

The Art of Turning What You Have into What You're Missing

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Growing up, I was always encouraged to be creative. My parents proudly treasure my “first body of work” which is a collection of all my drawings and paintings I made in Mexico while attending Montessori school. My cup of coffee, as they called it, was pushing paint around on a large piece of paper and creating whatever doodle I wanted and then moving on to my next activity while the painting dried. I remember always having a small, heart-shaped purse filled with crayons. I never left the house without it. Coincidentally, one of my formative memories has to do with my first cross country trip and the contents of that tiny purse. This long and tiring train journey was the first of a string of pitstops my family would make before living in the United States indefinitely. I was about three years old when my family decided to relocate from California to Virginia. Before that, back in Mexico, my mom and dad had newly minted oral surgeon degrees. They differed their dreams to open a dental practice, shifting the utility of their dexterity to farm work.

After spending a year in Fresno packing cotton, peaches and grapes it was time to move again. We didn't have much money, but somehow my dad managed to save up to buy us train tickets. There were seven of us, including my newborn brother. While couldn't pack very much, most of our possessions fit into one tattered piece of luggage. Even so, my mom made sure I had a thick coloring book and my crayons. She knew how safe I felt when she and I would race around picture outlines together. I was routinely bundled up and carried in a heavy, colorfully striped *cobija*. It was the blanket I was brought home from the hospital in, and eventually, the same thick blanket I was carried across the desert in. Once on the train, my baby brother started crying and I remember my dad holding me tight against his chest as we made our way through

the sea of inquisitive gaze. When we got settled, I was given my beloved coloring book. My mom coiled the red crayon purse around me and told me to color as much as I wanted. After that, a lot of it is a blur; a memory compiled with a collection of retold stories. All I know is that somewhere between Chicago and Manassas, I lost my coloring book.

In transit, we had an unexpected layover in the outskirts of Chicago. We were dusted with snow as we made our way to a hotel room paid for with equal parts compassion and train vouchers. My brother and I bathed in a bubbly tub and for the first time in days, we slept through the night. We woke up early to make it back to the train station. Still tightly wrapped in my blanket with a bundle of crayons secured by my side, I was ready for the next leg of the trip. Remember, there were seven of us. All the grown-ups were sure they packed my coloring book, but distracted by chaos and infant cries, it was left behind. In an effort to keep me calm, we spent the rest of trip doodling on boarding passes, newspapers and even a phone book. Later that summer, my uncles gifted me a replacement coloring book for my birthday. They even managed to find a copy of the exact one I lost. I was ecstatic to doodle on a new treasure. But by that moment, something in my mind had changed and it still lives with me today.

I recently traveled with all my belongings crumpled and cramped in one rented van moved from DC to Harrisonburg. It was an uprooting fresh start that led me to finding old treasures. I was reacquainted with childhood drawings, paintings and even my old baby blanket. Woven into its dense fibers, was a fragrant sense of security. As I held it against my chest, I was transported to a time when it shielded me from the gusts wind, a sandy desert border and the Chicago snow. I found myself feeling a sort of nostalgic, de ja vu energy come over me as I traveled with all these bits of myself across the valley. I realized that my blanket, along with a collection of art supplies had been with me through many pivotal moments in my life. Together,

acting as a cape worn to explore the unknown. In my new studio, I feel as though I am shedding little scraps of my existence and stitching new memory patches to my life quilt. It provides a sense of comfort when I'm flooded with longing for places I've called home. My paintings and drawings are made on found materials; collaged with scraps of my material experience. Making art is misunderstood by my parents. Ironically, they wish I had become a dentist. With age and long arguments, I've been able to explain that following the instinctive urge to use my hands isn't much different than theirs. Up until this recent move, I've carried the weight of their delayed actualization to the point of postponing my own. How can they argue with something they stitched into the fabric of my existence? Creative resourcefulness has always been a mode for survival, and it will carry me forward regardless of my career aspirations. A part of me thinks that my parents have come around to the idea of me being an artist. A validating sign of hope was seeing a painting of mine proudly adorning my mom's dental office in Mexico.