

PRESS: [Rizzhel Javier - Artist, Educator](#)

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By Jella Roson

in the heart stories



Rizzhel Javier - Artist, Educator

Rizzhel Javier is an artist and educator based in Mira Mesa, CA. Her work as an educator is to help others find their voice, talk about the intricacies of their identity and what makes them who they are. Art is used to discuss what is important and to liberate.

Below is her work, bio, and very in depth interview. It's an important read about finding identity and growth in the work you do.

Bio

Rizzhel Javier (San Diego, 1983) is an artist and educator that examines identity, culture and memory. Trained in darkroom photography, in the last ten years her work has become interdisciplinary, combining images with sculpture, installation, digital media and social art practice. She works autobiographically, using art, to explore personal, community and global connection. Her pieces are playful and often require the viewer to engage physically with the work. Rizzhel brings participatory learning experiences into the community, through her project BRIDGE, to advocate for self-expression, equity and social change. Her recent projects activate community dialogue on migration, travel and the concept of home.

Rizzhel is currently living and working out of her childhood home in the San Diego suburb of Mira Mesa, known for its Filipino community and businesses. She is one of two daughters born from immigrant parents from Cavite, Philippines. Like many Filipino families in San Diego, her family ended up in Mira Mesa because her father served in the Navy. She was the first in her family to receive a MFA degree and pursue a career in the arts. In 2007 Rizzhel graduated with a BA in Studio Arts from Humboldt State University and, in 2012, an MFA in Studio Arts from San Diego State University. She is currently a lecturer for Video Production at California State University San Marcos and Darkroom Photography at San Diego City College.

How did your interest in art begin?

My interest in the arts started young, I can recall a project that I made in fourth grade, it said “I want to be an artist and a doctor”. Still to this day, as a FilAm first generation child, I battle with my choice to live and work professionally as an artist. While I didn’t know what being an artist would entail back then, I did know that being a doctor is something my parents would have loved. From the beginning, what I did understand, was that I would always have a career that my parents didn’t want or wouldn’t understand.

My family doesn’t talk much, so art was always my outlet, from elementary to high school I learned to use art class to communicate ideas and express myself. I honestly do not know what would have become of me if I didn’t find art. I was lucky to have such supportive instructors to encourage me to pursue arts professionally. I knew something was there, but I always had one foot out the door, I couldn’t get myself to commit because I was scared. I constantly asked myself: *Do you believe in yourself enough to do this?* Being one of the first in my family to go to college, I had no models to look up to, and with very few students of color at my college, I dealt with these feelings alone.

As a student in 2002, my friend and instructor Don Gregorio Anton asked me to do this: Find a book with a Filipino artist and bring it back to him. So I searched and searched, and ended up finding one person online, a painter named Manuel Ocampo. I wasn’t a painter myself, but finding him gave me hope, the reality that someone like me could make their mark in the art world. When I returned to the school ten years later to give a

lecture, I had a Filipino student come up to me and say, “I never thought I could do this, but meeting you made it feel more possible.” That was when I knew I was finally doing the right thing, and since then I have really shaped myself to be the person I needed growing up.

My teaching practice is deeply rooted in the inclusivity of all people. I notice the students that slip through the cracks because I was one of them. Teaching is my chance to define my own understanding of education. I grew up never feeling like the daughter my parents wanted to me to be, for years I let that define me, and as an adult I am still learning about my identity. My goal in teaching and creating art is to help others feel comfortable in their own skin and to find a safe space to talk about all the intricacies that make us who we are.

What are you most passionate about?

My passion is helping people find their voice. I grew up in a very submissive family, talking about feelings was not so much taboo, but my parents did not really understand the concept about talking about emotions. We talked about work, money and the things we needed to do to get through the day. As a child, and still as an adult, I have trouble expressing myself, finding the words and the guts to express my feelings. Art liberated me and it gave me a voice that I never knew I had. To cut a long story short, when you find something that makes you happy, you want to do what you can to help others feel that happiness too. For me, that comes in the form of teaching.

Being a teacher is a confusing profession because we are often labeled by the trades we are hired to teach. For example, I am primarily hired as a Photography or Media Instructor, whose job revolves around camera operation, computer editing software and presenting viable careers to my students interested in media technology. While this is important, and essential to the development of a career, this is not to be mistaken by my real purpose in the classroom. For me, it's more about giving students the techniques and skills to communicate their thoughts and ideas. I teach media technology because it is accessible, user friendly, has the ability to reach the masses and has the ability to spark conversations about topics that would never typically arise in a classroom.

I am currently a Media Arts Instructor at [Pacific Arts Movement](#) for their youth documentary program [Reel Voices](#). In this program, I work with high schools students to produce documentaries about identity and culture with stories relevant to San Diego. In the three years I have taught the program, I felt the strong impact of their films on the community, and feel my own personal connections to their projects. In 2016 my student Winter Smiley produced a film called [Motherlands](#), a film that follows the stories of seven Filipina women as their tales interweave across generations, borders, and bloodlines. I still cry every time I watch it because it brings back the feeling of representation that I needed growing up.

This year the San Diego Asian Film Festival premiered [Dependent](#), by student Drake Presto, who interviews five Filipino American daughters growing up in Military families. In their interviews they discuss the struggles and expectations they have as daughters, how they communicate with their Dads and what they have learned from their experience. In 2016 when I first started teaching the program, I knew I found the right places to teach. This story, and all the stories produced from the program hold a special place in my heart, because they are discussing many of the timeless challenges that teenagers face. It is a healing process to help bring these films to life as I wish I had this same mentorship growing up.

What has been instrumental in your personal and creative growth?

Failure. I spent most of my young adulthood scared to make any choice by myself because I grew up in a patriarchy. I tried to live my life through the eyes of my parents, I wanted to be what they wanted me to be, and for most of my formative years I understood myself as constant disappointment. Nothing I did was good enough. That no matter how good my grades were, no matter how many clubs I joined, or how many activities I did, nothing would ever measure up to their idea of who I should be. Growing up was confusing because the idea of "success" was so different between school and home.

I was educated largely by the male eurocentric perspective, I didn't understand the world through my eyes, through the experience of being a first generation FilAm raised by immigrant parents. They didn't teach or talk about any of that in school. I became familiar with the feeling of failure very young, because I never seemed to meet the expectations of the adults around me. My Dad made everything seem so black and white, and for most people in the art world, we live and feel comfortable in the grey areas. When I left home to go to college, it was the first time I gave myself the permission to think independently, and I really embraced it. I knew that I had to put myself in a situation where I could fall and pick myself back up without the help and guidance of others.

I still keep all my rejection letters in a binder. I show them to my students when they confide in me because something they wanted didn't go as planned. I remind them to take their feelings of failure and turn them into opportunities, signs that are telling to you to keep your eyes open for something bigger and better to come along. I try to get them to break the mold of expectations and to shape their own vision of success or failure. To surround themselves with the people, places and things that inspire them--that they are their own true limitation. Take the time to listen to your heart and what it needs--for me that was the Philippines.

"You're chasing a history that doesn't belong to you." When I turned thirty years old, I told my parents that I planned to go to the Philippines for the first time. They were mad and gave me lots of reasons to stay home in San Diego. I cried and cried trying to understand why it was so problematic. If my 88 year old Lola could live there? Why couldn't I visit? Why weren't they proud that I wanted to learn about my heritage? I was mad about what he said because I didn't want it to be true. In that moment, so many memories flooded my mind, with questions that I asked myself growing up: Am I American? Am I Filipino? Where do I belong if I feel in between? In high school, people used to tell me that I was the whitest Filipino they know. As an adult I still grapple with how that affected me.

Going to the Philippines gave me the comfort and permission to talk about my story out loud. Since 2013, I've been back to the Philippines every year since, this travel back and forth taught me everything that I missed in school. It's helped open up the conversation about family and to understand why we are the way we are. Much of my teenage anger transformed to empathy for my parents, my teenage self and to other FilAm youth dealing with similar challenges. When I realized how I felt whole and complete, I wanted to use teaching as my opportunity to help others bridge that gap.

How important has diversity, inclusivity, and representation been to your work? And how has it been received by museum, panel, workshop audience?

Diversity, inclusivity and representation is the heart of my work. The whole time I went to school I was often the only person of color in the room. I never really had peers or mentors that openly address topics about race, ethnicity and family origin. In a recent installation project The Palengke I create plush toys that resemble the different seafood sold at the the wet market in my Grandmothers hometown. The Binakayan Market, called

palengke in Tagalog, is a common market that residents of the Philippines go to for their produce and seafood. Visitors of my installation purchase daily goods with soft sculptures of Bangus (milkfish), the Philippines national fish, Tahong (mussels) a staple in Sineguelasan.

This collection of work encourages the Filipino community to revisit their own memories of the Philippines, childhood and family origin. My artwork is about holding on to the memory and history that shapes my Filipino identity. When I visit my Grandmother, in Bacoor, Cavite, we purchase daily goods and visit the wet market to buy seafood. This is a memory that I dream of often as a resident of San Diego. The reproduction of these goods, for a moment, take me back to a time and place where I wish I could be. These soft sculptures comfort and console my longing for the Philippines and the distance that we face everyday. My goal with this project is to encourage the Filipino community to revisit their own memories of the Philippines, childhood and family origin.

My work has been received very differently depending on the space and community I am serving. I have lectured at museums and schools, but the space I have felt the most impact is directly with the community. In October, for FilAm History Month, I took The Balikbayan Project to the FilAm Fest in San Diego, CA. I was happy to see the project impact participants of all ages. As an instructor, I felt liberated not to talk about technique, but to jump right into the content and root of what my visitors needed: Community. I realized quickly through this experience that all of us have a story that we need to share but sometimes people need the time, space and encouragement to allow themselves to do it.

Please describe Balikbayan and the message behind it?

The tradition of packing gifts for loved ones overseas is practiced by the Filipino community with the balikbayan box. Named after the Tagalog words for “returning Filipino” this container serves as a means to transport goods from the United States to the Philippines. This symbol of the Filipino diaspora is studied through interviews collected from the San Diego community and beyond. Participants are asked to share stories about the items in these boxes, the people they send them to and the important role this process plays in their life. This project makes visible the struggle and love of separated families, the want to provide and the need for consolement.

My first intention with this project was to produce a documentary, but when I realized that people across all ages wanted to participate, I created projects to engage the public. I created an activity with prompts to promote discussion about their experience with balikbayan boxes. Questions like: What would be the contents of your balikbayan box? Where will your box be sent? This project is important for our community to discuss intergenerational relationships, cross cultural relationships, learn how we deal with distance, how to console each other and deal with feelings like happiness, loneliness, sadness and guilt.

What brought you to teaching and community work?

I knew I wanted to be a teacher because of all the bad teachers I had in school. I hated school growing up and I spent most of my time trying to figure out how to escape. When I got to college, and I realized that I could have more control over my education, it impacted my understanding of what role teaching played in education. I took all my bad experiences in school and vowed not to repeat those with my own students, I wanted to be the teacher that I never had and always needed.

I started doing community work in graduate school when I received a couple of scholarships to do workshops with the community. My personal work was all about photographic technique back then, so I taught workshops in alternative photographic processes. As a group, my studiomates and I would take trips to the desert, which was so interesting to me, being the only student in the group that was born and raised in San Diego. I continued the tradition after school by developing my first core public engagement project called Traveling Tintypes.

The Traveling Tintypes was developed to explore the diverse landscape of California with a photographic process called tintype. In this camping excursion, participants would produce a one-of-a-kind print in a contemporary mobile darkroom. The process was borrowed from the photographers from the mid-1800s civil war era. We traveled up and down California, much like the historic photographers of the 1800s and their covered wagons. On these trips we would document the landscape and make portraits of each other while traveling. It was a happy discovery to find how positive people were responding to the events.

Creating this project made me realize something important: That people are always looking for a community to identify with. From the beginning, BRIDGE was created to serve those who slipped through the cracks, for people that felt like they didn't belong or for those who lacked the means to engage in these community building events. For me, it wasn't about the photography, it was about this sense of family that was created by every event. The first series of workshops were all photographic because those were the skills that I was trained in as a college student, since then, I have developed several workshops to meet the specific needs of my community.

Describe your biggest driving force.

My niece Lydia is a huge catalyst for my work. When my sister was pregnant with her, she spoke often about what to name her first child, that it needed to have an important meaning. It was no surprise that she chose the name Lydia, because it was the same name as our Grandmother, a person that we love and admire so much. Then it had occurred to me, that one day she would ask me about this story: Where did my name come from? Even though this would be far in my future, I wanted to be prepared, I never wanted her to feel the emptiness that I felt as a child. So I started to obsessively research and archive my family history, I started doing it for her, not realizing how healing the process would be for me.

Lydia really transformed me. Since her birth, I have been able to talk about my family, work and art simultaneously. When I used to give lectures about my work in the art world, it was mainly based on technique, people wanted to know how I made things, what materials I used and who I learned it from. Since Lydia was born, I realized that art was just my vehicle to discuss something much more important. That my passion does not revolve around media technology, but that my love is really about the skills of storytelling and narrative development. It feels good to know that one day she will ask me these questions, and while I might not have all the answers, I have a place to start.

What are some of your favorite projects?

One of my favorite projects is a body of work called Move(meant). A series of card catalogs that shares the stories of women of color across Southern California and the Tijuana region. It is really special to me because it was one of my first projects where my art, work, family and friends all intersected. As a recipient of the 2017 Art Prize I was asked to exhibit work in a library. This invitation made me consider my own experience of representation in libraries, so I wanted to make something specific for the show. For this public piece, I

refurbished a card catalog, inside each drawer, a flipbook and audio recording of fifteen interviewed women. Once I started working more with the community, I couldn't stop.

For 2018, I was the Artist in Resident at The New Children's Museum, for them I developed a workshop called the People and Places Project. In this workshop, participants draw a self portrait, or a picture of someone that is important to them, and turn it into a plush toy. When you squeeze or hug the toy, an audio recorder is activated, and plays a special message that shares their name, where they live and something special about who they are. This has been one of my favor projects with the community because I see the impact immediately.



"I picked this color because it is the color of my skin." A five year old participant Sophia said this to me while she was drawing a picture of herself. When she said this, I thought, to myself: Did I ask these questions growing up? I felt a warmth in my heart that was new, I saw myself in her, she was asking the questions that I couldn't. The project was meant to help youth and families discuss identity and family, it is really quite lovely to hear the families talk about things that my family never knew how to talk about. That the comfort of this toy helps to open a dialogue, bring families together and get people to really think about who they are no matter what age they happen to be.

What upcoming projects are you excited about?

Since 2007, I have been crossing the San Ysidro border because I found the feelings of comfort and home there, which I never understood until I first went to the Philippines in 2013. On the drive to my Grandmothers house, from Manila, I saw Tijuana in all the streets, walls, textures and colors. Without knowing exactly why, I embraced those feelings of home, that perpetuate my need to cross the San Diego, Tijuana border more

frequently. In my project [Between Two Worlds](#), I explore my concept of home through these landscapes that intertwine the Philippine and Tijuana environment.



These photographs explore a landscape that doesn't exist in real life, they represent the places that I long for, and the comfort that I feel when I cross the border. Growing up in San Diego, along one of the busiest borders in the world, I frequently recall memories of the Philippines which make me question my own relationship with the land, its barriers and the distance in between. This project is helping to develop my changing concept of home and giving me a place to put my thoughts about why so many immigrants find themselves there. For me, Tijuana is a little slice of the Philippines that I can access. The border, no matter how difficult, scary and militarized it gets, it doesn't feel as far as the sea that separates me from the Philippines.

The border in San Diego makes visible that many people, beyond my own experiences, are facing similar types of struggles. That families love each other and they will do anything they can to be together and have a good life. That the constructed walls at the border touch us deeply, yes because they physically separate us, but also because the symbols activate the walls inside our bodies and minds. That physically, symbolically, emotionally I know to the core these walls are wrong. My hope is that this project helps to build a dialogue, awareness and empathy for the migrant community and why Tijuana region attracts so many of us. The project is new, still developing, providing me a space to tackle the emotions with everything happening there right now.

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