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Works from *American Dream Blues*: “Cesar” & “Rigoberto”

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My work explores the human condition at the intersection of issues such as immigration and labor, where race, class, ethnicity, and culture contribute to the complex portrayal of human experience today. As an artist I am particularly interested in the inadequacy of words to explore experiences of war and immigration. I am convinced that art can further allow us to explore aspects of the human dimension of these experiences.

California State University, Northridge is the only campus in the United States with a degree-granting Central American Studies Program. In addition, there is a Central American United Student Association (CAUSA), which is very active. As a result, the Central American student and faculty population at CSUN has greater visibility than in other universities. In contrast, California State University, Northridge has close to twenty employees of Central American

origin working as part of its Physical Plant Management (PPM) team in charge of the grounds. They move across campus wearing their blue shirt uniform and are greatly invisible. But it is they who have an immigration story that is most similar to mine.

My students and I share our commitment to Central American Studies, although our life stories are quite different. My students, for the most part, grew up in the United States. Some of them were even born in this country. Many of them come from immigrant families, and many of my students want to understand the issues that impacted their parents' lives. They have a continued desire to learn about Central American history and culture; they want to know about their background. This desire is what encourages them to excel in their studies. But several of the PPM workers came as adults, as was my case. Through immigration they experienced the loss of their homes, friends, part of their families, way of life, among others, but they were also able to find ways to succeed in their new environment. Talking to them feels like home. This collection of portraits, *American Dream Blues*, is an homage to them.

The American Dream Blues is a series of oil pastel portrait paintings. Each of the pieces in the series is a 20" x 24" portrait of a Physical Plan Management (PPM) worker at CSUN who is also a Central American immigrant. While these workers are largely invisible as they move around the CSUN campus wearing their blue shirts as a uniform, the portraits seek to provide visibility to each of them. Their individual characteristics, personalities, and even their way of wearing the blue shirt give each of the workers an individual identity and invite the viewer to contemplate their humanity beyond the blue shirt.

One of the significant aspects of this series of portraits is that they elicit different reactions from the viewers depending on their own status in society and their own experiences with immigration, labor, class, and education. For

some, this is an undesirable service job. For others, this stable job with benefits is the fulfillment of the American dream.

Furthermore, the series makes a commentary on portrait paintings as a form of artistic production that historically has been linked to commissions ordered by wealthy patrons. In contrast, in this case it is the artist who has selected the models. Ironically, these models have come to share the ownership of this project, often demanding to see the progress of the pieces, sharing with me their judgment of the work, and criticizing and/or celebrating the final work. As a result, these working class subjects problematize the production of artistic portraits in a process that gives visibility to issues of class, race, immigration, labor, and the intersection of each of these with the realm of fine arts.