



Eduardo Vázquez Martín*
Photos by Gretta Penélope Hernández **

Migrants of Clay¹





Alejandro Santiago was born in San Pedro Teococuilco —today, Marcos Pérez—, Oaxaca, in 1964, and died in 2013 before the age of 50 in the city of Oaxaca. His vital, creative, exuberant spirit made him a select human being and artist. Those who knew him say that he spent his childhood in the countryside, in Zapotec lands, where he spoke the language of his people, joyously roved the dirt roads in sandals and barefoot, and delighted in swimming in the cold river. His childhood taught this little boy, the son of Isabel and Juan, a teacher, to play; and playing taught him to be a child for his whole life.

His father wanted him to be a lawyer, but Alejandro went from collecting little the reproductions of landscapes that came with Clásicos matchboxes to entering the Miguel Cabrera Center for Artistic Studies when his family moved to the city of Oaxaca. There, he channeled his vocation for music and learned to play the piano, the violin, the saxophone, the accordion, and the flute, at the same time that he danced the part of Moctezuma in the town's fiestas and wore tights to try his hand at ballet.

Writer Braulio Aguilar Orihuela, Santiago's friend, collaborator, and biographer, says that when he finished the Fine Arts School, he went to the Rufino Tamayo Visual Arts Workshop, directed by Roberto Donís, from Venado, San Luis Potosí, where he met the maestro himself, Rufino Tamayo. Later, he would turn up in the Oaxaca Free Graphic Workshop, headed by Juan Alcázar, where he would meet Zoila López, his lifelong partner and the mother of his two children, Lucio, the elder, and Alejandra. His

* Executive coordinator of the Old San Ildefonso College; evazquez@sanildefonso.org.mx.

** Photographer, [@grettaph](#).



talent was so evident that, at his first exhibition, when he was just over 20, he sold all his work. With that happy achievement under his belt and the money from the sale, he launched into life, visiting cities, museums, and the world; in 1998, he moved to Paris with Zoila and their son Lucio.

Two years later, in 2000, the Santiago family returned to Oaxaca, and in Teococuilco, Santiago experienced the desolation of a town that migration had practically emptied of everyone, where there were many more absences than presences. Driven by the need to understand the fate of his own, Alejandro Santiago undertook a journey to Tijuana, where he contacted the smugglers who would take him across the border to follow the footsteps of so many other Mexicans and migrants of the world. He lived in

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the United States as an “illegal”: he saw and experienced the life of migrants. One day, he saw a sea of crosses on the border, where someone told him, “There are 2 500 of them.”

When he returned to Oaxaca, Santiago decided to create 2 501 bodies, each different, with its own history, its own flesh and soul, like the first beings the *Popol Vuh* progenitor deities created before the men of maize; Santiago’s migrants are made of clay.

Between 2001 and 2006, the “mountain-dwelling artist,” as his countryman Aguilar Orihuela called him, worked on what to him had restorative meaning: the idea was to repopulate the vacuum left by those who had emigrated. It was a way of bringing back those who had to emigrate, but also those who had died. The result is hundreds of sculptures, beings who manage to stay upright, but at the same time are the representation, shadows fired in clay, projected by those absent in space and in the minds of those who remember and miss them. They are also ghosts, who, like Pedro Páramo, never stop dwelling in their homeland and remain among us.

This act of transformation, of transit between the world of the living and the dead, between restoration and healing, worthy of the grandson of a healer grandmother, a Zapotec “witch,” turned into a collective work process that involved 35 young people, local inhabitants, and his entire family. On a little ranch he acquired for the purpose that he baptized “Where the Buzzard Dances,” the artist experimented with different materials, different processes, until he found the hardy Zacatecan clays. From



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as the friends, colleagues, and the ever-present curious onlookers. The artist had a Mixtec ball court built and brought in the most noble mezcal so nothing had to stop, so the work could become a game, so the game could become a ceremony, and the ceremony, a fiesta.

Faces with frantic eyes, covered in the white dust of the desert, breasts of mothers and grandmothers, men whose leathery skin is weather-beaten, women traveling the world barefoot carrying children, all naked with their genitals exposed, arms crossed across their chest like the dead, with the expression of thirst, hunger, fear, desire, and hope that the living have. In 2006, Alejandro Santiago finished creating this migrant Oaxacan town, this clay community; a little girl would be the very last piece, his daughter Alejandra, born in 2001, migrant 2 501.

When the process had just finished, some of Santiago's migrants visited the Oaxaca Contemporary Art Museum (MACO), one of the many spaces founded by the generous creativity of Francisco Toledo. Later, in 2007, the full "2501 Migrants" exhibition was mounted for the first and only time until now, at the Monterrey Foundry Park as part of the Universal Forum of Cultures, curated by Jorge Contreras.

Between 2007 and 2013, when Alejandro Santiago died, the artist supported the Huella Gráfica (Graphic Footprint) workshop created by his son Lucio and Francisco Limón; inaugurated the Spiderweb Sculpture Museum; and mounted the exhibition "20 Love Murals and a Desperate Woman." After his death, Santiago's family has taken on the task of preserving the sculptures at the Where the Buzzard Dances ranch, but the clay migrants, like all the world's migrants, continue to look for their destination. They need—as do we all—to find a welcoming land, a refuge where their stories, their expressions can find shelter, and where their symbolic power, the metaphors they invoke, and the reality they name can express themselves with the vital generosity that Alejandro infused in them, as homage to the millions of human beings who every day leave the land of their birth, pushed by the hunger plaguing them, by the violence that threatens and sacrifices them, by the lack of opportunities that our unjust, cruel societies impose upon them, emboldened by the legitimate desire to create a better life for their children.

that moment on, his hands, and the hands of all those who assisted him in the task, were dedicated to kneading, like those ancient gods, these primordial beings. At the same time, he was designing the ideal kilns to fire the pieces in and determining the pigments and paints that would give their skin color. Simultaneously, the Santiago family raised goats and planted corn to feed his collaborators who were learning the necessary trades as well



While all this is happening, Santiago's "migrants" continue their nomadic existence, seek out new routes to meet up with us, look at us every time we look at them, question us when we speak to them, ask us about those who remain behind, about those who have been lost along the way, and tell their stories, which is the great odyssey of a humanity discontented in the face of all the adversities, that once and again and always stands up and goes in search of new horizons. If we pay attention, if we prick up our ears, we can hear their voices, sometimes a murmur, other times a far-off song; it is the hushed echo of those who had to leave.

The San Ildefonso College has presented "2501 Migrants" with an exhibit of 501 pieces as part of the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the UNAM Center for Research on North America. The center's mission is the creation of knowledge focused on understanding national and global problems in order to respond to the challenges the contemporary world is throwing up in the path of humanity, where capital and goods circulate practically unhindered, but human beings confront ever more rigid borders and higher walls. Undoubtedly, the pieces in this exhibit are a contribution, from the point of view of the artist's subjectivity and empathy, to the construction of an urgent, humanist, solidarity-based vision, of those who leave their homes every day, launch themselves onto the world's roads and seas,



and cross borders with the earth of their homeland on their skins, but with their eyes focused on a new world. **MM**

Notes

1 This article was published previously in the book *2501 migrantes*, by Alejandro Santiago (Mexico City: CISAN, UNAM, 2019).

