

CURRICULUM MATERIALS: I

ANALYSIS OF THE IMAGE “EL CHOLITO”



El Cholito, 2008 | Sgraffito on wood panel | Alice Leora Briggs
Courtesy of Evoke Contemporary, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Overview:

In Alice Leora Briggs' own words:

El Cholito memorializes a young member of the Wonderlook Gang who was gunned down in Colonia Anapra, Juárez. I read documentation about this young man's death and traveled to the site of his execution. According to the report, he apparently died at an intersection that does not exist.

From the perspective of an educator, *El Cholito* is an image that I believe could speak to many of our students, as it shows the death of a young man, that could easily be the same age as many of our students. The image of the young man is foreshortened, recalling the style of many Renaissance paintings. Like *Altar Parsioneros*, Briggs makes allusions to the crucifixion. The young man is arranged in a position like that of Christ—arms out, legs extended and crossed at the ankles. While the background is done in dark shades, the areas around the young man are lighter—as if light is shining down on him, or radiating from him. The allusions to Christ suggest that Briggs may believe the young man innocent even though he was condemned to death. Yet, unlike Christ, his body has been left in what appears to

be a rubbish heap in an abandoned building. In the documentation of the young man's death, it states the intersection where he was killed. Yet, this intersection does not exist. As in *Altar Parsioneros*, Briggs is again making allusions to our own complacency or complicitousness as witnesses to the state of violence in Juárez.

The situation for many young men in Juárez is bleak. Often times, there aren't many options outside of gangs and drug cartels. Some fear, that many young teenagers watch the glamorized life of gangs and drugs (as portrayed in the increasingly popular narcocorridos) and are drawn into a life of death and violence. This may be an area to explore in greater depth with students as you analyze *El Cholito*. Corridos have long been an important part of Mexican music, but the narcocorrido is something different. A quick Google search will bring up a number of examples. NPR did a special report on narcocorridos posted at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zjyDGnDUXs>. *Al Otro Lado: To the Other Side* is another film that speaks to similar issues of drugs, music, and the opportunities available to young men in Mexico. The film's synopsis writes, "*Al Otro Lado: To the Other Side* 'follows Magdiel, an aspiring corrido composer from the drug capital of Mexico, as he faces two difficult choices to better his life: to traffic drugs or to cross the border illegally into the United States.'" The following is a link to the trailer and the lesson plan:

http://www.pbs.org/pov/alotrolado/lesson_plan.php#.UVHkNmfO-So

It's important to note that while the majority of deaths of young men, like the one in *El Cholito*, are assumed to be in connection to gangs and drug cartels, this is not the case for all of the murdered young men. Some are unjustly connected to illegal activities as a way to explain their murders.

Discussion Questions:

The following questions can be used to help guide a discussion or analysis of the image. However, it would be best to start this activity by allowing students to spend some time looking at the image, talking about what they see and what they think it may mean. Then, also share some of the information above as it relates to your purposes in studying the image.

1. Describe what you see in the painting.
2. What do you think is the main focus of the image?
3. Why do you think Briggs would choose this young man as her subject?

4. Note the position of the body of the young man. How is he laid out? What do you think this represents? Why is this important?

5. Describe the surroundings in the image. Where has the body been left? What does this communicate to the viewer? What does it say about the value of this young man's life?