

An artist describes his work on American cultural identity, addressing its most unpleasant precincts—those patrolled by racism, xenophobia, and segregationism—with a “melting pot” methodology.

AMERIKKKA

Text + Images:
Ignacio Gonzalez-Lang



In the last decade I've produced a series of textile works that involve personal collaborations with undocumented immigrant workers from different parts of the world. In each project, the original fabric or object taken on by the work—typically a problematic cultural identifier or product—is transformed into a new sculptural piece through ornamental needlework by immigrant artisans working in their own homes. The results of this dyadic process attempt to reflect the multitude of fault lines that exist among different cultures and identities in the United States and elsewhere, while highlighting ideas of tradition, kinship, and memory.

I initially focused on ceremonial outfits of the Ku Klux Klan because they were the most exotic symbols of racial conflict I encountered after I first moved to the US from Puerto Rico at age 17. The KKK also interested me because of its contemporary resurgence and its shift of emphasis toward immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and most recently the Middle East and other conflict zones—often places where America has been embroiled in wars. While the KKK's caped robes, conical headgear, and masks were intended to conceal the identities of Klansmen, the outfits also contributed to the visual language of white supremacist identity by building on historical references to the Scottish Highlands and medieval armor design. I wanted to take this iconic cloth, ostensibly representing racial purity, and imprint it with signifiers of other cultures belonging to the same geography.

Peluche, 2015, cotton, zinc beads, gold-plated beads, pearls, lapis lazuli, acrylic thread [all images: Ignacio Gonzalez-Lang, courtesy of the artist]

Queens (2009) consists of a red Exalted Cyclops robe I commissioned from a seamstress belonging to a Louisiana chapter of the KKK. After researching vanishing Amerindian textile traditions and covering the entire robe with drawings based on these patterns, I worked with an undocumented immigrant from the Latino neighborhood of Corona, in Queens, who embroidered it in white and blue thread. The idea was to subvert the threatening presence of the robe by overwriting its surface with intricate and playful patterns of geometric and organic shapes. The result is a tactile object that conflates two seemingly irreconcilable ideas of what it means to be a native of a place.

The black robe used in *Khinatown* (2011) belongs to the rank of the Knighthawk, a security officer within the hierarchy of the KKK. I purchased it through the Internet from an unidentified merchant in upstate New York and then worked with a group of undocumented workers in New York City's Chinatown to embroider it. Chinatown is historically known as a neighborhood for counterfeit products as well as a place of employment for undocumented workers. In comparison to *Queens*, the patterns created by the embroidery here are more abstract and optical. In some parts, the embroidery also includes phrases in "Chinglish," written in both Chinese and English characters, which conflate the two languages in creative ways. The total number of stitches adds up to approximately 350,000, a number that also represents the significant demographic of undocumented workers currently present in New York City.

Sweeter Than Salt (2014) is a dress made from recycled military uniforms worn by veterans of our current war in Afghanistan (2001–present). The work was inspired by a veteran subcultural practice in which ex-service members recycle their uniforms into artwork as therapy for PTSD. The work's title comes from an Afghan folktale that speaks of the strength and resilience of a princess. So I commissioned an Afghan immigrant, who is a seamstress by trade, to transform donated military uniforms into a traditional Kochi dress. Kochi dresses were famously brought from Afghanistan to the West, where they were appropriated by the hippies and the fashion industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Our version of the dress was embroidered with traditional patterns, but using beads in camouflage colors and US quarter-dollar coins.

Peluche (2015–ongoing), a work in progress, is a handmade teddy bear. Once complete, its surface will be entirely covered with beads of gold and silver-gray zinc, pearls, and lapis lazuli stones. It was inspired by the Beaded Zemi in Rome's Pigorini Museum—one of the finest surviving works of art produced by the Taino people of the Caribbean, before the disappearance of the Taino culture in 16th century. Similar to a fetish object, the Beaded Zemi represents a supernatural character with coexisting Taino, African, and European features. I wanted to reimagine it by using the familiar form of the teddy bear, an American object that is also a globally recognizable signifier of warmth, love, and home. I also wanted the embroidery to reflect my son's lineage, which meant combining geometric patterns derived from the Beaded Zemi with the organic lines of Ottoman calligraphy from the same period. I'm working with an immigrant from Western Asia now based in Istanbul to bead the sculpture.



ABOVE: *Sweeter Than Salt*, 2014, US Marine and Army uniforms, beads, US coins, silver thread, crochet, lace, metal bells

OPPOSITE, TOP: *Queens*, 2009, red cotton KKK robe, white and blue thread, iridium lens, body form

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: *Khinatown*, 2011, Knighthawk KKK robe, white thread, iridium lens, prosthetic eyes, body form, plastic pallet

Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, artist Ignacio Gonzalez-Lang received his BFA from the California Institute of the Arts (Valencia, CA), and his MFA from Columbia University (New York City).



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