like, really take hold of the U.S. So, when I stopped being able to go outside and had to sort of rethink everything in life, it sort of made me feel super-depressed and confused, y al mismo tiempo in Estados Unidos, like, leadership has not been present, so it was a big mess. Creatively, *no podía hacer nada*, because, like, I make art on the outside. Um, I make art based on being with people and connecting to people. And so, from that point on, I could not longer do that, and I could not see a future for me doing anything else like that.

Entonces, like, I didn't know what was going to happen to my practice or—like, I was very insecure in, like, the future. But as I went through that grief y todo paso, like, I started to understand more of the causes of the pandemic—like, what comes after myself. Um, started to, like, listen to myself, and again, I found la respuesta and, like, actually making art, um, because that's how I survive. And it's what's helped me, like, just live through migration and through, um, you know, my own complexes and, like, my own fears. Um, so making artwork is what helped me get through it.

Um, and then, slowly started making more artwork, and, like, finding the ways of thinking about what it means to be an artist en un tiempo de pandemia. Um, I started sort of slowing down myself y estoy trabajando con like, a new speed. Um, I no longer—I want to get rid of, like, this pressure of capitalism or, like, the idea of producing. And I've been trying to for a long time, pero ahora es mas facil because I think a lot—making art and, like, having any sort of interaction right now is more meaningful or more focused. Porque—like, it takes a lot even to go out. Um, you know, we no longer can go and watch a movie because you could get sick.

So, what does it mean for me to actually go out and make a project and make a mural? And who am I going to interact with? And how important is that? So, just, like, brought in another level of sort of importance to making artwork. Um, y al mismo tiempo estoy, like, in the middle of fear and know what that looks like. Uh, it's been a few months, and I feel like we're just at the beginning of this curve. Um, I see this going on for, like, the foreseeable future. Like, at least three years or something like that. el mismo tiempo—um, but it's been—it's been, like—yeah, kind of like a curve, uh, and I think we're just, like see the ramifications of it. So, it's been that.

[00:05:30]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Uh, when you started, uh, making art again after, um, feeling, um—or, well, you described feeling low for some time. Um, what kind of things were—did you start working on?

LAYQA NUNA YAWAR: So, al principio, I was, like, not really sure how to frame my artwork because I was unable to interact with people, but that was just the internal—so, like, immediate response because I still could connect to people through, you know, what we're doing right now, which is Zoom, or, like, talking on the phone, or just being part of a community. And I think what was great about that is, that—or—by me reaching out to community, I was also able to be healed by community.

So, I started working with different organizations and just offered them art for what they needed. Um, so, I started working for an organization in Newark called Ironbound Community Corporation and they needed some posters, and I reached out to, like, Make the Road of New York and New Jersey, and I would be working on different projects. And so, that—like, allowed me to kind of create again. Um, um, and before, like, the sort of larger-scale murals and all the time that it took for me to create, like, educational projects and do the teaching and do the painting, all that was out of the way. So, I could sort of rethink that approach, um, to do, like, the internet or on paper. And so, that helped me out.

And the same time, I started doing como un proyecto que estoy haciendo ahora that's like, based on my own family's immigrant narrative from Ecuador to Estados Unidos. Um, and I'm doing that in a virtual reality space. So, I'm working with 3D graphics, and I took this time to sort of, like, teach myself a lot of new programs, and also started playing with, um, clay, and just some different ways of challenging myself. Um, and that helped me out a lot. mi terapia was kind of, like, porque el mismo tiempo to, like, make things and create art.

Um, and then, I started growing plants a lot more because I think it reminded me of, like, doing that with my mom when I was a kid. Oh, al mismo tiempo I feel like I am centered and more calm when I'm close to the earth and to mountains. And I just really enjoy putting plants in the ground and making them grow and, like, taking care of them. Um, I think that was also, like, just me taking care of myself through that.

Um, and I don't see, like, uh—I don't like to separate the art from my life, because I did that for a long time. So, I just see all of this as, like, the creative process. And another thing that I did was sort of figure out how to be in the outside more. So, I bought a bicycle, and I go out more. I, like, try to be careful because I think what we're lacking right now in these social distancing times is the idea of community or interacting with people. Um, como like, ver a tu familia o amistades—it just become something that we have to try to do more. So, yeah, that.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, so, I did mention this before, but you are in your studio in Newark—

LAYQA NUNA YAWAR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: — um, and I know you've been based in Newark for some time. Can you talk a little bit more about how, uh, your community—uh, whoever you call your community—and you have, um, met these new times—um, both the pandemic, but also all the changes and the consequences, um, of what's been happening?

[00:10:00]

LAYQA NUNA YAWAR: Yeah, I think we're just the beginning of the changes or—like, again in that curve of change. Um, I found it super interesting that, you know, we were all isolated for months, and then the first time I was able to see the Newark community was when we went all out to protest George Floyd's murder. Um, and it was a beautiful, interesting environment of community, you know, being policed at the same time. And having, like, drones, like, fly around and, like, you know, standing up against oppression, and doing so with your friends and your community and people you haven't physically seen for so long. That was wonderful moment.

Um, and I think Newark's continued to rise up to the moment and react in, like, a very progressive way. For example, one night, um, I was invited to witness the removal of the Christopher Columbus statue in the city, which was an act from City Hall. And there were community members there, and they were burning palo santo [laughs], and it was, like, a beautiful, like, drum circle. And people came out at middle of the night. And so, that was, like, a

moment of community. That was being, like, pushed by, um, governance, right?

So, there's, like, this interesting in-between right now, and I feel very lucky to be in a city where I can work with my friends and community members with the things I believe in, and also do that as an artist, because I was also able to help, um, along with like a 150 other artists and organizers to do, um, a ground mural that said, um, "Abolish white supremacy" and, "All Black lives matter." Again, like, a wonderful action of community. And now, I'm working on different murals that we're developing. So, that's been super healing, and I think we only see a few examples of that in the U.S. Um, I feel pretty blessed about it.

So, I'm trying again to sort of be aware of that, and also think about *como cual es el futuro de esto*, how can we keep growing, and how can we push that curve upward and continue? Um, so, yeah, I think we're just at the beginning of that, and we—yeah, it feels like, out of all the anxiety and, you know, this super horrible place that we're in, that chaos moment can also allow us to have some hope and to push for what we believe in. So, um, yeah, I've been kind of hopeful about it.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, with, uh, the people that you've been, uh, going out and, um, for the protest, and that you're working with, and just that larger community, what kind of conversations, um, have you been having in these times?

LAYQA NUNA YAWAR: Um, there's been a lot of conversations what to do next. Um, I've had conversations about, you know, actions that are not sanctioned [laughs], about immediate protest, about long-term change, about just, like, private change. Um, I've had conversations about how to support each other through business and money. I've had conversations about how to support ourselves as artists. Um, we've had conversations about how to creatively answer the moment, um, work with its collaborators on kind of reframing how to interact and do this. Like, become this, like, become like this Zoom sort of cultural hive.

And, um, within all of those conversations, I think I'm super blessed that it's all been about looking forward. Um, and my immediate community it super aware of what their problems are, because I believe that, Newark being a Black city and Brown city, it knows the part of—like, the most powerful part of change is to envision future, as opposed to, like, stay in the moment of pain, which is something that the artists here and I do with my art myself, which is not—for example, like show oppression, but show what could come after oppression. Um, and I feel like that's the vibe and idea that I get from talking to people in Newark. And I feel super, super—again, hopeful and happy that that's where I'm at and what we're doing. Yeah. And these are very interesting questions, thank you.

[00:16:09]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Uh, thank you. Um, enjoying, um, our conversation. And it also makes me think about, um the things we imagine in the future. Um, in that context what do you—what do—where do you see your work going, um, in the future? Or, what role do you think it will play?

LAYQA NUNA YAWAR: So, that's interesting because—um, so a lot of what I was doing before was, um, working with institutions like universities or schools, pero todo, eso es como like, up in the air right now, right? Like, um, the whole model's changing. Schools—there are some that are not opening; others are opening somehow. Um, so I'm still not sure how to tackle, like, those opportunities, or—like, my planned projects, um, as far as engaging to people. I mean, the easy answer is to have workshops and muralism through Zoom, but that's not ideal to me.

And also, how can you produce, like, a physical mural if people cannot come together? Um, all of that right now, it's up in the air for me. So, I'm to trying to start—to sort of envision that future. And I think about different ways of doing this. Um, where—and right now, I don't have a solid answer, but I have a few ideas como por ejemplo like, how does—how can we arrive at—as a group of people, how can we arrive at consensus, um, and what does agency mean when you're creating together? Uh, does that mean, like, bordering at designs? Does that mean giving someone agency to make those decisions? Does that mean picking one part of the community or one person in the community to represent the rest?

Um, it could be—I might just get into a lot of trouble, and people will have, like, hurt feelings [laughs]. So, I don't know what that's going to look like, but so far, that's where I'm at. I'm trying different projects with different ideas, and we'll see where that goes. Um, other than that, um, I think I—from a personal career or, like, survival as an artist, I have to also challenge myself. Um, and figure out different ways of—you know, one, because we're living hell as a country, how to

survive within that system, how to understand the new system, um, and how to properly, like, sustain a practice, right?

Um, and there's a lot of institutions out there right now that are trying to help artists, so I'm taking advantage of that. Um, I'm seeing myself as a business, as well. So, I'm trying to, like, push towards that and how to take advantage of those systems, um, whereas before, I wasn't doing that so much. Um, because I could survive as, like, one way of being an artist, but now I have to think in different ways of doing that. And then, that just allows me to sort of make the art that I want to make. Um, and I think right now, what I have a lot more of is time and space to sort of make art that's more private and more about myself. Um, because I have a sort of mental space, right? Y not that I don't enjoy making work with community; that's sort of, like, what feeds me, but it's also allowing me to do both.

Um, so I think that's where my—the trajectory of my artwork is going—is, like, to be more sustainable, to sort of fit into the new system, and also to make more space for my personal voice. Um, because that's just going to help me grow as a public artist, as well. Um, yeah, and I'm—it's been interesting to allow myself to do that because it feels like growing plants again. Like, you know, all those projects and my art itself is the plant that I'm trying to grow from, you know, where we've been left. Um, yeah, so, it's, again, a very helpful moment for me.

[00:20:59]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, have you been doing any personal work, um, to document or mark these times?

LAYQA NUNA YAWAR: Not so much to mark the times. I think they're—the work that I'm making is a result, but it's not speaking to that. Um, like I said—like, having a lot of time to think about, like, my family and, like—I've been reading about—a lot about castas, and I've been doing all this research which is guided by my experience, but not because of the pandemic. Not guided by the pandemic as a theme. But it's just allowing me to, like, research and kind of create work about the things that maybe I wouldn't have had time to do before because I got busy. Um, but not in relation to the pandemic, per se.

Um, yeah, but maybe—all right, so maybe the work that I'm doing con organizaciones and—um, for example, *The City of Newark*, that is related to the pandemic. Uh, it's related to the moment; it's a reaction to the political realities of it. Um, so, then, that side of my work is totally related, but the personal, not so much.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much. Uh, like, uh, before I end our recording, I would like to ask you if there's anything that I didn't, uh, bring up that you would like to document in this interview.

LAYQA NUNA YAWAR: Um, I think what happens—what I've been enjoying and seeing a lot more of is the engagement from youth and, um, our current TikTok generation. Um, I am super, like, impressed and elated by what I'm seeing, and I think we should find space for that and celebrate it. The next generation is not apathetic. They're doing a lot, and, you know, that just fills me up. That's it.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right. Thank you so much.

LAYQA NUNA YAWAR: Thank you. Bye.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Bye.

[END OF yawar20_1of1_digvid_m.mp4]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]