



Painted mural in the Loop – by Eliana Cristancho, Carol Lara, Luise Otero Prada and Aleida Hertel

# A Rich and Vibrant Addition to our Cultural Landscape

BY GERRY MANDEL

**I**t all began when Elisa Bender had an idea. “I thought about reaching out to local Hispanic artists. It seemed like more and more were coming to St. Louis.” Her idea was to get a few of them together for an informal meeting, like a happy hour event. So “reach out” she did. The response astounded her. “I put a message on Facebook and thought maybe only a handful would be there.” Fifteen artists showed up, and that was just the beginning.

Today, Latinx Arts Network is an active, thriving organization that provides a

network for artists and art advocates who support and encourage the Hispanic arts in St. Louis. The arts, as stated on their website, include “fine art, performance arts, visual art, literary arts, music and all other art expressions including art producers.” That’s an impressive line-up of artistic expression, by a diversified and accomplished membership.

In 2021 a unique and powerful mural was unveiled in the Delmar Loop. Four visual artists wanted to make people aware of the Hispanic culture in St. Louis and express a shared experience with the community.

The artists were Eliana Cristancho (Colombia), Carl Lara (Peru), Luise Otero Prada (Colombia), and Aleida Hertel (Mexico). Their personal stories are as compelling as the mural, entitled “Building Bridges,” which is at 5875 Delmar.

Elisa was born and raised in St. Louis. Her mother is Hispanic, her father is Caucasian, from the United States. She went to McClure North High school, where she was one of only two students with any Hispanic roots. “I love to dance,” she told



me. “My parents had me involved in Hispanic dancing at an early age. In the mid-90’s, my mom and a couple of friends organized the first Hispanic Festival in St. Louis.” That is a popular event that continues to this day and is widely attended by people from every part of the City, County, and surrounding area. Other events connected with Latinx are the annual Day of the Dead observance and the Latinx Film Festival.

“My family was so supportive, especially my mom,” she says. “They encouraged me to make this happen.” Elisa also credits the Missouri History Museum with seeing the potential in her idea and providing whole-hearted support from the very beginning. She describes herself as a person who wants to make things happen. The Hispanic Festival is one of those. She is the president of Latinx, and works with a small board of directors who have provided significant help. Their experiences and knowledge cover a wide variety of fields that contribute to the success of the organization.

With ninety members, it is difficult to single out a few to represent the entire organization. In going through their website and attendant links, I think the following artists will give you an idea of the members’ background and talents.

**MIRIAM RUIZ** is a visual artist, art curator and educator. She manages school and community programming at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, and is also a curator for the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. With a Master of Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she has a wide range of teaching experience, including English instructor in the Czech Republic. Her ten years of educational experience, in addition to administrative and research experience, provides valuable guidance for Latinx.

**LUISA OTERO PRADA** was born in Colombia, South America, and is based in St. Louis. She attended La Salle University in Colombia, where she majored in architecture before moving to the U.S. “Art has always been a part of my life. My intention is to create Visual Magic Realism in my work. The beauty and exuberance of nature and people are my deepest inspiration to paint.” She is an acrylic painter whose work has been exhibited in many St. Louis area galleries.

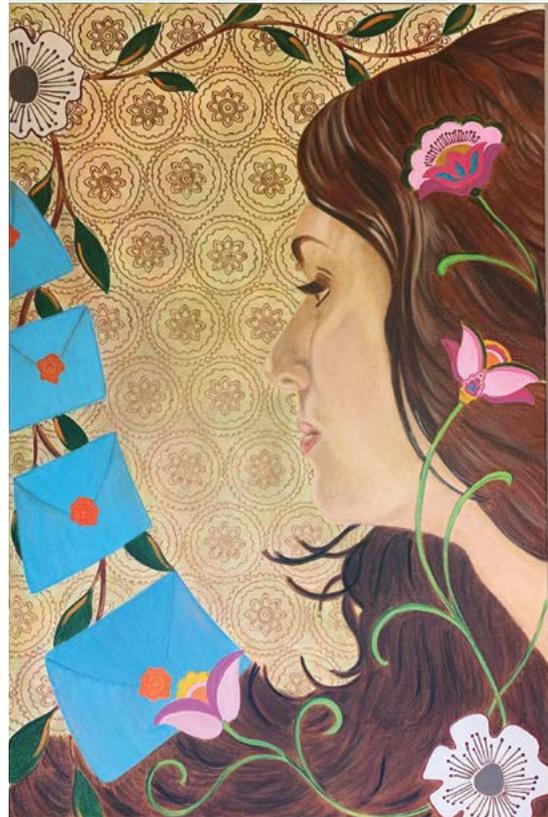
**CAROL LARA** has been exploring art since childhood. Her parents, who are from Peru, emigrated to St. Louis, where she grew up. Singing, dancing, exploring, storytelling, and painting have always played important roles in her life. At 19, she discovered the joys of working with a camera, and today she is a full-time photographer and artisan. She also works with clay to create distinctive jewelry and sculptures.

**ORLANDO VINCENTE TLL** says it best: “My bags are always packed and ready. I am a storyteller, a traveller, and I make images, both moving and stills.” He picked up a digital camera twenty years ago, and that was the beginning. He has a passion for the crafts of movie and video production, and loves to make beautiful images as the center of everything. “But to experience the world through travel and meaningful relationships is truly the nucleus that life and creativity revolve around.”

**L. IRENE COMPADRE** is the founding principal of Arbolope Studio. She has a background in musical composition, architecture, sculpture and scenic art. Irene holds a Master of Landscape Architecture degree with Honors from the Sam Fox School of Design at Washington University, St. Louis. The goal of her company is to create innovative, sustainability-minded, and impactful landscapes that help make a happier, healthier and more connected world.

**CARLOS RESTREPO** wears many hats. He is a bilingual communicator, graphic designer, freelance journalist, translation specialist and public relations professional. He was born in Medellin, Columbia, and has lived in St. Louis for more than a decade. He describes his professional mission simply: “Make sure you are understood, regardless of the language or the medium.” Carlos is committed to the betterment of the Hispanic and immigrant communities in St Louis, and beyond.

**JAVIER TORRES GOMEZ**, a licensed architect from Mexico, works as a



Top: Nostalgia by Eliana Cristancho

Bottom: Photo by Julia López

Lower left: Elisa Bender



Left to right: Luisa Otero Prada, Javier Torres Gomez, Carol Lara, Julia López

Project Designer at ACI Boland Architects in St. Louis. With an interest in art and architecture, he graduated from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico. Javier also creates his own comic book, *Acatl the Eagle Warrior*, and also designs 2D and 3D logos and photorealistic renderings, as well as hand sketches of all kinds, including architecture and landscapes, portraits, animals, and character creation. He moved to St. Louis in 2012 and has been a member of the Latinx art group since 2017.

**JOSE GUADALUPE GARZA**, raised in Florida by parents who immigrated from Mexico, grew up without speaking English. He is an artist, educator, and veteran working in new and traditional media. His studio practice utilizes cinema and popular culture as theoretical frameworks to explore the changing demographic and cultural landscape of the U.S. with significance to the Latinx experience. He has exhibited nationally and internationally including the 2017 Biennale de Spazio

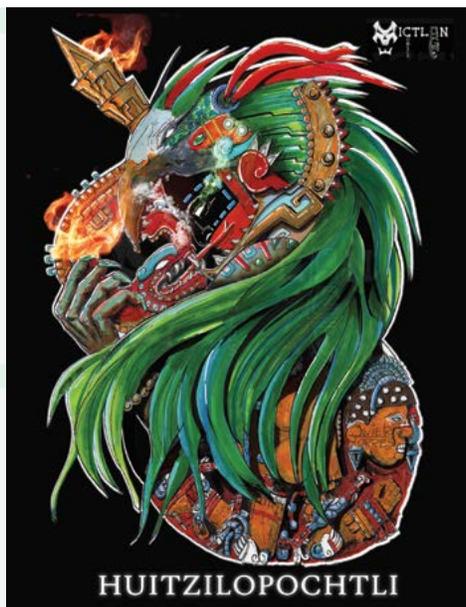
Publico in Rome, Video Art in America at Everson Museum, University of Michigan Stamps Gallery, and the Counterpublic Triennial. Jose earned a BFA in Drawing from the University of Florida and an MFA in Visual Arts from Washington University in St. Louis.

**JULIA LÓPEZ**, who lives in St. Louis, is of Venezuelan and Mexican descent. She found her true medium in 2010, when she fell in love with photography. “I am inspired by the relationships between significant moments and the candid, natural beauty that surrounds us every day.” Her work has been displayed at several museums and galleries, including the Contemporary Art Museum, Soulard Art Gallery, St. Louis Artists’ Guild, Lindenwood Center for the Arts, and Clayton Fine Art Gallery. She finds the city of St. Louis to be fertile ground for her work, especially because of its history and transitions. She calls her studio “Angelfallsphotography,” a tribute to the world’s highest waterfall in Venezuela.

“I thought it only made sense to integrate my culture into what I love to do.”

These are just a few of the artists who make up Latinx. Their stories, their origins, and their art are as varied and rich as the cultures with which they identify. They are talented, dedicated to their art, and proud to be members of Latinx. If not for the inspiration and follow-through of Elisa Bender, this organization would probably not have happened. St. Louis can feel justifiably proud that Latinx has joined the rich culture of this city.

You can see more about Latinx by visiting their website, [www.Latinxartsstl.com](http://www.Latinxartsstl.com). Click on “Artist Directory” to learn more about other members, and to see samples of their work. And if you know an artist you think would enjoy knowing about Latinx, be sure to tell them about it.



Left:  
Huitzilopochtli by  
Javier Torres Gomez  
Right: Silkheart by  
Luisa Otero Prada