

Shedding Light on Visual Storytelling

//BY CAROL STINNETT

In grade school, Camilo Velasquez remembers roaming hallways lined with works from the Metropolitan Museum of Art—seemingly a small museum of its own, complete with a print of Vincent Van Gogh’s “Starry Night.” It was there that the art professor and Anita S. Wooten Gallery curator first discovered a love for art. “I was awestruck,” he explains—eyes wide open as if seeing it for the first time all over again. “Completely in shock how images could move my emotions.”

As we find a seat at a local coffee shop, he sips on hot tea and details how the artist's story impacts his own work. Though Van Gogh was never formally educated in art, Camilo's certain of his influence. "If I'm in a gallery or museum, I'll recognize his work from across the room—even if I've never seen it before," he grins.

Though art always intrigued him, Camilo spent hours contemplating life after high-school graduation. So when his father offered to pay for college, with the condition that he study business, he jumped at the opportunity. Recalling that period, he pauses to take a sip of tea, glances down and scrunches his face. "Two long, miserable years," he sighs. "I hated business, but enjoyed plunging into anything creative—literature, humanities, philosophy."

Camilo describes his father as a responsible man who taught him work ethic. He vividly remembers the political violence in Cali, Colombia, where he was born. Like others, his family planned to migrate to Argentina, but days before, a telegram arrived, warning against the idea. Instead, the Velasquez family decided on New York—a place Camilo's father had previously visited.

Though his father never finished high school, he held multiple jobs in New York to support the family. "I never saw him in pajamas. He was the last in bed at night and first out the door every morning," Camilo describes.

Laughing, he remembers telling his father that he wanted to become an artist rather than a businessman. "He almost had a hemorrhage." Echoing his father's tone, he continues, "There's two things we'll never have in our family—a priest and an artist. We've never had those and we won't have one any time soon."



Top Left: Camilo's father as a young boy in Colombia.
Bottom Left: Camilo (right) and several friends after their first art exhibition in Colombia. Photographs provided by Camilo.



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Craving independence, Camilo struck out on his own, returning to Colombia and enrolling in a fine arts program at Universidad Nacional de Colombia. He returned to the United States after he earned a scholarship for a master's degree at the New York Institute of Technology.

After sipping more tea, he taps the cup, thinking about his work. Based on experiences—life, death,

love and loss—he equates art to publishing a diary for everyone to read. He sits back, gathering thoughts before detailing his work process. "Before starting a piece, I write about an experience and consider its symbolic meaning. What's the lesson? Conclusion? The philosophy involved in it?" It's his favorite aspect of art—conceptualizing—a labor of love as he explains.

A pulverized pencil inspired one of his most recent works. "I'm trying to find my car in the campus parking lot when I look down and see this crushed pencil. To me, it symbolized the dilemma



Top: Annual Juried Student Digital, Graphics and Fine Arts Exhibition
Right: In drawing class, Camilo works with student, Jules Ramirez, on a portrait.

“

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of technology—the loss of handwriting. So I took a picture and did a piece on that. It represents me holding a mirror to society. I need to write and this allows me to see clearly.”

Outside the classroom, Camilo’s around the Anita S. Wooten Gallery or in the vault—an area used to store art for upcoming exhibitions. It’s a fairly new role for Camilo, after the sudden passing of Jackie Otto-Miller, who served as the director and curator of the gallery for 15 years.

Since taking over, Camilo has big plans. After finishing his tea, he presses his fingers together,



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The gallery hosts exhibits each year that feature work from murals and portraits to sculptures and artifacts. The Annual Juried Student Digital, Graphic and Fine Art Exhibition, which takes place each spring, remains one of his favorites. “It highlights students’ work—they’re at the same

gallery where their professors, mentors and other admired artists exhibit,” he says. “It’s the biggest show we put on.”

His favorite part of the job, though? Learning from students. His voice, crackling with emotion explains, “It’s a creative journey. Students find their voice.” From first day jitters to confidence in critiques—Camilo loves his front row seat in watching students learn the language of art. ▮