RUBY CITY

Kristopher Driggers. Courtesy of San Antonio Museum of Art. Photo by Josh Huskin.

Jenelle Esparza. Photo courtesy of the artist.

## Jenelle Esparza's Embodied Weavings in *The Family Room* (2025)

*By Kristopher Driggers*

After eight years of working in weaving, Jenelle Esparza is about to buy a second loom. This purchase marks a milestone: The 8-shaft floor loom she is acquiring can manage more complex patterns than the 4-shaft loom that she uses now, opening new possibilities for the cloth that Esparza creates with Texas cotton.

It is also clear that acquiring it is as much a milestone in her identity as a maker as it is an expansion of her practice. Textile artists, she observes, often live with multiple looms at home, each one close at hand to manage different ways of organizing fiber into cloth. Having another loom, in a sense, will mark her arrival as a weaver.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the artist would connect tools with understandings of identity when taking into account her work currently on view at Ruby City. *The Family Room* (2025) is replete with objects once used at work, some from the artist's own family history, mounted on, near, or through weavings that Esparza produced through her own labor.

Jenelle Esparza, *The Family Room,* 2025 *as photographed in Synthesis & Subversion Redux,* Linda Pace Foundation, Ruby City, San Antonio, Texas. Jorge Villareal, photographer.

Some of the tools belonged to the artist's great-grandparents, who worked in cotton fields from youth to old age. Esparza found them hanging from a wire in the shed of a family home in rural South Texas. In the installation, fiber forms knot and twist around them. Sometimes cotton rope wrappings seem placed to blunt the hard edges of the rusted tools, softening the potential of their impact. At other times, the fibers dress the tools with expressive verve, anthropomorphizing them in ways that recall a doll's wig or a man's beard. They are hung close to lengths of weaving suspended from hangers, fields of cream with macramé openwork and inlays of colored thread.

When we see historical tools on display at an art museum, we are often encouraged to think about the expertise of the makers who formed them and to consider the artists who stewarded intergenerational knowledge about how to knap, forge, and embellish tools that their future owners would cherish. It is equally true, however, that tools in use tend to act upon their owners. Esparza works with tools that once choreographed the way their users moved while at work. Years wielding the scythe in the fields forever changed the body that held it, a story repeated innumerable times through four generations of Esparza's family and, she notes, "probably, for all of my classmates' families [growing up], too."

Esparza's artistic exercise is to see the body through the tool and through a process of abstraction. In her telling, this visualization first began with habits of seeing her weavings: The cloth hangings that she produced, woven in white Texas cotton, had already begun to feel like figural forms, ones that evoked the subjectivity of a body in pain. The immediacy of working with the fiber that Esparza's family historically cultivated made that anthropomorphism even more acute.  As she tells it, once she began to see the human in the weaving, Esparza became more sensitive to the possibility of finding embodied figures in

other forms. Tools seemed imbued with the substance and the anima of their users; they hold the oils from fingerprints and also traces of spirit and soul. Their patina—of time, exertion, exhaustion—validates the analogy: In Esparza's eyes, these tools are also bones.

Many of Esparza's weavings reference the body, but some also have the specificity of portraiture. One weaving at Ruby City hangs on the dowel of a small spice rack with a little shelf. This is *Dreaming of You,* Esparza's self-portrait. Here, the cloth is embroidered with line drawings from her childhood journal; the shelf holds a cotton boll, a pencil ground down to the nub, and a small stone gifted to her by artist Ángel Rodríguez-Díaz. Two other weavings in cream-colored cotton, now on the finishing table in Esparza's studio, run nearly identical in length. One is a portrait of Esparza's mother, the other the artist herself, here visualized as an adult. Poignantly, they are connected by inlaid thread. The verticality of hanging weavings suggests their figuration; amplifying this, Esparza recalls how webs of fabric woven on a backstrap loom were held in tension by a weaver's body, their widths constrained by the span of the artist's reach.

Detail of *The Family Room, 2025 in Synthesis & Subversion Redux,* Linda Pace Foundation, Ruby City, San Antonio, Texas. Jorge Villareal, photographer.

Jenelle Esparza, *Bodies of Women or the Many Forms of Memory*, 2025, 58 x 36 x 3 in., natural cotton yarn, magnolia seeds, found objects, a family heirloom, driftwood, brass. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

To Ruby City's installation of *The Family Room,* Esparza brings a new context and metaphor for understanding the process by which she arranges her weavings and found objects. In this iteration, she sees her arrangements as language. Groupings of objects have become paragraphs, made up of sentences and building to an argument. Where the weavings seemingly emphasize relationships to folk embroidery, Esparza's paragraphs extend longstanding dialogues on the aesthetics of domesticana. In other paragraphs, the thesis sentence is a tool  placed in an orientation that evokes the appearance of a gun. In certain areas, the history of labor is so clearly foregrounded in a work that that history becomes both the object's surface accretion and its paragraph's argument.

Each paragraph Esparza creates is always anchored by a weaving. In textile arts, a cloth's structure is often key to its meaning; accordingly, Esparza's woven structures are key to her paragraphs' expression. Esparza primarily works with a weave customarily (and perhaps understatedly) termed "plain weave," the name for fabrics with an even balance of warp and weft threads, the fundamental over-under of textile art. Discussing her technical choices, Esparza explains, "It's harder than you would think to do. It's the easiest form, it's the first thing that you do when you learn to weave, but at the same time, you have to get it right. You have to have your tension right, you have to get your proportion of warp to weft right, and you have to make something structurally sound in order to move onto the next step."

When Esparza describes *The Family Room*, it becomes clear that her practice is not only about producing a finished work of art, but it is also about the relationship of care that she cultivates with the work in formation. Her tools are never irreversibly altered or damaged; their wrapping and dressing can always be undone. Esparza's stewardship also extends to conversations with family seeking permission about how the tools should be utilized and stored. Furthermore, she hesitates to imagine them circulating on the market. Showing the work at a museum, Esparza notes that its meaning shifts: "It did change it for me, because it almost heightened the importance of the objects. In my mind, I insisted on calling them heirlooms, because they're not what you typically think of as heirlooms, but they're reminders of where we came from. They're important, but they've never been important enough before to be in this display where it would be in a museum, an acknowledgement of an experience and a story."

Jenelle Esparza's new loom. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Pursuing these threads, Esparza will now have her new loom with which to work. Fittingly, she has selected one that comes with a history of its own: "I like hand-me-down looms because they're already broken in," she notes. "People put layers of wax so that the wood doesn't splinter, and after it's been used for so long, you don't have to do that anymore." History and care over time have strengthened her new tool. Working in the same spirit, Esparza finds ways to materialize South Texas's history in spaces of visibility.

**Kristopher Driggers** is Associate Curator of Latin American Art at the San Antonio Museum of Art. A specialist in art of the ancient Americas, he has curated exhibitions and authored publications on topics such as textiles from the Andes, Maya visual narratives, and the work of contemporary artists in dialogue with ancient American traditions. He has also published on the history of the collecting and circulation of ancient

American art in the United States, especially in the Southwest. Driggers was previously the Associate Curator, Bernard and Jeanette Schmidt Curator of Latin American Art at the Tucson Museum of Art. He holds a PhD in art history from the University of Chicago and a BA in history of art from Yale University.

**Jenelle Esparza** (American, b. 1985) is an interdisciplinary artist who was born in the coastal city of Corpus Christi, TX. She attended the University of Texas at San Antonio and received her BFA in photography in 2010. She currently lives and works in San Antonio.

Esparza examines the lesser-known history of cotton and labor in South Texas through photography and textiles, and incorporates concepts of body movement, history, gender, identity, culture, and race. Her recent projects utilize textiles and found objects to explore the parallels between landscape and bodily experiences, and the implications of generational trauma.

Esparza has exhibited nationally in institutions such as The DePaul Art Museum in Chicago, IL; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and The Momentary in Bentonville, AR; and Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. She is the recipient of numerous honors including 2015 National Association of Latino Arts and Culture (NALAC) Artist Grant, the Artpace International Artist Residency, and the National Performance Network Artist Engagement Fund. Her work is also included in the permanent collection of the San Antonio Museum of Art and the Art Museum of South Texas.