# *Árbol de la Vida: Memorias y Voces de la Tierra*

Liz Kim

Margarita Cabrera, *Árbol de la Vida: Memorias y Voces de la Tierra,* (2019). Metal pipe, ceramic sculptures; 15-500 pounds each. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Margarita Cabrera's *Árbol de la Vida: Memorias y Voces de la Tierra* (2019) is a large public artwork made of metal pipes that stands forty feet tall and eighty feet wide upon the San Antonio River Walk. It is composed of various ceramic artworks—numbering more than 700—tethered to its many branches.[1] Commissioned by the San Antonio River Foundation, it is located at the start of the San Antonio Mission Trails, a network of five historic missions designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.[2] With *Árbol de la Vida*, Cabrera brings forth to the public a form of *artesanía* (handicraft) that combines Indigenous symbolism with Christian apparatuses to memorialize the mission and ranching history of South Texas. Rather than to select an art form that would tie directly to either theme, Cabrera chose *árbol de la vida,* or tree of life, as the medium that would hold all the mission and ranching stories together. With her work, the basis of the history of this region becomes Indigeneity mixed with European Christianity as coming from Mexico's origins, referring to the fact that the region was claimed by Mexico before it became a part of the U.S. With *Árbol de la Vida*, Cabrera powerfully utilizes the resistance built into a folk form to erode the anglicized version of ranching history that is common throughout Texas lore.

[1] Patricia Mora, "Es imposible Tapar el Sol con un Dedo: An Interview With Margarita Cabrera," *Glasstire*, February 8, 2019, https://glasstire.com/2019/02/08/es-imposible-tapar-el-sol-con-un-dedo-an-interview-with-margarita-cabrera.
[2] "Árbol de la Vida," https://arboldelavidasa.org, accessed July 11, 2025.

**Cite as:** Liz Kim, "*Árbol de la Vida: Memorias y Voces de la Tierra*," in X as Intersection: Writing on Latinx Art, April 2, 2026, accessed [DATE], https://uslaf.org/essay/arbol-de-la-vida-memorias-y-voces-de-la-tierra/.

Referring to a type of artesanía called árbol de la vida, Cabrera's work utilizes the folk form to enact a postcolonial resistance. As Constance Cortez states regarding contemporary Chicana art, "[m]any artists employ the mechanisms of postcolonial discourse and oppositional consciousness to combat notions of canonical histories and art history as well as their European-based constructs."[3] For Cabrera, the folk form of artesanía is this oppositional consciousness, what Chela Sandoval refers to as the differential mode of asserting cultural distinction, beyond what is possible in dominant culture. Located approximate to Amalia Mesa-Bains's articulation of tactile folk traditions of *domesticana*, Cabrera's sculptures expand upon the dynamics of Chicana art in expressing the political possibilities of craft forms. Mesa-Bains has singled out the incorporation of folk art forms by Chicano and Mexicano artists as a means of opposition to dominant cultures: "[c]ontained in this aesthetic is a cultural resistance expressed through the affirmation of an ancient worldview."[4]

Cabrera first encountered the folk craft form of árbol de la vida—ornately decorated ceramic trees, typically forming ceremonial incense burners or candelabra—during her visit to family members in Acatlán, in the state of Puebla, Mexico.[5] Decorative details include scenes from the bible, Christo-pagan icons, elements from nature, and objects from the everyday. The origins of the tree of life are unclear, but according to Elizabeth Snoddy Cuéllar and Luis Fernando Rodriguez Lazcano, it likely comes from early potters of Izúcar de Matamoros in Puebla, with its larger foundations going back to Mesoamerican iconography. Trees of life may come from clay versions of silver and bronze church altarware that became a part of community-based customs of Izúcar for weddings and religious ceremonies.[6] According to Delia A. Cosentino, within trees of life, "the convergence of native and European belief and practice encouraged a special kind of spiritualism that, even with its Christian guise, continued various indigenous traditions."[7] For Cabrera, an earlier iteration of the work can be traced to *Árbol de Vida: John Deere Tractor* (2007).[8] In this work, the life-size ceramic John Deere tractor replaces the tree to shed critical light on the impact of the industries on the natural environment, including the unsustainable extraction of natural resources that destroy the earth.

Cabrera is an artist who immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico at a young age and continues to express themes of migration, identity, and labor through artesanía.[9] A number of Cabrera's past projects were completed in this mode, including *The Craft of Resistance* (2008), an amalgamation of copper butterfly sculptures collectively made during Cabrera's Artpace Residency, and *A Space in*

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[3] Constance Cortez, "History/Whose-Story? Postcoloniality and Contemporary Chicana Art," *Chicana/Latina Studies* 6, Iss. 2 (Spring 2007): 25.

[4] Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 57; Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 157–167, https://icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/847038; Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Ceremony of Meaning: The Folk Ethos in the Contemporary Aesthetics of Chicano and Latino Artists," in Karana Hattersley-Drayton, Joyce M. Bishop and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *From the Inside Out: Perspectives on Mexican and Mexican-American Folk Art*, ed. Karana Hattersley-Drayton, Joyce M. Bishop and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (The Mexican Museum, 1989), 81.

[5] Michael Agresta, "Margarita Cabrera's Monumental 'Arbol de la Vida' Grows in San Antonio," Texas Monthly, April 2019, https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/margarita-cabreras-monumental-arbol-de-la-vida-grows-in-san-antonio.

[6] Elizabeth Snoddy Cuéllar and Luis Fernando Rodriguez Lazcano, "Where It All Began: The 'Tree of Life' of Izúcar de Matamoros, Puebla," in Lenore Hoag Mulryan, *Ceramic Trees of Life: Popular Art from Mexico* (UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003), 58-59.

[7] Delia A. Cosentino, "The Tallest, the Fullest, the Most Beautiful: The Tree in Pre-Columbian and Colonial Mexico," in Mulryan, *Ceramic Trees of Life*, 33.

[8] David S. Rubin, "Margarita Cabrera's Community-Based Activism," *Glasstire*, November 27, 2016, https://glasstire.com/2016/11/27/margarita-cabreras-community-based-activism.

[9] "Margarita Cabrera: Stories Woven from Migration and Resistance," *Plus Magazine*, September 19, 2024, https://plusmagazines.net/margarita-cabrera.

*Between* (2010-), a series of workshops that produced fabric agaves and nopales from recycled border patrol uniforms that are embroidered by immigrant communities who employ the needle and thread as instruments of resistance and repair.[10] The work that most closely resembles the public nature of *Árbol de la Vida* as a collaboration is *Uplift* (2015), which was a large outdoor installation commissioned from Cabrera by the City of El Paso, but was censored and removed by the city.[11] This work consisted of designs resembling *papel picado* which incorporated used components of fragmented guns. Overall, Cabrera's works speak of transformations that occur through the use of Mexican folk forms.

*Árbol de la Vida* is the result of a three-year collaboration with more than 700 members of the San Antonio community, who provided the stories carried by each clay sculpture. The work for the sculpture started in 2017 by collecting oral histories from the community through *charlas*, or conversational gatherings for cultural dialog, which then became the basis of the ceramics workshops where community members brought their stories into material forms. Using mission clay sourced from nearby Floresville, the work brings the mixed heritages of San Antonio as rooted in the land up into the air above. The work is a suggestion to the residents of San Antonio to literally look up to find their family narratives.[12] Vines made of multicolored ribbons representing a peace offering reach down to the earth, to connect to the namesake of the sculpture, *Memorias y Voces de la Tierra*, or the memories and the voices of the earth. The tree is a statement about the confluence of cultures that has built the city, with hundreds of ceramic stories on the tree's solid branches.

In *Árbol de la Vida*, artesanía is political. One ceramic sculpture by community member Merry Ruth Gutierrez, tells the story of Rosa María Hinojosa de Ballí (1752-1803), one of her ancestors. Hinojosa de Ballí was known as the first cattle queen of Texas, and was nicknamed *La Patrona*.[13] Gutierrez's sculpture is a lady's top hat on a round platform with Hinojosa de Ballí's name written around the surface. The hat is decorated with a yellow ribbon in clay and tall peacock feathers. Gutierrez has described how the sculpture represents the history of ranching in the region by memorializing an important family matron who owned a million acres in the Lower Rio Grande Valley at the beginning of the nineteenth century.[14] After the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848, where Mexico lost 55 percent of its territory to the U.S., and the annexation of Texas was formally recognized, much of Ballí's land was taken by Anglo squatters or pressured into sale for much less than its actual value. The representation of Ballí in this tree is a recognition of a key figure in the region's history whose descendants suffered under the violence of U.S.'s colonial policy of manifest destiny.

Another work illustrating regional history is the sculpture of the Incarnate Word Catholic Sister by community member Jaine Garza. This compressed figurative sculpture of a nun represents the coalescing impact that the school run by the Incarnate Word nuns from 1917 to1967 had on the local community, an influence shaped by the legacy of nearby Mission Espada following its secularization in 1824.[15] The school taught reading and writing, math, and religious subjects to local

[10] "Margarita Cabrera," *Plus Magazine*; Angelique Szymanek, "Haptic Encounters: Margarita Cabrera's *Space in Between*," *Art Journal Open*, October 15, 2020, https://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=14594.
[11] "City-Commissioned Sculpture Raises Questions of Censorship," *Marfa Public Radio*, June 22, 2015, https://www.marfapublicradio.org/2015-06-22/city-commissioned-sculpture-raises-questions-of-censorship.
[12] Norma Martinez, "Arbol De La Vida - Sculptures Take Form," *Texas Public Radio*, June 30, 2017, https://www.tpr.org/arts-culture/2017-06-30/arbol-de-la-vida-sculptures-take-form.
[13] Clotilde P. García, "Rosa Hinojosa de Ballí: The First Cattle Queen of Texas," Handbook of Texas, Texas State Historical Association, January 1, 1995, https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/hinojosa-de-balli-rosa-maria.
[14] Margarita Cabrera, "The Arbol Story of Merry Ruth Gutierrez," YouTube, September 8, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bu_ir63cazs.
[15] Margarita Cabrera, "The Arbol Story of Jaine Garza and the Incarnate Word Sister," YouTube, September 8, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xM3zSvvq1yU.

children, as a way of continuing the work of the mission.[16] The sisters, who arrived in San Antonio in 1869, were an important source of education for the region, establishing the University of the Incarnate Word further north of the city in 1881. For San Antonio, the nuns represented a colonizing instrument of the Catholic church, especially for the descendants of Native Americans who built the missions and continued to live in the nearby communities. Nevertheless, the cultural formations the nuns fostered contributed to the growth of San Antonio as it exists today.

A work speaking to the Black communities of San Antonio, Renee Harris Watson's family ranch brand symbol, GVL Farms, is one of the many included in the installation along with those of other ranches found throughout the region. Watson's grandfather was a sharecropper who bought land from his former slave owners, and her family has since planted a pecan orchard on the ranch.[17] This points to San Antonio as a region where slavery expanded significantly following the official U.S. annexation of Texas in 1848, as part of broader processes of colonization in the area. The family farm symbol represents a transfer of wealth from slave holders to those coming from a history of enslavement, pointing to, in this instance, a sense of historical justice and recovery through generations.

Finally, the overall installation itself tells the story of the artist. In the midst of the research for *Árbol de la Vida*, Cabrera found out that she herself descends from the Canary Islanders who settled in San Antonio and contributed to building El Rancho de las Cabras, which was a ranching outpost of Mission Espada.[18] A part of the settlement's history during Spanish rule, this connection points to the complex process of colonization that gave rise to the culture of San Antonio, as a mixture of powerful forces enacted on the region throughout its time. Artesanía is the expression of diaspora in this case—as the folk form spreads beyond its homeland, it holds and transforms folk knowledge into critiques of colonialism. With *Árbol de la Vida*, Cabrera uproots the concept of an American homeland within the daily life of a city located near the border, deconstructing the symbols of San Antonio among its various residents using the format of artesanía, and turning them into postcolonial critiques of the city's history. The ranching histories that the work tells locates the true origin stories of San Antonio, beyond the anglicized myths associated with the city.

[16] "The San Antonio Missions: San Antonio's First Catholic Schools," *El Camino de San Antonio Missions*, January 10, 2025, https://caminosanantonio.org/the-san-antonio-missions-san-antonios-first-catholic-schools/.
[17] Margarita Cabrera, "The Arbol Story of Renee Harris Watson and Her Family's Historic Ranch," YouTube, September 8, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8PaaojD3lI.
[18] Norma Martinez, "San Antonio Stories Blossom With Árbol De La Vida," *Texas Public Radio*, March 27, 2019, https://www.tpr.org/arts-culture/2019-03-27/san-antonio-stories-blossom-with-arbol-de-la-vida.