

# ART OF LIVING

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## Beaumont Art Museum show represents women's struggle under patriarchy

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There are lessons to be found in stories. Angélica Delfina Vásquez Cruz listened to her grandmother's Mexican folk tales as a child. When she grew up, she turned to the lessons from the stories to help her overcome struggles.

The Art Museum is showing a collection of eight of Cruz's ceramic sculptures from the John Gaston Fairey Collection of Mexican Art through March 30. The pieces are beautiful and fascinating to explore. They are not only visually appealing, but we are also invited to glimpse Cruz's journey from a poor upbringing to international renown.

Born in Santa Maria Atzompala in Oaxaca, Mexico, Cruz grew up in a family of ceramic artisans. From a young age, she helped her family as they made a living from selling "muñecas (woman dolls)." Her parents' work was commercial, the figures were functional for use as flowerpots. But Cruz was interested in Mexican mythology and wanted to incorporate skeletons and devils, something her family discouraged.

She continued to make her own work. When a dealer came to see her family's work, her father covered hers up. However, the dealer saw Cruz's work and said he wanted to buy them, but Cruz's father took credit for her work.

She was married at 16, and over the next decade later she had four children. She continued to make her art, which won awards and competitions. Once again someone took credit for her work, this time it was her father-in-law. At 26, she demanded to take the credit for her work, causing a rift in the family leading to her husband abandoning her and their four children.

Cruz's grandmother told her Mexican folk tales and told her to be sure to remember them. As she continued to work, Cruz realized the stories had vital lessons to share about women's burdens and punishments under the patriarchy. She turned these lessons into her art.

"La Llorona," or "The Weeping Woman," or is the story of a mother who mourns for dead



"La Llorona (The Weeping Woman)" on display in the exhibition "Ceramista del Preciosismo: Angelica Delfina Vasquez Cruz from the John Gaston Fairey Collection of Mexican Folk Art" at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas through March 30.

children. In some versions of the story, she drowns them after her husband leaves her, forever doomed to be a wandering ghost searching for them. In others, she kidnaps children, never to be seen again. Cruz's sculpture sees La Llorona weeping, her hands raised to her face. Is she about

to cover her eyes or is she calling to the children? The children are cradled in the arms of a skeleton representing death, while a crescent moon watches.

Despite a lack of formal training, the works in the exhibition show a mastery of technique. Each piece is a collec-

tion of figures and objects, but they are fired as a single piece. The sculptures have a matte finish rather than a shiny glaze. Cruz mixes organic materials into a slip, which reveal the colors when fired.

"Innocence" is an emotionally powerful piece that deals with the dissolution of Cruz's

naive thoughts of what her marriage would be. The pyramid is topped by a female figure with a blindfold — innocence is blind. All of the figures are versions of herself before she married — playing basketball and musical instruments — and the sculpture is also interwoven with snakes and centipedes. Like all Cruz's work, the more one looks, the more one finds.

"Fiesta de Sirenas," or "Gathering of Mermaids," is a subtly feminist piece. Nowadays, mermaids are considered cute. However, if one looks at the Spanish for mermaids, "sirenas," we see the old tradition of malevolence, as they were believed to lure sailors to their deaths. In Mexican folklore, mermaids lived in rivers and lakes. Cruz remembers her grandmother telling a story about a girl who wanted to swim in the river on Good Friday. Her mother said she should not swim that day as it is the day Jesus was crucified. The girl went anyway with her boyfriend. The pair swam together and lay together. When the girl tried to leave the water, the currents held her down, she grew a tail, and she was unable to leave the river. The boyfriend ran into town and the villagers came to the river. The priest said she had sinned three times — by swimming on Good Friday, by defying her mother, and by having sex. She was doomed to live in the water and only leave it on one day a year. It is noticeable that the boy suffered no consequences for the same actions as the girl.

Cruz's mermaids are grouped in celebration, playing music. All of the figures are playing different instruments — drums, flutes, guitar, violin — one even has a microphone. Far from mourning their fates, the "sirenas" sing joyfully. While she struggled with her marriage, she wanted the mermaids to experience joy and have a happy ending.

Cruz's works draw heavily on her personal experiences, but they have a universality that anyone can relate to. They are playful, thought-provoking and impressive in their creativity. And the credit is all hers.

AMSET is located at 500 Main St. in Beaumont. For more, visit [amset.org](http://amset.org).



"Innocence."



"Fiesta de Sirenas (Gathering of Mermaids)."



"Frida Kahlo."



The exhibition "Ceramista del Preciosismo: Angelica Delfina Vasquez Cruz from the John Gaston Fairey Collection of Mexican Folk Art" at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas takes place through March 30.