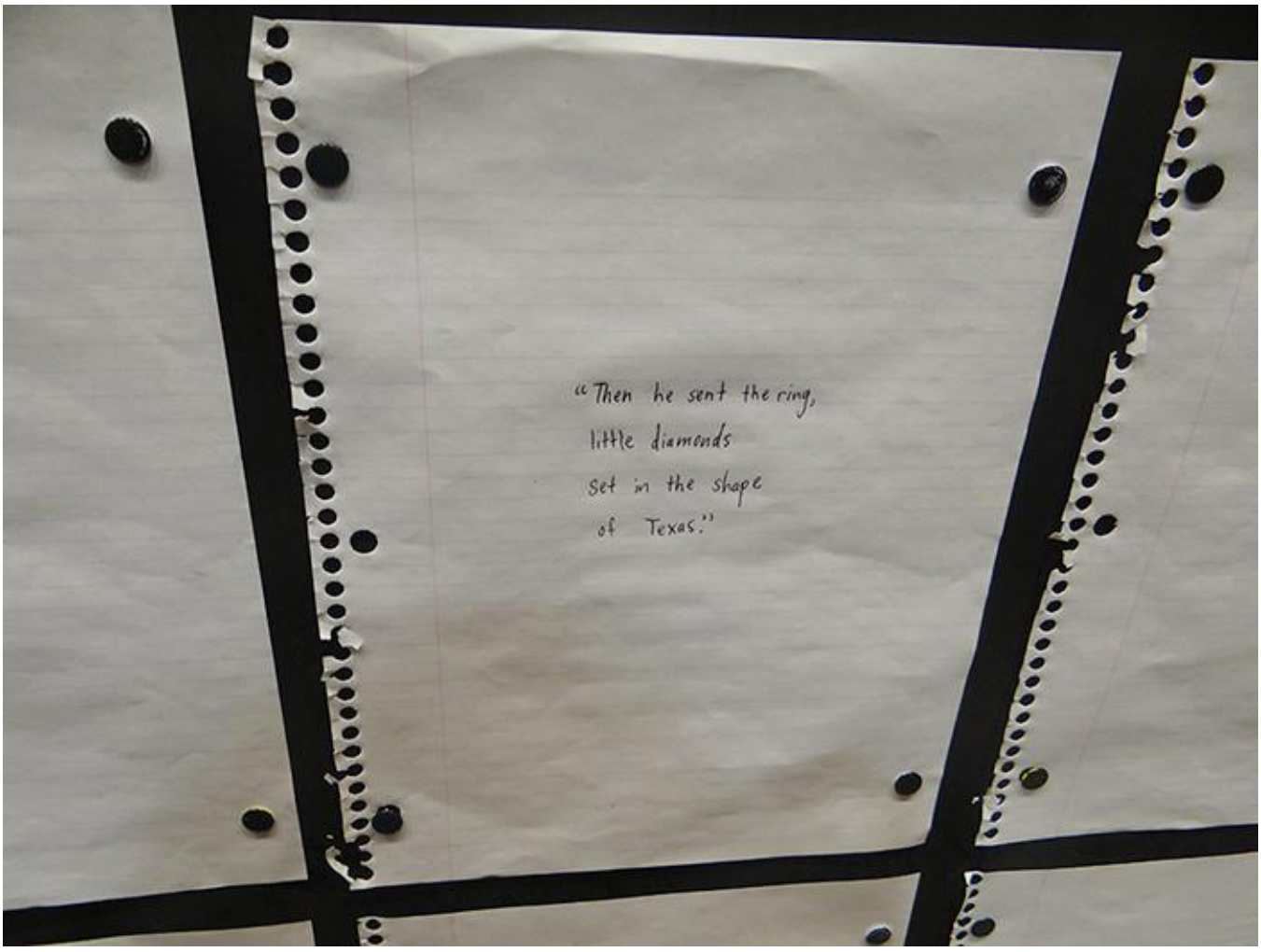
In Tlilli, in Tlapalli

Writing about Josh T. Franco's work "In Tlilli, In Tlapalli: Three Tejanos in Red and Black," Rotem Rozental follows the migration and reincarnation of individuals, colors, ideas, and legacies between New York City and Marfa, TX.

A single artwork / Rotem Rozental November 7, 2016

San Antonio_photo Maya Cueva 3.jpg



[1]Josh T. Franco. In Tlilli, in Tlapalli: Three Tejanos in Red and Black (detail), 2013. Mulberry House, San Antonio. photo: Maya Cueva

When artist Donald Judd (1928 - 1994) tried to find an area vast enough to contain his work and creative process, he decided to conduct a visual geometrical experiment of chance: the artist held up a map of the American West, and tried to draw the biggest possible circle with no major cities or towns around. According to the story, this is how he ended up in Marfa, Texas, a railroad town established in the nineteenth century. Named after a character in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers*

Karamazov, which the wife of the Chief Engineer was reading at the time, Marfa had been a town mainly associated with barren lands and financial defeats. As is often the case with remote areas that are suddenly touched by a famous hand, Marfa had been injected into public view after Judd had made it his home, and it slowly became a pilgrimage site. Today, this west-Texas city, located in the high desert of the Trans-Pecos region, attracts artists, designers, and creative minds that are hungry like the coyote to find the next hottest place [2] to work/shoot/live/Instagram in.

Conversely, it seems Judd's presence and impact had little to do, if at all, with the daily life of Marfa's population, which mostly consists of Chicano communities [3], who were -- and are -- far more influenced by the Texas border with Mexico, local traditions, the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement [4] of the 1960s, and Spanish-speaking cultural heroes than by a white male artist from the heart of the New York art scene. Applied to Mexican-Americans since the early twentieth century, the term Chicano became increasingly popular with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. Activists, artists, poets and scholars reclaimed this once-derogatory term, and used it to denote an idiosyncratic cultural, social, and political experience and worldview. Crucially for contemporary work, it is in this convoluted intersection of borders, identity, economic structures, and communal codes of conduct that unique pockets of scholarly and artistic self-reflexive endeavors emerge.

Nurture Art (2)_lowres.jpg **[5]**



[6]Josh T. Franco. In Tlilli, in Tlapalli: Three Tejanos in Red and Black II, 2016
Transcribed writings, height-specific plywood mounts, color scheme, beeswax-coated glyphs, storytelling table

NurtureArt, Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy of the artist and Nurture Art.

Josh T. Franco [7] grew up in Odessa, not far from Marfa. In both his scholarly and artistic practices, Franco investigates the aesthetic domains and visual regimes that define Marfa and Chicano culture, sometimes by exploring their embedded contradictions. In a sense, as an artist, scholar, archivist, and a Texan, Franco himself embodies the tensions indicative of the region and the ways in which it is seen, understood, and consumed worldwide.

“When I started my dissertation project, I wanted a lot more standoffs between Mexicans and Gringos,” Franco says about his research into the intersections of minimalist aesthetics and the history of West Texas. “Most of the time there’s a benign indifference, as a kind of entertainment, or something that’s ignored,” Franco indicated in reference to his work in a talk I had conducted with him [8] recently, at Independent Curators International [9] in Manhattan. Overlooking a dusky skyline, we had an opportunity to discuss the origins of his work, and the routes that lead him back, time and time again, to Texas and, specifically, to Marfa. Like other artists in the exhibition “Dead Lands: Karkaot Mawat [10],” which I curated at NurtureArt Gallery in Brooklyn, Franco was addressing the complicated connection between land and identity: in line with the exhibition’s premise, which considered land as that which excludes, marginalizes, or celebrates their backgrounds and predetermined perspectives.

Nurture Art (1)_lowres.jpg **[11]**

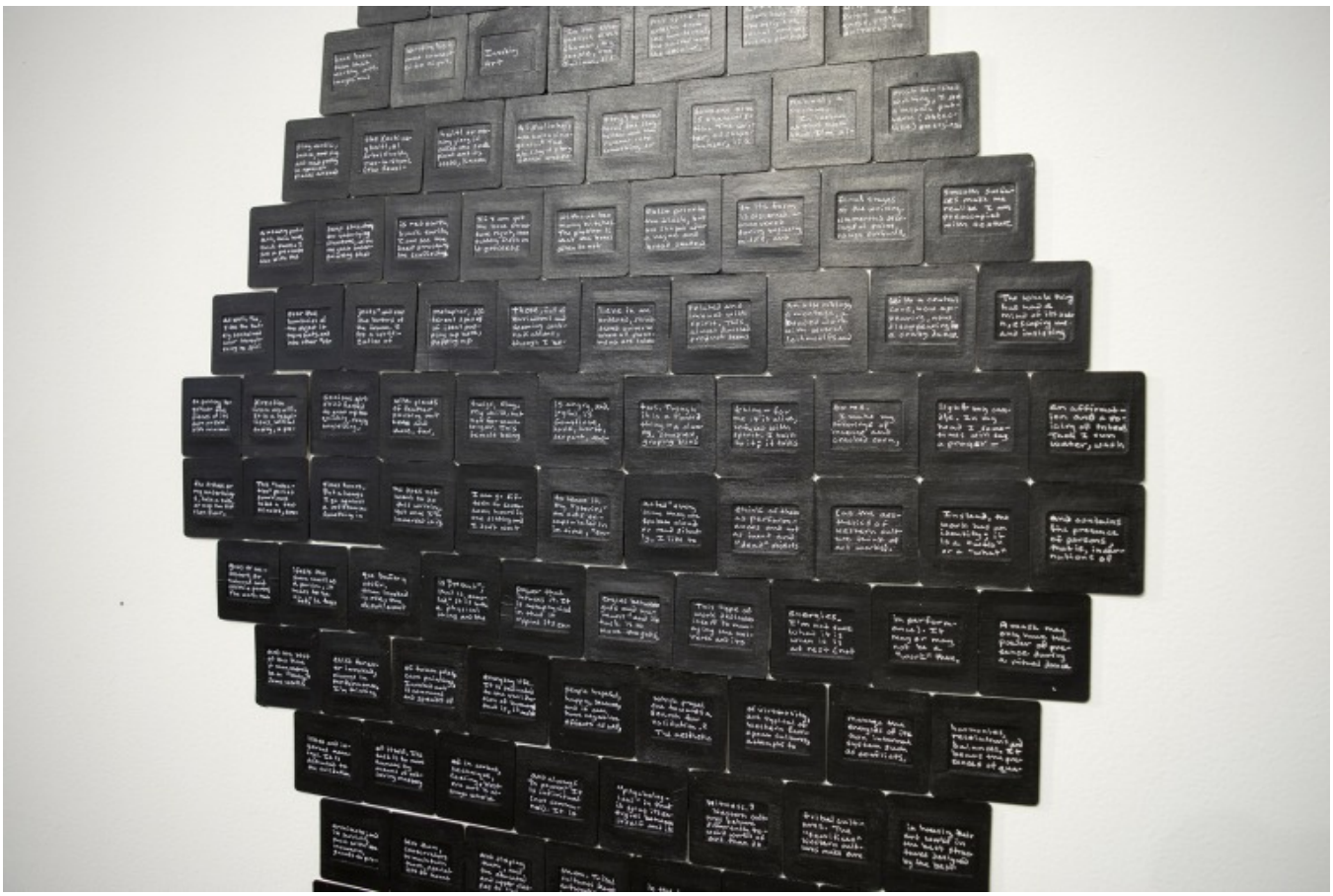


[12]Josh T. Franco. In Tlilli, in Tlapalli: Three Tejanos in Red and Black II (detail), 2016, installation. NurtureArt, Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy of the artist and Nurture Art.

Far away from the rugged-yet-suddenly-trendy real estate of NYC, Donald Judd purchased his first property in Marfa in 1971, and then acquired two more ranches in 1976. 101 Spring St. in New York, a beautiful industrial space Judd had converted into a live-work studio in 1968, remained in his possession, though1. Together with his wife, Choreographer Julie Finch, Judd hosted dinner parties and gatherings in this Manhattan space, as well as local political initiatives. He also accumulated works by fellow artists, and became a central figure in the migration to SoHo from all five boroughs and beyond. In 1979, he received assistance from the Dia Art Foundation to convert Marfa's Fort D. A. Russell, a decommissioned camp for German prisoners-of-war, into an exhibition space he conceived as an anti-museum [13]: a site that would function differently from mainstream American art institutions. Josh Franco's grandfather used to live right across the street; he spent his childhood wondering about the soldiers behind the walls at Fort D. A. Russell, who sometimes paraded around town as the Border Patrol.

Launched in 1986, less than a decade before Judd passed away, The Chinati Foundation [14], which he founded, opened to the public as an independent non-profit organization. The foundation strives to "preserve and present to the public permanent large-scale installations by a limited number of artists," among them Dan Flavin, John Chamberlain, and Roni Horn. And here again, just as Judd helped, perhaps unwittingly, to redefine Manhattan's character, his move to Marfa changed its global status. The converted space also became a central location for local artists and scholars, like Franco himself.

Nurture Art (4))lowres.jpg **[15]**



[16]Josh T. Franco. In Tlilli, in Tlapalli: Three Tejanos in Red and Black II (detail), 2016, installation. NurtureArt, Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy of the artist and Nurture Art.

When I was working with Franco toward the “Dead Lands” exhibition, we asked ourselves what happens to the work when it migrates from Texas to New York, like the artist himself. The result was a second iteration of the installation In Tlilli, In Tlapalli *[17]:*2 *Three Tejanos in Red and Black*, which had originally been conceived and shown in Texas. It begins with the colors red and black, and the ways in which they constitute conceptual and concrete domains of contemplation and practice, such as tribal traditions, but also contemporary writing in the Southwest. Both Donald Judd and Gloria Anzaldua [18] (1942-2004), an influential Chicana philosopher, scholar, and cultural theorist, explicitly mention these colors in their texts [19], considering indigenous Americana not only as a geographical region, but also as a cultural sphere3. The pairing of red and black embodied particular spiritual and visual meanings for indigenous communities, and, subsequently, in Judd and Anzaldua’s work as well. Both of them, Franco noted in our conversations, were intrigued by the production of red and black colors, and by indigenous craft, like the Aztecs, who had used natural materials such as ash, rocks, and insects. Franco’s project also considers writer Sandra Cisneros [20] (b. 1954), who explores sensuality in her writings through red and black, as well as other basic colors. By invoking these textual, visual, and communal associations, this installation comments upon myth and crafts, attempting to demolish disciplinary and physical divides.

Considering these three figures (Anzaldua, Judd, and Cisneros) and their rootedness in Texas, their philosophical and political readings of these colors, and the relations between them, Franco erected three plywood mounts, each assigned a color and measurements reflecting the three thinkers: red for Anzaldua, bare for Judd (“I think he would roll in this grave if I would try to paint it,” he says), and black for Cisneros, and on each he added handwritten quotations. He placed a storytelling table, set up across from this space of shared dwelling, , inviting the viewers to add their own red and black narratives. The length of each plywood corresponded to the heights of the respective protagonist.

Tlilli Texas.png **[21]**



[22]Josh T. Franco. In Tlilli, in Tlapalli: Three Tejanos in Red and Black (detail), 2013, Donald Judd's "Some Aspects of Color in General, and Red and Black in Particular"
Hand-transcribed, black Sharpie on sheet aluminum, plywood

Mulberry House, San Antonio. photo: Maya Cueva

In the New York version of the work *In Tlilli, in Tlapalli*, Franco focused on Judd and Anzaldua's physical presence by, again, referring to their heights, and their understanding of the formal, ritual, and contextual qualities of red and black. "I almost immediately knew Cisneros doesn't belong here," he says, reiterating the fact that two of the figures he deals with have already passed away, and thereby the work was "invoking a body that's still living." The gallery was then to be filled with the ghostly presence of two influential ancestors who have redefined their respective disciplines. Writing openly about her identity as a lesbian feminist and a Chicana, Anzaldua broadened the mere idea of a self [23] into a complicated structure of ideas, identities, and desires. Judd's writing and motivation were apparently different: he produced an intensely analytical work, trying to substantiate the autonomy of the artistic object, the space it creates, and the experience of the viewer. I wonder, however, if their exploration of an expanded self and an autonomous object does not share a common thread, a certain interest in conceptual abstractions and their potential to form

relationships both with the viewer and with the space in which the encounter takes place.

San Antonio(1)_lowres.jpg **[24]**



[25]Josh T. Franco. In Tlilli, in Tlapalli: Three Tejanos in Red and Black (detail: Tejano/a Story-telling Table), 2013.
Dinner tray, die-cut letters, beeswax-coated glyphs, light table, candle.

Mulberry House, San Antonio. photo: Maya Cueva

A few weeks prior to the opening, we distributed an open call to Texans, inviting them to join us in the gallery, and share their Texan story around a storytelling table during opening night. The artist was sitting at another storytelling table, waiting for them with bottles of Topo Chico sparkling mineral water (hugely popular in Texas yet virtually unknown to New Yorkers) and discarded projector slides, hand-painted in white. He summarized each story told in enigmatic codes, conveying personal accounts that could never be fully interpreted by outsiders. He wrote them on two slides: one in red ink and one in black, and the participants could choose which one they prefer to keep. When the artist was not present, people were invited to add their own experience or observation. “Can’t get abortion,” “Truth is unfair,” “Girls pushed him out of Bushwick,” and the mysterious “Bone rash,” were some of the phrases told to Franco or shared by anonymous hands. As days went by, a textual stack accumulated on the table. “The most impacting thing for me was that

really everyone has a thought about Texas, regardless of had they been there," says Franco. The table has thus become a compilation of possible meanings of Texas, a site that is both concrete and imagined.

San Antonio (4)_lowres.jpg **[26]**



[27]Josh T. Franco. In Tlilli, in Tlapalli: Three Tejanos in Red and Black (detail), 2013. Mulberry House, San Antonio. photo: Maya Cueva

On the wall behind the table, the plywood boards shown in Texas were converted: replaced by slides. These remnants of a derelict technology were extracted from the artist's personal collection, compiled from rejected memories found in private archives and forgotten accumulations. Their appearance on the gallery walls intensified their formal qualities - erasing past lives and, concurrently, acknowledging the inability to do so. Judd's plywood became a red stack, while Anzaldua's was converted into a black serpent, a central figure for her, reflecting ideas of transformation, and suggesting she might be present in the gallery space. Their texts about red and black were (again) handwritten by the artist: "art history is made by hand," (Judd) "my stories are acts encapsulated in time." (Anzaldua) Judd was therefore imported back into New York, but this time as a Texan. "They have an ancestral status that is haunting me," Franco admits. "I think in New York it's easy to forget Judd is very much a Texan, because he is also very much a New Yorker, but for Texans that is an important thing. He is one of us."

- 1. In fact, this space now houses the East Coast arm of the Donald Judd Foundation [28], where guided tours provide a peek into the daily habits, aesthetic positions, and relationships of the artist and his family.
- 2. The title In Tlilli, In Tlapalli refers to the indigenous Nahautal term signifying the use of red and black as a medium that inscribes writing, thinking and wisdom. The word Tejanos has a couple of meanings (it can also refer to denim), but here it signifies Texans in spanish.
- 3. See, for example: Donald Judd, Some Aspects of Color in General and Red and Black in Particular [29] (1994), New Complexity, January 31, 2011.

Source URL: http://tohumagazine.server288.com/article/tlilli-tlapalli

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