

University of North Carolina Asheville  
Journal of Undergraduate Research  
Asheville, North Carolina  
Spring 2025

# Jugando con Recuerdos: Hecho en Mexico (Playing with Memories: Made in Mexico)

By: Angel G. Xelhua

Art/Art History  
The University of North Carolina Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Mentor(s):

Tamie Beldue, Matthew West, Robert Dunning, Eric Tomberlin, Carrie Tomberlin,  
Louise Deroualle

## Abstract

This body of work is a direct result of a childhood without various childhood-defining objects, such as toys, candy, or media. Influenced by an obsession with nostalgia, this eventually led to an attempt to relive the past through the present. This obsession snowballed to a concerning collection of various childhood objects, ranging throughout time from 80's and 90's Mexico, to early 2000's U.S. pop culture, and an unfathomable amount of thrift stores. Now experiencing the tragedy of adjusting to adulthood, this body of work features alcohol, cigarettes, the shame surrounding enjoying children's media, and a desire to reject modern adult life through objects. However, a common theme can be seen throughout this nostalgic experience: the prevalence of Mexican values—specifically the significance of family. Families and people can change radically, whereas objects are a product of their time.

Mexican culture strongly focuses on the importance of family and the stern acceptance of growing responsibilities. Grit is assumed, not rewarded. A nostalgic reflection through

a Mexican-American lens resulted in various clashing emotions towards the rapid passing of time. Playing with child-like objects is exciting, limitless, and timeless. However, the constant reminder of adulthood often makes play seem jarring, and almost out-of-touch. Mourning, frustration, and a great amount of appreciation could recontextualize a past with the depiction of objects and the people that informed it. Through the utilization of mixed media to depict various nostalgic subjects, this body of work is an invitation to view an on-going attempt to accept the past, learn to play again, to love the objects and people lost to time, and all with those gained along the way.

## Introduction

Nostalgic experiences occur through various means, be it toys, photographs, music, or smells. Typically through the five senses, nostalgia is a strong emotion intertwined with feelings of joy, loneliness, or content. Dr. Krystine Batcho, PhD recipient and professor of psychology, defines nostalgia as a bittersweet longing for one's past, involving various aspects in one's life. Initially considered a medical condition related to an illness, the term evolved into a complex emotion universally experienced (American Psychological Association, 2019). Recent studies suggest a positive link to nostalgia, where it serves as both a coping mechanism (Batcho, 2013) and support to coping. In addition, such nostalgia is more likely to arise as a result of traumatic or negative experiences (Hepper, 2021), but these negative emotions seem to be more natural and less permanent of a state. Studies show that nostalgia usually ends in happier, more calm emotions (Hepper 2021), usually more complex, such as an appreciation for the past and future, or a realization of one's true self and progress in relation to the present (Baldwin 2019). Dr. Batcho's new journals and discussions aim to explore this further, as nostalgia has evolved into an ultimately beneficial experience for humans. Other results are a sense of empathy, unification, and belonging or connection to others (APA 2019). Ultimately, albeit a complicated emotion with no true result, nostalgia clearly seems to benefit more than damage the human experience. Such an important idea is essential in understanding the research question at hand; "How can depictions of childhood objects and family inform personal, present-day obsessions with nostalgia?" Through focusing on the obsessive elements of nostalgia, this research hopes to establish these results through visual means.

A subject often associated with nostalgia are toys, commonly used throughout various people's childhoods. These subjects come in various forms, shapes, sizes, and materials. Some may be universally known to a wide variety of people, while others may be specific to a country or culture. The exploration of various toys and their infinite forms as a subject matter will influence their connection to a specific or more broad audience. Other nostalgic elements include smells, clothing, music, candy, or vague and broad memories (APA 2019), subject matters that may target various audiences depending on the illustration itself. Take, for example, an older adult compared to a younger child. The adult may recognize and better relate to earlier toys and objects, perhaps ranging from the late 1900s up to the early 2000s. However, a child may recognize toys more modern and recent, possibly something they may play with to date. This could relate similarly to people

of various cultures and countries, where some objects have more sentimental value than others to people of different backgrounds and ages, an interesting element that will be explored further. In addition to toys are old photographs, often a source of memories for all kinds of people. Revisiting such photographs, or altering their reality, can help enhance nostalgic experiences through a present or modern lens.

The main impetus for this work comes from personal experiences, both past and present. Growing up in a low income family with a lack of material objects, such as toys, often led to an experience where maturing was beneficial in understanding and helping with family issues, typically financial. A reflection of past experiences created a current appreciation of life, a common experience with nostalgia. Thus, this newfound perspective of life evolved into current interests in nostalgia and its usage as a universal language.



“Los Temelargas”, Watercolor and Colored Pencils, 2025

**Figure 1.** Depictions of specific objects, such as beer cans, compared to more vague subjects, such as sock-puppets, can result in various interpretations. By focusing on a nostalgic-like approach through undefined rendering or yellow undertones, a more nostalgic depiction of toys appears. An interesting dichotomy is that of the materials of such toys, here handmade, and how they relate to their modern-day counterparts.

## Methodology

Utilizing various subject matters and objects, the bulk of this body of work will focus on composition, rendering style, lighting, and color. The subject matter has led to various still-life or photography based approaches, where the arrangement and rendering of the subjects aim to present a nostalgic and dramatic mood, utilizing cool or warm colors to their full advantage. Recent developments have included photography and 3D mediums, such as handmade toys with found materials (Fig.1), and more finalized

photographs to be utilized less for reference, but as pieces within themselves. However, photographs as reference make up a large portion of the illustrations within this work, so a flexible mix is utilized as needed. (Fig. 2)



"Onwards", Photograph, 2024

**Figure 2.** Although the vast majority of this research utilizes traditional mediums, photography as a resource has accelerated the infinite possibilities to play with subject matter and background. This piece blurs the line between reality and fiction, where toys seem to mush into the real world as though with sentience.

The process of each medium includes various stages, where the mixed mediums include photography, illustrations, and the making of 3D objects and toys. More often than not, the handmade toys are constructed first, using various found materials or objects based on personal past experiences. Given the freedom with such materials, more interest is gained in the handmade toys and hopefully instills more complex emotions than that of popular modern-day toys. (Fig.1 and Fig.3)



"Childhood Friends", Found Objects, 2023

**Figure 3.** Specific childhood objects, especially those personal and found in Mexican-American culture, can be manipulated to assert certain emotions associated with

nostalgia, such as obsessions, longings, or self-reflection. Posing this dichotomy directly allows for complex relationships, especially when drawn.

After the construction of these objects is often the photography stage, where a combined usage of modern, vintage, or nostalgic-like objects are arranged, utilizing personal experiences as a metaphor for narratives. Elements to be considered include; the background or setting, lighting scenario and color, overall composition, or complexity in number of objects, to name a few. A certain mood, such as excitement, confusion, appreciation, or bittersweetness, is achieved to set a concrete sense of nostalgia. Each will be present depending on the approach and intended audience, varying from individual to group of pieces.



“Wandering, but still Looking”, Colored Pencil, 2023

**Figure 4.** While still focusing on elements such as composition, lighting, and rendering, this piece aims to focus on color above all else. The distinction and variation of cool colors, especially compared to warmer colors, allow for calmer moods and undertones. Given the title, it is clear this moment focuses on the toys as a subject for a vague narrative.

Afterwards is the transition from photography to artwork, where the final image will be drawn with watercolors, colored pencils, gouache, or other mediums as needed, on watercolor paper. These illustrations aim to deter from concrete and hyperrealism styles, whereas the subjects are not set into a specific setting and time and will not be fully rendered tightly. This decision arises from the vague memory-like emotions associated with nostalgia, where memories begin to fade and alter, sometimes altering perceptions and experiences as a whole (APA 2019). The intensity of this abstraction will vary, once more, on the main theme, but will mostly steer away from hyper realism to exaggerate a nostalgic or jarring tone. However, more defined styles may help inform the works in relation to others, so it will not be dismissed entirely and instead utilized when needed. Color choices can vary greatly and will directly influence the interpretation of each work. Cool colors would suggest bittersweet memories or calmer situations, (Fig. 4) whereas warmer tones can depict joyful or reminiscent effects. To



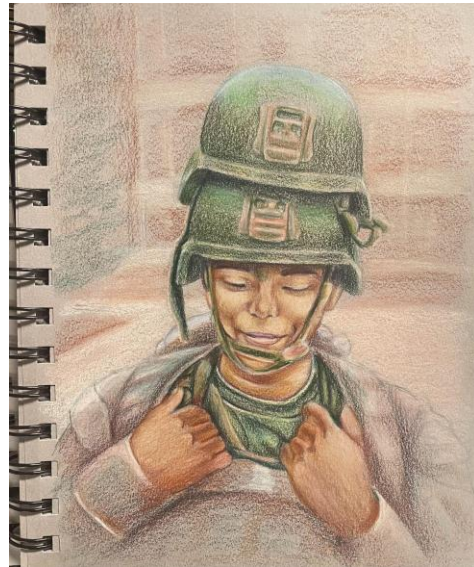
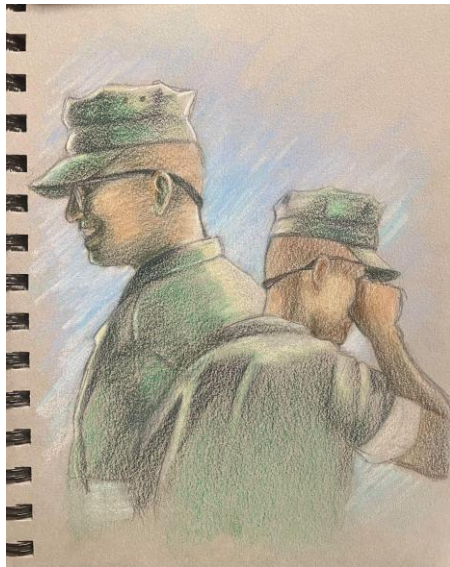
keep the body of work cohesive, most color rendering will range but largely be similar in approach, relating to the impressionist style.



“Since when were you a Smoker?”, Soft Pastel, 2025

**Figure 5.** Similar to Figure 2, alterations through photography, then onto illustrations, can achieve bizarre scenarios. Although nostalgia tends to lean towards past experiences, in this instant there is a focus on more recent experiences. A self-reflection of childhood versus adult activities is taken head-on, such as smoking, when literally compared to each other. This piece asks: Would my younger self approve of this?

An evolution of this body of work and its concept has led to an exploration of recent events, albeit still past, but with the intent of being within near memory. Such a deviation from past to recent nostalgia has resulted in a different series of work, but with the intent and hope that it will strengthen this body of work. A personal experience of my brother being deployed for a year has served as the main impetus and inspiration for this approach, (Fig. 6) but it has led to a varying degree of “coping” with the past. Instead of focusing on childhood memories through old photos or dioramas, the focus on recent events can expand the variety of nostalgia experienced. However, “recent” may also refer to larger, life-altering events, such as the transition from youth to adulthood. Through the alteration of images and editing, jarring themes can be depicted, like a toy smoking cigarettes as a form of coping with the relatively new activity of smoking. (Fig.5)



“Mi Hermano, Mi Hermano, Mi Hermano, y Yo”, Colored Pencil, 2023



“Our Future Generation”, Colored Pencil, 2025

**Figure 6.** These three pieces focus on more recent events, focusing more on family and how it relates to nostalgia. Although different in depicting various age ranges within a family, a common impetus is that of coping with the passage of time. Objects are still and a product of their time, but family members can change drastically. These works attempt to address the present-day while being rendered as though “vintage” photographs.

Past works that follow this general methodology were found to engage with artwork and viewers were more likely to react positively, often relating the piece to a certain narrative related to their own life. However, the complicated nature of nostalgia itself leads to an infinite amount of interpretations and audiences, all of which will be addressed in segments as the process progresses. Throughout these works, a common theme of Mexican culture is clearly seen throughout. Although nostalgia is a complex, almost

vague phenomenon, a relation to the viewer through a more personal lens can help instill stronger relationships through work.

## Influences



"Queen City Sunset", Oil Paint

**Figure 7.** Although Queen's medium and style are far more focused and tight in rendering, the end result of his paintings depict his toys as a part of a larger narrative. Through this, Queen's paintings serve as a language in more universal nostalgic experiences, focusing more on a toy's "sentience". Although they may vary in time-period or materials, they all fit seamlessly when given a holistic approach.

Influences for this body of work include Johnathan Queen, a Cincinnati-based painter who focuses on toys and antiques as his main subject. His work is made with oil-paint and is incredibly rendered, presenting his extreme professionalism and appreciation for his subject matter and materials. His body of work emphasizes the reflection of his chosen toys in relation to his background and story. Each toy has a specific purpose and story behind it, and through its usage in relation to other toys, he aims to depict important themes or narratives through a comfortable subject matter. In a short documentary with Kentucky Educational Television, Queen states, "It's easier to read certain caricatures of toys without carrying the weight of a human figure, becoming more of a fictional story that, if painted with people, may become too heavy of a subject matter."

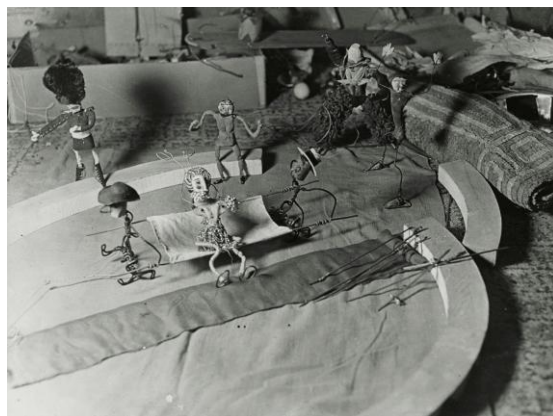




“Sderot Home”, Sderot, Israel, 2012

**Figure 7.** McCarty’s focus on toys as subject matter, specifically when depicting the harshness of reality, is incredibly interesting when considering the extremities that can be addressed. Without the burden of using human figures, McCarty can manipulate his environment to exact measures that can result in specific narratives.

A second influence involves a different medium and approach, but it has affected the process heavily. Brian McCarty is a photographer who focuses on toys in order to convey certain emotions. His initial work is seen in his book, “Art-Toys”, a collection of images that focus on the realm of “art-toys” in various backgrounds and settings. These images are much more entertaining in concept, varying in approach and ideas. McCarty’s more recent works are much more serious in intent. This series, titled, “War-Toys”, reinterprets children’s drawings from their experiences in the Israel-Palestine conflict into photographs. These reimaginings bring the reality of these childrens’ lives in a warzone into light, where any audience can truly understand the tragic experiences they are forced into. The topic in itself is sensitive and could not be truly explored in relation to this research, but one can appreciate how successful this collection is when utilizing toys as a universal language.

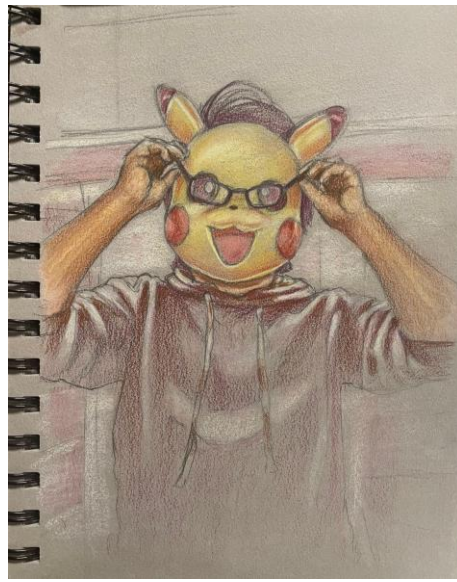


Spear Thrower act and Cowboy act from Cirque Calder (1926–31), Paris, c. 1931  
Photograph by Brassai © Estate Brassai - RMN

**Figure 8.** Calder's circus has not aged well, literally, as these figures are hard to maintain given that they were made with cheap and short-lasting materials. However, Calder viewed these objects as masterpieces, personal projects that achieve exact goals and movements. This tenderness towards objects that seem crude or elementary is incredibly significant, especially when viewing the various videos Calder created presenting the objects in their glory.

Although various more influences have shaped this research as a whole, a largely important influence is that of Alexander Calder. Infamously known for his mobile and dynamic sculptures, Calder was involved in the creation of his "circus", where he created various small play-things and movable figures that represented a small circus group. He even went further beyond to showcase these "toys" in performances, creating whole stages and mimicking sound effects to give a real impression of a circus (Sperling, 1994). According to the Calder Foundation, he states, "Oh, these are stylized silhouettes, but astonishing in their miniature resemblance, obtained by means of luck, iron wire, spools, corks, elastics . . . A stroke of the brush, a stroke of the knife, of this, of that; these are the skillful marks that reconstruct the individuals that we see at the circus. Here is a dog who seems like a prehistoric cave drawing with a body of iron wire. He will jump through a paper hoop. Yes, but he may miss his mark or not. This is not a mechanical toy . . . All of this is arranged and balanced according to the laws of physics in action so that it allows for the miracles of circus acrobatics." Calder's focus on handmade subjects was a large inspiration for the idea in handmade versus modern toys and how their relationships can invoke nostalgic reflections.

## Conclusion



"Self Portrait", Colored Pencil, 2025

**Figure 9.** One of the most common forms of self-reflection artists do is a self portrait, typically depicting a bust with a focus on facial expressions and features. However, this portrait focuses more on the blurred perceptions of childhood interests versus adulthood experiences. A form of masking, almost literally, is achieved, almost as a direct clash towards a portraits' real intents.

Aiming to achieve nostalgia universally was initially a goal within this body of research, but doing so is nearly impossible. Nostalgia itself is an emotion so complex that it is barely understood to-date, so a more personal approach is far easier to achieve. Through the lens of an immigrant student with a Mexican background, this body of work presents itself as an attempt to relive the past through the present, and vice versa. Recent self-reflections lean towards a more positive view of the past, where obsessions become appreciations. However, the present-day issues at hand seem far more manageable when looking forward, knowing how much time has passed and its inevitability.

## Acknowledgment

The author wants to acknowledge the UNCA Art department and all faculty involved for pushing this research to its limits and infinite possibilities. Specific grants that helped fund this research in experience and practicality are the Wrengrow New York Travel Grant and the UGR Summer Research Grant. Without such privileges, this research and body of work would not be possible.

## Bibliography

- Baldwin, Matthew, Monica Biernat, and Mark J. Landau. "Remembering the Real Me: Nostalgia Offers a Window to the Intrinsic Self." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 1 (2015): 128–47. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038033>.
- Batcho, Krystine Irene. "The Role of Nostalgia in Resistance: A Psychological Perspective." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 2 (2018): 227–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1499835>.
- Batcho, Krystine Irene, Andrea M. Nave, and Meghan L. DaRin. "A Retrospective Survey of Childhood Experiences." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 12, no. 4 (2010): 531–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-010-9213-y>.
- Batcho, Krystine Irene. "Nostalgia: Retreat or Support in Difficult Times?" *The American Journal of Psychology* 126, no. 3 (2013): 355–67. <https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjpsyc.126.3.0355>.

"Does Nostalgia Have a Psychological Purpose?" American Psychological Association. American Psychological Association. Accessed March 13, 2023.  
<https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/nostalgia>.

Hepper, Erica G., Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, Sara Robertson, and Clay D. Routledge. "Time Capsule: Nostalgia Shields Psychological Wellbeing from Limited Time Horizons." *Emotion* 21, no. 3 (2021): 644–64.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000728>.

Sperling, L. J. "The Popular Sources of Calder's Circus: The Humpty Dumpty Circus, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey, and the Cirque Medrano." *Journal of American Culture* 17, no. 4 (Winter, 1994): 1. <http://0-search.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/scholarly-journals/popular-sources-calders-circus-humpty-dumpty/docview/200649177/se-2>.

*Toying with Still Life: The Art of Jonathan Queen*. KET, 2022.  
<https://www.ket.org/program/toying-with-still-life-the-art-of-jonathan-queen/toying-with-still-life-the-art-of-jonathan-queen/>.

"1926–1930." Calder Foundation. <https://calder.org/timeline/1926-1930/>.