



Samantha Saldaña

Essay Written by Fatima Majia

Influenced by her upbringing and dedication to socio-political activism, Samantha Saldaña's artwork is a fusion of photography and textile sculpture. Through her exhibition *Insecure* and the ongoing investigation of her thesis, Saldaña critiques the forces behind systemic poverty by reflecting on her personal experiences. Crucial to Saldaña's work is the concept of art as mutual aid, an ideology which influences every aspect of her creative process and career. She firmly believes in art's ability to provide people with a creative medium to self-reflect and connect with others, which acts as a catalyst for community organization. Through her work with a local community college and nonprofits, Saldaña continues to promote arts accessibility within her community.

In her exhibition *Insecure*, Saldaña's Comfort Quilts are handmade by repurposing materials she collects second hand. To adorn them, blue cyanotype photography is printed onto fabric and sewn to the front. Each quilt is hung on a clothesline and features an object that Saldaña connects with the feeling of home, a concept that she grappled with defining for many years as someone who grew up experiencing housing insecurity. As a result, Saldaña moved nearly thirty different times by the age of 20, which affected her understanding of what home means and her relationship with identity, security, and cultural history. Rather than finding peace in a memory of four walls, she finds nostalgic comfort in items her family collected to furnish their home. A school chair was repurposed for her childhood bedroom, a statue of the Virgin Mary became a tie to her Mexican American identity, and a Young Frankenstein VHS tape entertained when cable television was not an option.

Printed in blue tones, each image evokes the melancholy associated with a childhood of financial instability while also providing a calm ground to present this lived reality. By using quilts, Saldaña creates nostalgic softness for herself and viewers who relate to her upbringing. To combat a trend in media that uses shock value to exploit the trauma of low-income families for artistic consumption, Saldaña only displays her own memories and guides the viewer to empathize with the person behind the experience.

In her thesis, Saldaña looks to expand her concepts from *Insecure* by examining the predatory rental contracts of storage units. When moving, her family used these for their most valuable belongings, but in California late payments give businesses the right to auction the room's contents. Units are gutted for resale, and the rightful owners lose access to the things they valued most. To represent this, Saldaña's exhibition will take the form of a fine art auction. A Collateral Quilt, made from a unique pattern Saldaña designed, will feature family photos alongside eviction notices. Childhood belongings locked in plastic boxes will remain visible yet out of reach. Looking at these features and Saldaña's practice as a whole, her art highlights emotional loss, and asks the audience to identify with the individuals facing the avaricious corporate and political practices that fuel systemic poverty.