



Expressions on Caring, a Pilgrimage by Jenè Jackson

We chat with friends and strangers everywhere who are suffering in everyday ways we cannot imagine. If they mention their struggles, we feel sorry and say things like, "How do you do it?" and "You're so brave." We often hesitate to push past politeness to ask more, because we are afraid. Afraid of the need's depth, our inability to help, the complexity, or hopelessness. We may not ask because we, too, are struggling so much that our empathy is used up on our own lives.

Nowhere is empathy more necessary than in caregiving for an aging parent. Its struggle is locked inside a house, and caregiver children are often judged for choosing paths that seem unreasonably difficult. The assumption is that finding help should be easy. But when a parent is hard to deal with--from mental illness or a difficult personality--the harsh reality is that their child's home is the only place where physical and pharmaceutical restraints would not be the norm. What do you do when one choice would be so much easier but would feel so wrong? The decision is never simple.

Lupita Carrasco's exhibition, *Expressions on Caring*, tackled this complexity through art by expressing her experience in caring for her elderly, mentally ill mother for the last 21 years while being a wife and mother of seven children, in their family home.

The Gallery of Contemporary Art (GOCA) filled their newest exhibition hall, The Project Space, with Carrasco's show. Getting to it felt like a pilgrimage: from UCCS's ENT Center entrance, I walked past a wall of windows, three theaters, and the main exhibition space, finding it after four turns, one hall, and two sets of doors. The classroom-style space had been transformed with a mix of shadows and pools of bright light. At the doorway, dark blue stickers in the shape of a cross and rosary implied a path around the room. Like a cathedral's "stations of the cross," each of Carrasco's works held mystery and told a heartbreaking yet joy-filled story.

The first piece was a collage of photos of children and a wedding, all under an upside-down photo of Carrasco's mother. A hand-sculpted medicine bottle held a stem of tiny dried white flowers underneath it. Both were humble and sweet but unsettling. Next came a large oil painting, a self portrait. Saying, "It is the artist with her eyes closed and rocks hanging from her hair," you might come close to an accurate description of the painting. But the juxtaposition of the background's

cheerful colors, her hair's rich texture, and the weight of the rocks communicated dissociation, peace, and fatigue.

The next three large black and white gouache paintings captured the complexity of a mental illness, the first with mobile phones floating in the air around Carrasco's mother's profile. Her dark sunglasses and hair in a bun seemed like a badass movie star, but the painting told the story of when she hid visitors' phones all over the house one afternoon. Underneath the next painting, with the words "The Silence of her Absence" glowing from a black background, hung small crocheted panels, the work of Carrasco's mother's hands. The third, another self portrait, had a pen and ink texture that seemed topographical as Carrasco's head tilted up, pleading, with "Malvada no me sugeres!" on her chest. In Spanish, its meaning is similar to Jesus' cry, "Get thee behind me, Satan!" Each line in the painting seemed to be embedded with the pain of making art while enduring her mother's repetitive accusations of being evil.

Next, the large oil painting featured on the showcards was pop-art cheerful, but in person, the mother's face felt like an inscrutable yet intimately known landscape of rock and shadow. After a small oil painting of the artist in her mother's arms when young, the video demanded my attention. Its intimacy was gale-force, fascinating and shattering, prompting so many questions. Why does Carrasco's mother wrap things in plastic bags? How stressful is it to help her experience joy after she destroys so much? Below it, an altar-like cabinet displayed several of the show's sculptures--Carrasco's first ever, of praying hands, medicine bottles full of flowers and rocks, her mother's face emerging from water for anointment--all rough, broken, and pieced back together. Their imperfections spoke of the grit needed for caregiving.

In the middle of the room, a rustic, fragile wooden chair held a long letter from the artist to her mother. It required me to be uncomfortable to read it, squatting down or bending over, deserving my time and effort with its intimacy and gut-wrenching honesty.

The last wall held small work. Photographs of hundreds of objects and bundles seemed like pages in the children's "I Spy" books, showing the urgency and fatigue of Carrasco's constant effort to handle her mother's mental illness. A bench filled with many of those objects seemed almost mocking, a place of rest that could not be used for rest. Above it, in a grid of small paintings, disembodied eyes, and arms, bodies floating in air and entwined with tree trunks, and faces looking directly out seemed to be one last attempt to communicate the pain of her caregiving experience.

Walking from oil paintings on canvas to gouache on paper to sculpture to photography in a haze of sound from the video felt like a tilting carnival ride. Up with the beauty of art, down with the crushing pain, up with the joy of family, down with the weight of the care. I could see Carrasco's love for her mother in each piece, and I could feel the flinches of her pain. The end of the show held no answers or solutions. Carrasco cared for her mother before, during, and after creating each work of art. I had tried to put myself in Carrasco's shoes, imagined her confusion, frustration, and constant fatigue. And I had failed. But in trying, I developed more empathy for caregivers, and feeling their pain through this complex show was what stayed with me. Images of a caring family living life with art and joy, in the face of the struggle.