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Artist Lina Montoya brings magic realism to Staten Island

By LAUREN STEUSSY

On a storefront at the corner of Richmond Terrace and Jewett Avenue, artist Lina Montoya is perched atop a ladder, painting rays of sunshine over the building's shuttered window.

The mural's bright orange and blue colors warm the corner, which crowns streets of tire shops and auto repair garages.

Behind her, cars drive by, honking not out of anger, but acknowledgement. Montoya, 27, waves back, paintbrush in hand.

The corner is already a second home to Montoya: last year, she and dozens of local volunteers kicked off her street beautification project, "La Isla Bonita," with an installation of 18,000 yellow butterflies on the fence across the street.

The installation, "Mariposas Amarillas," represents much of what the Colombian-born artist brings to the borough through her work: a belief that art can profoundly change a community. It's a concept that at times seems so idealistic it can't be true: fitting for an artist hailing from the birthplace of magic realism.

"And how much more 'magic realism' is a cloud of butterflies?" she laughs.

As she paints, kids wave hello, or get their parents to honk from the cars. It's one of her favorite parts of working in Port Richmond.

"What I represent in the community is that connection that is so hard to find," Montoya, a Graniteville resident, said. "I can represent the fact the one of these little girls can be 'Lina' and feel inspired. They know if I can do art they can do anything."

The dreams, not the struggles

Montoya, 27, was born in 1988 in Medellin, Colombia, in an era of war spurred by the Medellin drug cartel. When she was a young girl, her mother immigrated to the United States. The conditions of her journey were harsh, to say the least — by some estimates, up to 80 percent of women crossing the Mexican border are raped.

These were the conditions Montoya's mother endured, which Montoya is keenly aware of — it's why migration is such a central theme of her work.

But at the same time, Montoya travels between countries for her "Ele Eme" art series freely thanks to a green card. She's studying to become a U.S. citizen now. Balanced with the stories her mother has told her of crossing the border along with her own experiences, Montoya's grasp on the subject allows her to show the positive aspects of migration.

Like the butterflies she uses in her murals, migration can allow for great change and growth, she says.

"My goal is to show the dreams and not the struggles," she said. "It's not that I'm ignoring that aspect of it, but enough people have told the story of the struggle. It's a different view of the same point."

Bringing the dreams to life

Though Montoya does plenty of solo work, she seems most at home when others are helping. This was nowhere more obvious than in her work last week with students from P.S. 20 and Wagner College.

For the past two years, Montoya has been helping the young students understand public art as it relates to concepts they're learning in school. It's part of a partnership with Staten Island Arts and Wagner College.

On Friday morning last week, about 360 tiny hands secured Montoya's trademark butterflies onto a fencing at Wagner's Grymes Hill campus.

In less than an hour the students watched the empty fencing become denser with the yellow butterflies, solidifying everything they had learned from Montoya about immigration, diversity and beautifying their community.

"Them working together shows how we can all come together to do one big beautiful thing," said Nick Galletta, a fourth and fifth grade teacher at P.S. 20 said as he watched his students tie the butterflies to the fence.

Montoya says working with students, especially those from immigrant families "gives them the tools to tell their story," she said.

"It shows them that you can be a good person in society no matter where you're from."

The beautiful process

Under the Ele Eme project she founded, Montoya has installed several pieces around Staten Island and other parts of the city, in addition to Latin America. More often than not, these projects involve kids in the community.

In the coming years, she'll be contributing even more of her work to Staten Island through Groundswell, an organization that works with area youth to create murals with powerful messages.

Since so many of her projects involve working with members of the community, Montoya says she's been able to see the transformations projects like the Mariposas Amarillas have brought to the community.

Kids who she works with are able to express themselves better, through art or the lessons that correspond with it, she said. And they know that if Montoya could grow up to be a working artist in the United States, they can dream big with their own career goals, she said.

"At the end of the day I know I've given something positive to the community and have changed people's perspective," she said. "It's like magic, it's very beautiful the process that happens."