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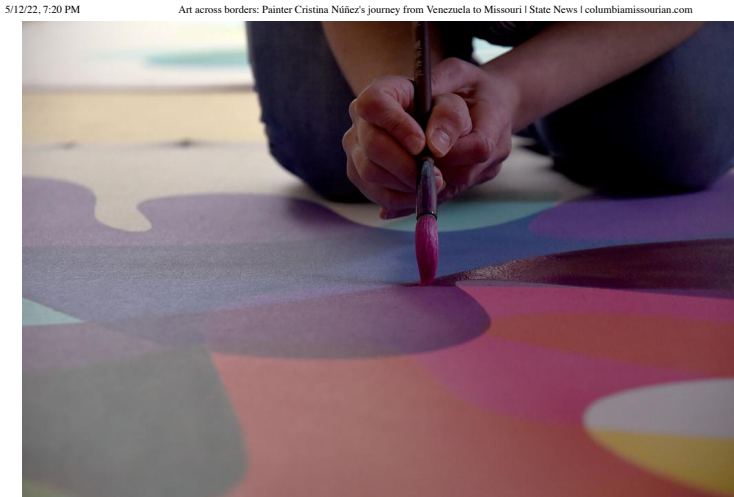
Art across borders: Painter Cristina Núñez's journey from Venezuela to Missouri

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Apr 19, 2022

Editor's Note

This is one of an occasional series of stories about people whose paths to mid-Missouri started with immigration and how they made the journey from their home countries.



Cristina Núñez paints with acrylic on a canvas March 24 at her home studio in Columbia. Núñez has a homemade studio in her basement and also spends time in a studio at the Columbia Art League.

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While most children became interested in other career avenues, Núñez never got over the fascination and fixation she had for painting when she was a child.

“I never decided I wanted to be an artist,” Núñez said. “I just never stopped doing what I love.”

Sylvia Chavez, Núñez’s mother, remembers sending her daughter to a pottery class when she was 8. At first, Chavez thought Núñez just wanted to take the class to spend time with her friend.

“It ended up that she was very good at it,” Chavez said. “They closed that studio one year after she enrolled, and the teacher told me to get something for her, because she was very good and that she was an artist.”

Cristina Núñez steps back from a painting March 24 at her home studio in Columbia. Núñez is a Venezuelan artist who now paints in Columbia. She has murals all over town and showcases her art at the Columbia Art League.

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Cristina Núñez never thought about leaving Venezuela.

She loves how the weather in her home country always feels like spring and how neighbors feel like family. Her dog had plenty of open outdoor space to run free and return home in the evenings.

While she enjoyed traveling and exploring new countries, she always looked forward to returning home more than anything.

“The best part of going out was coming back home,” Núñez said. “But everything changed.”

Life in Venezuela

Núñez was born in 1977 in Caracas, Venezuela, and grew up there with an older sister and two younger brothers.

Like most children, Núñez loved drawing and painting in elementary school. One of her first memories is of a teacher opening the art cabinet in the classroom, revealing a multitude of colored markers and paint and an endless supply of white paper.

Chavez said Núñez has always been fiercely independent. She remembers her second pottery teacher explaining that her daughter would not accept help and always wanted to complete projects by herself.

Eventually, Núñez stopped taking ceramics classes and began pursuing her passion of painting.

“She would paint even the ceiling of the house,” Chavez said. “She would climb up to the roof and then paint the roof.”

After finishing high school, Núñez told her mother she wanted to start painting as a career, but her parents insisted she pursue an education and a college degree.

Núñez decided to study art history at The Central University of Venezuela in 1996. After receiving her bachelor’s degree in fine arts, she applied for programs to get her master’s degree abroad.

While it was never Núñez’s plan to leave Venezuela permanently, she found herself in a difficult position.

The economic and political situation in Venezuela made Núñez feel unsafe and her living and financial situation unpredictable. Núñez said the country is dealing with government censorship, low wages and shortages of basic items like medicine and milk. Venezuela is currently an autocracy led by President Nicolas Maduro, but Núñez’s concerns began in 1998 when Hugo Chávez was elected president.

While she could navigate the economic situation in Venezuela, Núñez did not feel secure in her home. Her house where she lived with family was robbed, and her grandmother could not receive the medicine she needed for her high blood pressure.

Before, Núñez felt safe, secure and happy in her home country. She had access to all necessary goods and medicine and didn't worry about her family's safety. She struggled to adjust to the changes happening in her country.

"If I can't feel safe in my house, then where do I go?" Núñez said.



Cristina Núñez looks at the beginning of a new canvas March 24 at her home studio in Columbia. Lately, Núñez paints on canvases stapled to the ground because the paint she uses is too thin to paint on the wall. Núñez commented that the only problem with these paintings is the pain she gets in her knees.

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Seoul, South Korea



Cristina Núñez has acrylic paints laid out on a table March 24 at her home studio in Columbia. Núñez has lived in Columbia for the past three years with her mother and siblings, but her father still lives in Venezuela.

EILEEN WISNIOWICZ/MISSOURIAN

She planned on returning home after the program and hoped that Venezuela's economic and political situation would improve.

After three years, she said the situation had become worse.

Columbia, Missouri

Núñez decided to move to Columbia in 2018 after she finished her master's degree. Her brother was finishing his Ph.D. at MU, and her mother moved to Columbia to be with him. Her sister and her family also relocated to Columbia after living in California.

While they all left Venezuela at different times and for different reasons, most of Núñez's immediate family now call Columbia their home.

Núñez decided to leave Venezuela in 2015 after receiving a scholarship to study abroad for three years and receive a master's degree in painting and fine arts at Kookmin University in Seoul, South Korea.

She originally wanted to participate in a residency program in Beijing, but a spontaneous trip to Seoul to visit a friend working at the Venezuelan Embassy changed her mind.

"I had no picture of Korea or what it would be," Núñez said. "The first day, I fell in love with Korea."

Núñez said South Korea's culture was very different from Venezuela's, but that she learned to adjust to new customs about age differences and personal space.

"Everybody is very kind in every place, but in Venezuela, people touch a lot and kiss and hug," Núñez said. "In Korea ... people are very protective about their space."

While studying in Seoul, Núñez discovered many art materials that weren't available to her in Venezuela such as rice paper and a variety of calligraphy brushes. She started to experiment by making art with different types of plastic and mesh.

"I like the transparency that I can do with the layers of plastic and the different colors," Núñez said.

While the breadth of materials inspired her later work, she found herself returning to oil painting, her primary medium, whenever she started to miss Venezuela.

"It's like a miracle. We are all here," Chavez said. "In our culture, we're very family-oriented ... children don't go to college away from home ... even grandparents, they don't go to these senior living facilities. They stay home with their children until the end."

In Columbia, Núñez has continued to do what she does in every place she's lived — paint.

Núñez has had many opportunities to share her art with the Columbia community from painting murals to exhibitions at the Columbia Art League . Her painting collection entitled "Nuances" was displayed there in January.

While Núñez enjoys working with a wide variety of art materials. She said moving multiple times has challenged her to simplify her artwork.

"Moving from one place to another makes everything else more simple," Núñez said. "For me, it's very difficult because I like to use different materials. I collect and collect and collect, but traveling and moving to Korea and then here — I had to simplify."

There were painting tools she couldn't travel with by airplane, as well as other artistic materials she could only acquire in South Korea. Moving to Columbia encouraged her to go back to basics.

Her "Nuances" collection is a demonstration of the simplicity of layered colors and abstract shapes, inspired by the art she created in Seoul by layering plastic. The viewer can see all of the individual colors and how they look when layered together.



Cristina Núñez paints one of her larger canvases for her “Nuances” collection March 24 at her home studio in Columbia. For Núñez, moving from country to country inspires her work. She likes to utilize materials available in the country she resides in, along with simple tools that are easier to pack.

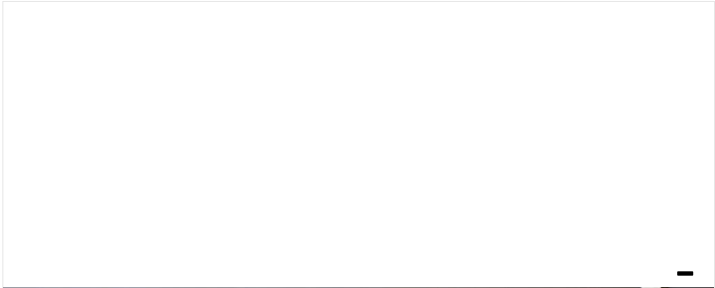
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A mirror reflects some of Cristina Núñez's artwork on the walls of her basement studio Thursday, March 24, at her home studio in Columbia. Núñez has been working on an abstract collection called “Nuances,” which layers colors and shapes. She said that the style is “completely different from anything that I did before.”

EILEEN WISNIOWICZ/MISSOURIAN

MORE INFORMATION



Stories of people's journeys to mid-Missouri through immigration

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