

Work Samples: Amairani Ceballos

Excerpt from "Jaguarlandia"

"I always thought that one's personal psychology, embodied in one's face, was the most interesting subject."--- Chuck Close

Mr. Jaguar: How to find Jaguarlandia

The scent of salmon burgers and beer on a Friday afternoon was Ramon's definition of a "chill" Friday. Sitting on a stool close to the bar, he blew a Toscano cigar, waving off the gray smoke behind him.

His best friend, Miguel, was on a business trip, so Miguel's sons took it upon themselves to host Cigar Friday. This tradition had begun shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic.

If there was a sporting game on a Friday, everyone knew what that meant.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers played in the background, much like the mellow playlist Ramon had made on Spotify. The bar sat at the back of the Sandoval home. Beer labels from all the breweries Miguel had visited over the years were sealed onto the table under a clear coat---permanent decorations, though many still tried to use them as coasters. With a minty breeze and greenery in the backyard, the Sandoval puppy found comfort lying on the couch and in its mother's lap.

One of Miguel's sons once prompted Ramon to share his thoughts through a presentation at a junior high school.

"I think I did well," Ramon said.

The Sandoval boys curiously pressed him: "What did you talk about?"

As the laughter settled, Ramon remembered the day, recalling the career fair he attended.

It had been career fair day for the middle school students in Bell, CA.

One guest missed the entrance at first. After peeking inside, she looked confused. Each cautious step she took was as hesitant as coaxing a child with candy. The kids were playing a game of red light, green light. As soon as she walked through the entrance, the students erupted in synchronized applause, flustering her.

"How have you been?" Another woman greeted Ramon with a sincere, friendly smile as she sat nearby. She was a senior tour consultant, surrounded by other guests---a math professor, a sheriff, the City of Bell Mayor, and even an actress.

The senior tour consultant radiated enthusiasm in the social setting, her positive and endearing attitude standing out among the rest who had shown up for career day.

Ramon took advantage of the brunch: fruit salad, donuts, and coffee. He was easy to spot with his long, wavy black hair and brown skin. At least four sets of eyes focused on him as he gave a synopsis of his life. With every casual question thrown his way, he was far from shy.

"The first five years were hard!" he said, letting breadcrumbs drop onto his paper plate after rubbing his fingers together, then taking a sip of coffee.

Ramon was livelier than most people his age---more animated even than the thirty-year-olds. His perspective on life was free-flowing and refreshing.

"Oh yeah!" he exclaimed, recalling how he found a newfound sense of authenticity after his divorce. He knew himself better, as if he had shed layers to embrace his drive and passion for art.

His eyes turned toward the well-crafted introduction by the organizer, and he said to his right, "This is about my fifth year attending this career fair."

A young junior high student wore her naturally long brown hair. Her black and white Vans complemented her casual black dress and cardigan adorned with festive ornaments. She gripped the microphone, eyes locked on her phone screen.

"I was shy... and after joining dance, it made me gain confidence... I want to graduate from college and become a criminal analyst for the FBI." Applause followed.

The counselor came by with a broad, genuine smile and handed the microphone to the Latin ballroom teacher, who thanked everyone for their time and effort.

The kids then performed a Latin ballroom dance recital they had learned in class. After the recital, Ramon made his way to his assigned classroom, feeling the bright energy of the morning

In counts of twos, like the recital, Ramon's feet carried him to his assigned classroom. His free-spirited aura was immediately noticed in the room, next to a red-shirted McDonald's owner and operator.

"Welcome, Ramon and Patrick!" the teacher called, snapping her black-burgundy stiletto nails at a pair of chatty boys. The look she gave them was that of a mother testing her patience.

With gestures and a casual attitude, Ramon adopted a Jack Sparrow demeanor, mimicking the pirate's hand gestures. "Hey guys, what's up... today I'm going to talk about my favorite subject---myself."

He knew what he wanted to say as if it were written on the back of his hand, though this time he was in a time crunch. The class was half the size it could have been, with half the attention span of an unbothered cat. Most questions came from papers in front of them, each space on the assignment marked with eraser bits and doodles.... "You're at that age where you might need to start thinking about what you want to do in the future," he said, making eye contact and pacing the room, making them work a little harder to follow him.

"I'm pretty sure your teacher wakes up and thinks to herself---why the fuck am I here?"

The teacher reacted like a schoolgirl who had never heard a professional curse in class. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she covered her mouth, hesitant to let out a giggle.

A student raised their hand to ask a question.

"Someone already asked that," Ramon replied matter-of-factly, then emphasized his answer.

"Reading is the best thing you can do for yourself! It gives you knowledge. Whether it's Chavo del Ocho or a history book, it doesn't matter." Some kids began to warm up.

"If you want money, don't be an artist---be a lawyer," he said, gesturing at a kid with lion-like long hair.

"Who knows, maybe you'll want to have long hair like this guy when you grow up." The kid shook his head in disbelief.

Excerpt from "Sincerely Santa Ana"

A 1979 Cadillac Fleetwood Brougham cruises at low speed in the nostalgic movie-like essence in the dark late evening in East Los Angeles. The car's body is boxy and lengthy, it looks like it belongs to a driver with a sense of self-assurance. The presence of a lowrider doesn't just slow down traffic, it also turns heads. It's powerful in its presence. Under the warm night street lights on Whittier Boulevard, the car glows with its beige tone and an understated gentle light yellow-green-green tint. It is sleek and captivating, with a timeless body that gives you a spark of curiosity. The hydraulics steady the vintage vehicle onto three paws, leaving the front left wheel in the air as it cruises slowly. On the driver's side, you can catch a glimpse of black hair tied into a short ponytail. Not a single hair below the shoulder. The sounds of cop sirens go off somewhere in the background as the driver checks their rearview mirror. A few motorcycles pass by, and folks on the sidewalks enjoy the sporadic parade of lowriders on the street. One in particular stands on the back of a Chevy Silverado to record on his phone. The cruising keeps going with the steady eye of some cops monitoring the event. The same 1979 Cadillac makes its way in front of your view again. Only this time, the car passes by on the right-hand side near where you stand on the sidewalk. The car's front lowers as it cruises; in gentle movement, it bobs

up and down as if it had a mind of its own, enjoying music. As it speeds up a little faster, the front wheels turn into hands, and the once-shy bobbing movements grow stronger, higher, and louder. Its nose lifts high into the air and slams down, leaving what feels like a centimeter from the ground, to avoid hitting the blacktop pavement.

This lowrider assembly occurred towards the end of 2023, in the city of Whittier, California. Soon after this event was documented online, in October, Governor Newsom signed Assembly Bill 436 allowing cruising to be legal in California. The Golden State has a rich history of lowrider culture, and it happened to be that legal systems were historically and systematically put in place to prevent cruising. It has been about 36 years since 1989 when anti-cruise ordinances were enacted. It allowed local governments to prohibit cruising as the practice of lowriding carried a reputation of being a gangster activity.

Santa Ana is a city that keeps you thinking. Like anything, there's a certain charm about something bad, like the quote "bad boy," except the city can be personified as a woman. Her first name in Spanish has a feminine connotation of holiness. She's the kind of person you find yourself curious about. You observe and soak up its quirks and why they have come to be. Santa Ana's population is about 300,000, the majority being Hispanics. When you walk down E First Street, you see the signs of a South California city. It has a vast amount of cars spreading around its city. One after the other into lines headed towards the light afternoon sun by heading straight down to the West of E First Street and the same amount of vehicles going East. As you walk, you can notice the subtle signs of gentrification in its downtown, old decrepit buildings in their grey element. Walking under the highway bridge on E First Street heading towards Standard Avenue, windows are old school--they are the tinted kind that push manually outwards. Down the street, you see many auto-themed local businesses.

Arriving to meet Tito Cano, a Santa Ana-raised Lowrider himself and organizer for lowrider cruising events that worked to preserve lowrider culture called "No Man's Land," at Joe's Local Garage and Moe, included in its surroundings were easy to spot sights like *Pep Boys*, a local carwash, and a shop that sells and buys used cars----all under 10,000 dollars.

"Hello, is there anyone named Tito?" An easy-going white man, with a long beard, pauses from glancing at his phone leaning on the table, and gets off the tall chair to look for Tito. Another Hispanic man with a navy t-shirt comes over and like a bouncer or airport attendant, unlatches the red belt stanchion. He was Tito Cano. The Lowrider Magazine follows him alongside at least 30,000 other Instagram accounts. He extended his hand for a handshake. It was as firm and peaceful as him.

"Let me give you a tour." Tito showed the items in the shop they used. There were brand new shiny car wheels----many of them piled against the wall. It was an auto shop-coded storage room for items customers requested for their cars. It also had a simultaneous restroom and locker room. Tito gestured to follow, outside of the garage room was the opened garage that let a

vintage Cadillac breathe from its delicate and meticulous paint job. Passing the first long-bearded man at the high-seated table was the backyard of the mechanical shop. It had colorful graffiti art on the concrete wall surrounding the small perimeter that was enough to fit a dozen cars carefully and compactly parked. By the look of it, it was a normal day for Tito and his coworkers, one coworker washed a golden-themed Cadillac with a sud soap-filled sponge on hand----not surprised by Tito's interview.... "Well, it all starts, I guess, like with every kid's passion. You know, it all starts from being a kid with toys, and in this case, well, not your regular average toys, but like cars, model cars. From there, of course, you upgrade to cars---- no?"

The coworker proceeded to hose down the automobile.

"There's body work involved. There's paint involved. You know, fabrication, cutting, welding, grinding--- everything." Tito was the kind of kid who grew up in Santa Ana looking for extra duties to earn some cash for his hobbies. He and his friends used to ride their bikes to downtown Santa Ana on the weekends asking people if they needed some extra help. Depending on the hours, they were lucky enough to earn anywhere from thirty to sixty dollars for a half-day shift on average. For kids who didn't grow up privileged, back in the old days it was a way to fund this way of life to build their projects aside from the tiny allowance parents would give to their kids. It was also part of the Hispanic culture, as soon as a kid were able to work using their intelligence or hands they were encouraged to work for their recreational or personal spending pursuits outside of school. Aside from earning money, they were able to trade to accumulate pieces individuals wanted. "So we would trade. It was no different, trading a set of handlebars or pedals for a seat... You know, if my buddy comes and says, 'You know what, my car is like this, like that, but I'm missing this.' Oh, you know what? I got it over here, pick it up."

Instead of a bright spark in the eye, more so he had a heartwarming energy emitting through each concrete detail he spoke about. You could tell why he was a leader in the low-rider community. "You grow up, you know, watching it on TV, or a family member, or you went to the store and you saw it in the street, and it just catches your eye."