Inside Fruitvale's Only Art Gallery

Owner Yadira Cazares offers an inclusive space showcasing artists of color

Azucena Rasilla Follow
Mar 12 · 6 min read ★

Photo by Samantha Shanahan

In a terracotta building where Fruitvale Avenue meets the Dimond District in Oakland, Galería Beso Maya sits

sandwiched between a barber shop and an upholstery store. Inside this small, eclectic space, which serves as the neighborhood's only art gallery, each piece of art adorning the walls tells a story—not only of owner Yadira Cazares but also all the countless artists of color who oftentimes may not have had another place to showcase their work.

"There is no form of support system for black and brown artists—or any real networks," said Cazares, who opened the gallery in 2013. "And if there is, it's mostly in nonprofit form, where you typically start to accept a lower price. It's really the economics of racism."

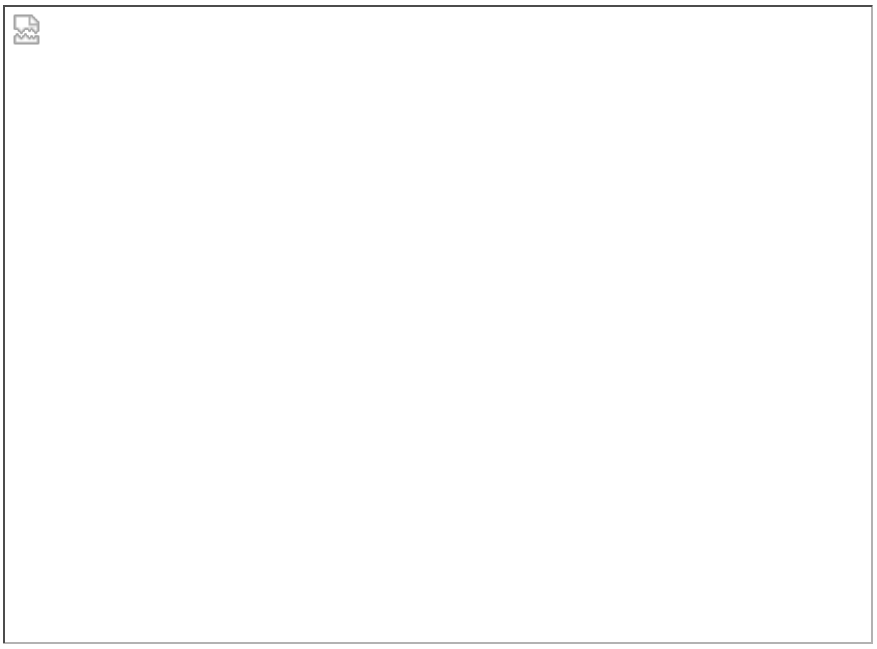

Photo by Samantha Shanahan

The vibrant gallery has become a community outpost in Fruitvale, one of Oakland's most dynamic neighborhoods that's rooted in history and undergoing fast changes. Sitting behind a table with a vinyl tablecloth over it at the front of the gallery, with her back to the bright-blue accent wall, Cazares greets visitors enthusiastically, effortlessly switching from English to Spanish.

Cazares opened the gallery in 2013 after spending years doing on-the-ground community outreach and activism, primarily working with at-risk youth and homeless individuals. It was during this time that she saw the need for an inclusive art space.

The art world at large systematically favors and lifts up privileged and white folks, putting people of color behind their Anglo peers. Nearly 85 percent of the country's museum staff is non-Hispanic white, for example, while blacks make up a mere 4 percent, and Asian Americans represent 6 percent, according to a 2015 survey by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. And how about Native Hawaiians or Native Americans? Statistically: none.

> *"My goal is to be able to take artists to bigger museums eventually. I have artists here who need to be in those spaces."*

The arduous work of sustaining the gallery is always on Cazares' mind as Oakland rapidly gentrifies. Since it's not a nonprofit, and because of the gallery's location, she doesn't get as much exposure as the galleries promoted by Oakland Art Murmur (the group in charge of promoting visual-arts spaces in Oakland). In Cazares' mind, turning her business into a nonprofit would diminish the value of the artists she works with, and her own art as well.

So she's found creative ways to keep the gallery open, continuing to develop a network for artists and helping to push those with a creative bug tap in to their hidden passions. The gallery hosts painting workshops, such as one hosted last December where participants could paint La Virgen de Guadalupe, and one held in January where attendees painted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. These events have given Cazares the opportunity to maintain a space for the community while giving access to art classes that are typically financially unattainable for most. Her workshops are also bilingual, a way to build a bridge between the Latinx community and those who do not speak Spanish.

"We know that we have a need to support these spaces—we have to make it OK for the community to come out," Cazares said. "My goal is to be able to take artists to bigger museums eventually. I have artists here who need to be in those spaces."

Currently, the gallery is hosting an exhibit called *Keeping Families Together*, co-curated by Maria Sanchez, artist and co-owner of

Sanchez Contemporary Gallery and Tertulia Coffee, the hybrid art gallery and coffee shop located in downtown Oakland. The exhibit features select works by nine artists (Cazares being one of them) depicting the current anti-immigrant political climate and the separation of families at the border.

> *"I may be gone, but I'm not forgotten."— Artist Javier Salazar*

Some of those artists include Melanie Cervantes, known for her political protest artwork, most recently in support of Oakland teachers; Adrian Delgado, who focuses on oil paintings, mosaics, printmaking and watercolors that are based on his daily interactions with people; and Javier Salazar, an artist who grew up in Oakland and was deported to Mexico four years ago.

Paintings by Luis Garcia

For Salazar, who has collaborated with Cazares from afar while he lives in Tijuana (though his wife still resides in the East Bay), a space like Galería Beso Maya is crucial for artists of color, especially an immigrant like him.

"She gave me an opportunity to showcase my work, and it's special to me," he said. "Words can't even describe it. It has allowed me to connect with Oakland, my hometown. I may be gone, but I'm not forgotten."

The gallery's current exhibit on family separation is not far removed from her own experiences growing up. Cazares was born in the

border town of Eagle Pass, Texas, but spent her toddler years in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, a neighboring town in Mexico, until her immediate family made the trek to San Jose in 1986 when she was just four years old. While the family moved to find financial stability, it didn't work out happily for Cazares, who ended up being separated from her mother for six years, spending time in a mental institution, a group home and foster care.

> *"In the art world, you have to have money and resources."*

"I come from a very poor working-class family," Cazares recalled. "We didn't have a bathroom or running water."

Eventually, Cazares was able to beat the odds. After being emancipated, she received a creative-achievement award that allowed her to attend California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

"Books really saved me," she said of her college experience, during which she witnessed the disadvantages of not having the solid network that is so crucial to making it in this competitive and often privileged field. "In the art world, you have to have money and resources."

After graduating, instead of trying to break into the creative realm, which felt out of reach, she used the hardships she endured while growing up to help the community, working at various nonprofits helping kids, at-risk youth and immigrant families. It was this line of work that allowed her to find herself and heal from past traumas.

"I always felt like I needed to be like Mother Teresa," Cazares said. "I really wanted to help kids while helping myself."

After 11 years of lending a hand to people in need, she diverted from a soul-rewarding but also mentally draining type of work back into the world of art. With the opening of the space, the role she inadvertently played as a sort of Mother Teresa continued in the form of helping artists of color without a support system or network.

Today, she hopes to continue supporting artists of color while

simultaneously finding creative ways to stay afloat and represent the community. "The gallery is a testament to the beautiful art and artists I represent to be the future," Cazares said. "Folks on the block are my kind of people. We're all striving for a better life full of color and love."

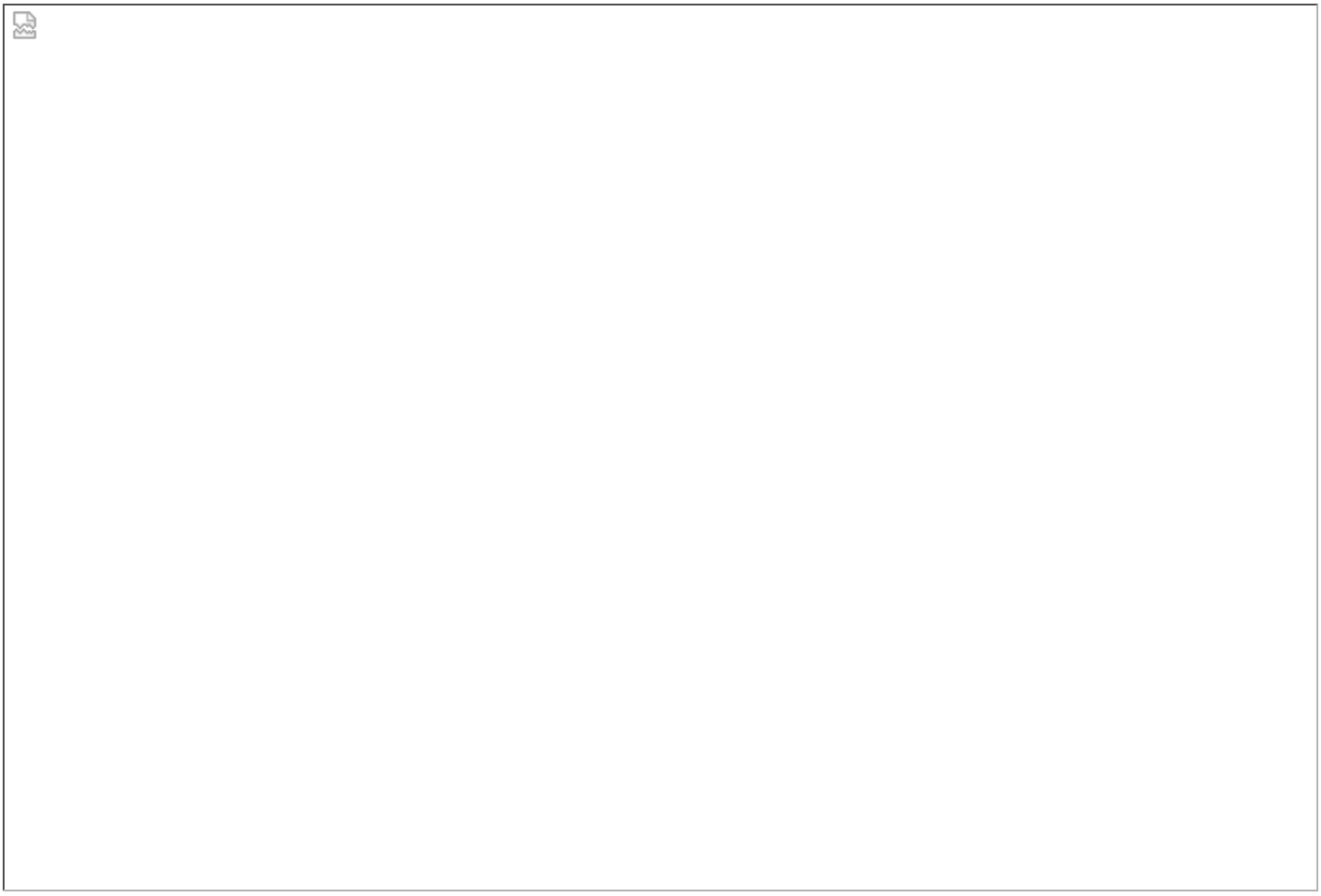

Photo by Samantha Shanahan