# *Can't Stop Her from Dancing*

## A SENIOR PHOTOGRAPHY THESIS

By: Angela Medel

ARTIST STATEMENT

# *Can't Stop Her from Dancing*

"Am I Latina enough for the world?"- This is a question that has lingered in my mind throughout my entire life. As a Hispanic woman growing up in the U.S., I have noticed from a very early age that people often have these idealized perceptions of Latinas. We are more than just the simple "sexy, exotic, and vivacious" character. Many women are defying these stigmas and I've been lucky enough to be surrounded by some of them.

Their strength, beauty and confidence are just some the traits that drove me to pursue this project. Their fearless and unapologetic attitude inspires me every day.

We are intelligent, we are brave, we are independent, we are confident, we are unstoppable.


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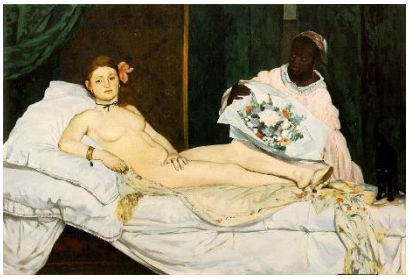
*Maria*, a name that has been passed down to many of the women in my life for years and years, from generation to generation. My great-grandmother, then my Grandma, then my Mother, all three of them named Maria. My sister Justina's middle name is also Maria. You can google the name *Maria* and millions of meanings, origins etc. will pop up but every culture has its own associations. It's a name that remains important to me because of the women around me who have transformed the word from a name to an adjective that best describes strength, beauty and confidence. This project, *Can't Stop Her from Dancing* is a look into the inspiring women in life, my perspective on how I see them and how they look at themselves.

I am of Chilean and Puerto Rican descent. The root of the project began with my frustration with stereotypes & objectification of Latina women who are over sexualized in media. The "male gaze" has long depicted women and especially women of color, in the world of art, literature, etc. as objects for male pleasure. We have characters like Sofia Vegara's character in Modern Family (who is funny and entertaining) but often times becomes the "ideal" Latina and people come to the conclusion that ALL Latinas look/act in the same way Sofia does on the show.

In early European art, women were often painted nude, often looking away from the viewer implying their passivity. Many of these women in these paintings were depicted with



mirrors to imply vanity or beauty. One painting that embodies those ideals include Manet's controversial "Olympia", where Manet paints the portrait of a women (supposedly a prostitute)

lays on her side nude gazing longingly at the viewer. This history raises the question how female bodies have been represented and how we can take back control over our bodies when we have been objectified and sexualized for hundreds of years? Is it possible to represent women and women's bodies without exploitation?

Many artists have been tackling this subject matter such as photographer Laura Aguilar. Laura Aguilar is a Mexican-American photographer who had been photographing Latina/Latinx female nude bodies and the female form in a much different way. A lot of the women in her photographs are a little heavier than the perceived "perfect" body as seen through the male gaze. In Aguilar's photographs, the subjects pose nude outdoors in unusual ways such as leaning forwards or backwards, sitting down in a typically "unflattering way", or laying on their sides (like many of the women in European paintings did). These women's forms become a part of the land and the landscape. A connection between body and landscape emerges in Aguilar's work while a realization of disconnect between myself and the community of Latinos I belong to emerges as well.

Throughout my entire life as soon as people find out my mother is Puerto Rican and my father is from Chile they would say things like “You don’t look Latina”, “You don’t sound Latina” or “Can you even speak Spanish”? “What YOU think a Latina is supposed to be like?”-is what I want to say to everyone when being asked these questions but don’t. Though these questions I get asked are insignificant compared to the discrimination that Latinos and Immigrants experience in this country every day. Hearing all those comments made me start to become self-conscious at a very early age I often asked “Am I Latina enough for the world? It’s still something that I think about.

I am not the only Latina who has dealt with questions like these that re-establish the cinematic stereotypes of Latinas as tan skinned, sexy, exotic, loud-mouthed women because of how they’ve been depicted in movies, television shows, etc. An article that I read by Melissa Lozada-Oliva for ***The Guardian*** called *A light-skinned Latina like me will never be able to live in the land of whiteness* talks about the author’s experience of being a light skinned Latina, existing in world where as she describes “all at once I am either just dark enough, too dark or not dark enough at all”. Oliva goes on to say that being a light skinned Latina to her means that “I’m the color white people want to be but white people don’t actually want to be me”. The rest of the article goes into many encounters Oliva had with classmates/ other people referring to her as having the “perfect color” and telling her that she was the “good” kind of Latino-that she didn’t “look like one of those sketchy Dominican girls” or those “Indian looking El Salvadorians with the wide noses” etc.

> ***“I explain my race and break it down into little bite-sized pieces for white people, the same way I give directions to tourists to the train. I dissect it, minimize it, make an easy to digest travel brochure for my***

***identity. These consistent explanations, this never ending need to prove myself only reinforces the racism that constructs the idea of the idea of "a perfect color" –Melissa Lozada-Oliva***

I know and other Latinos know, how diverse the community is and that we are more than just these stereotypes being projected at us, so the way that I approached photographing for *Can't Stop Her From Dancing* was to photograph the strong, confident Latina's in my life in contradiction to the history of objectified and racialized representation of Latina women. Traditional portraiture was the strongest way I could think of to capture these amazing women. I chose to mostly photograph them in domestic settings (bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, etc.) places where the subject felt the most comfortable. I love and admire all these women so much that I wanted to make sure they were in settings that made them feel most themselves, surrounding by people and things that they love.

Deana Lawson's work on Black Intimacy was especially inspiring into how I wanted to photograph these women and how I was already starting to photograph. Lawson's staged portraits of black men and women are mostly interior settings are posed like traditional family photos such as photos next to a Christmas tree, weekend hangouts, or leaving for church type of images. However, Lawson's photographs also often acknowledge and challenge the way the viewer looks at these images. Lawson does that by posing some of her subject's nude in these interior settings and pays attention to every detail of the shot including color of the walls to the clothes people are wearing, etc. I wanted to make these types of images but after months and months of photographing I started to notice something in the way that

the younger women acted in front of the camera that was distinct from how the older women acted on camera.

The older women are much more self-assured then the younger women seem to be more interested in making sure they look perfect. From subtle clues in the photographs such as body language, facial expressions, etc. I saw a much different type of strength in the older women then the younger women. This isn't to say that the younger women are not strong, but with the age and experience of my subjects comes a confidence in their strength when you're young there is still that path of trying to figure who you are and where you're going. Seeing this in my photographs made me start to become interested in the concept of time both going back in time and moving in forward in time.

I looked at Karen Miranda's *Other Stories: Historias Bravas* series, where she recreated significant events from her youth that she didn't document when they were happening. This series dives into the relationship of memory to photography and the act of preserving these moments you want to remember. Miranda's series made me interested in looking back at old photos of my family, family events, vacations, etc.

Mom always trying to keep me closer, since 1983

I spent weeks researching and archiving through boxes of photographs starting from the 1970's-early 2000's and found amazing images. Looking back at photos of my mother, grandma, aunt and other women in my family, it almost felt like these were characters and not the women I know now. It was strange to me but even stranger to my mother who looked so shocked and surprised to see herself from 40 years ago. We all react strangely to seeing younger ourselves because it feels like that's another person in those images and not you.

The last 8 months that I spent working on this project has taught me the path it takes to get from one big idea to a much more specific and cohesive idea. Starting with several different ideas in mind, I began photographing and what become of my original turned into something much more personal, an ode to the strongest women in my life. I wanted to make sure that I photographed them in a way that did them justice so I captured them in places that made them feel the most comfortable and the most freeing where they truly feel themselves.

# Annotated Bibliography

1. Katy Grannan, *Model American* (New York, Aperture Foundation, Inc.)

   This resource is helpful because the relationship between the subject and the artist is something I've been exploring in my own work. My senior project is about the women in my life who inspire me and how I look at them or how they look at themselves is constantly being brought up as I make these images. The way that Grannan is photographing (centering the subject, having them look into the camera, photographing in domestic/surrounding environments) is how I've been choosing to photograph my subjects. It serves as inspiration for my own practice.

2. Susan Kismaric, *Manuel Alverez Bravo* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1997)

   This resource helps serve as inspiration on the variety of ways that one can photograph culture. Bravo has made more surrealist like images, portraiture, landscape, documentary style, etc. but they all depict aspects of Mexican culture. His work made me realize that you can photograph culture in lots of different/experimental ways.

   Since I am photographing Latina women in my life, it's important for me to incorporate culture in some form or another and Bravo's images have been extremely helpful with that. You can photograph ones culture in subtle and indirect ways. It fits in with other resources because it delves into Latino cultural aspects that some of the other artists I've been looking into haven't.

3. Melissa Lozada-Oliva, "A light-skinned Latina like me will never be able to live in the land of whiteness" *The Guardian*, August 8, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/08/light-skinned-latina-never-live-in-land-of-whiteness

   The root of my senior project started off with my frustrations about how I felt like I am not quote on quote "Latina enough" for the world due to all the stereotypes getting projected onto me my entire life. This article (which is one of many) on Latina identity helps further prove how people view Latinas/Latino in a certain way when there is so much diversity and complexity in the community.

   This source helps expand my bibliography because it gives insight into a person's personal experience and it's not just someone's images I'm looking at. It makes me want to further explore Latino identity for future projects.

4. "*Other Stories/ Historia Bravas*" Karen Miranda, accessed November 06,2018. http://karenmiranda.com/project/in-the-mouth-of-the-mountain-jaguar

This resource has made me think about time and how age effects the way we see the world and ourselves. I've photographed women of all ages and it's been a beautiful thing to see

in the images how age/experience can change the way we see ourselves which comes through in the images. The older women have confidence and self-assurance, the teens/young adults are much more concerned with wanting to look pretty (which older women are concerned with too) but it's much more apparent in the images of the younger women and the children are carefree and just want to have fun in front of the camera.

This source helps in expanding my bibliography because helps introduce a new topic of memory in photography. I've been scanning and skimming through old photographs of my mother, aunts, grandmothers, etc. and it's made me think a lot about time as a concept. Why do we choose to photograph the things we do and the answer you're probably going to get is "because I want to remember it?" Our actual memories become as useless as not having any documentation of that memory because with time our memories begin to change. We forget little details but few things stay constant.

5. "*New Photography: Deana Lawson",* MOMA.org. 2011, https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/newphotography/deana-lawson/

   This source helps in expanding my thesis because it provides a platform for much of Deana Lawson's work. Lawson's work has been extremely influential and helpful with how I chose to photograph my subjects because of HOW Lawson photographs HER subjects. Lawson photographs in the style of traditional family portraits but challenges the viewers by paying attention to all the details of the frame like the color of furniture, walls, what the subjects are wearing, etc.

6. Duron, Maximiliano "*Laura Aguilar, Compassionate Photographer of Marginalized Groups"* artnews.com, April 25, 2018. http://www.artnews.com/2018/04/25/laura-aguilar-compassionate-photographer-marginalized-groups-dies-58/

   This resource gives insight into Aguilar's work on Latina bodies. She photographed heavier set women then had them pose in unusual ways which created a relationship between their nude bodies and the surrounding landscapes. Aguilar's work has inspired future projects for me and the way I view/photograph the female the form.