

Artist's work reflects immigration maze

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THE JOURNAL NEWS
August 18, 2007

In her self-portraits, Isadora Machado Lecuona is a little girl staring out from giant postage stamps.

She is surrounded by signs of bureaucracy. Penciled into the edges are names of immigration forms she's filed over the years. Her "alien number," which goes on every form, takes the place of a signature. There are official seals and postmarks, and sweeping around her head are the wings of butterflies - a kind that spends an entire life span migrating one way.

The 29-year-old artist, a White Plains High School graduate, is not the first person to take a long, winding and uncertain trip through the U.S. immigration process. Her own bid for permanent residency has taken 20 years and counting. But Isadora decided to use her art to communicate what the process feels like.

Born in Spain, she came to the United States with her family at age 9. Assorted delays in her green-card application, none of them very unusual, have kept her living year to year on temporary visas that limit her ability to work and travel.

"I always thought it was funny that a 1-cent stamp, at times, could travel further or more easily than I could around the world," she said.

Isadora's portraits have won accolades, most recently the grand prize in an exhibit at the Carriage Barn Art Center in New Canaan, Conn. Her talents are on display next to the children's pool at the White Plains Family YMCA, where she volunteered her time to paint swirling scenes of fish.

At the moment, her portrait collection hangs in her apartment in Norwalk, Conn., a bright studio lined with jars of pencils and paintbrushes. The poster-size drawings are filled with minuscule detail, hiding poems and symbols in what looks like a shadow.

One portrait is dominated by the Spanish words "sin pais," or "without country," reflecting her doubts about where she stood, legally and culturally, during her life in immigration limbo. The works are modeled on postage stamps from Spain.

When she was 4, Isadora's family moved from Spain's Canary Islands to Guadalajara, Mexico. Her multicultural education continued at a German school in Mexico, and in the United States. Her family came to New York when she was 9 and to White Plains 1 1/2 years later. Her parents separated, and her mother, Milagros Lecuona, continued to work here under a professional visa. She was sponsored by an architectural firm, Peter Gisolfi Associates in Hastings-on-Hudson.

In 1999, her mother and brother received green cards, or permanent residency. Isadora received a denial and a threat of deportation. During the six years it took to process the family's case, she had outgrown her status as a minor child on her mother's application. At 21, as an art and business student at Albany University, SUNY, Isadora had to start all over trying to immigrate to a country she considered home.

While her mother and younger brother went on to become U.S. citizens - her mother is running for White Plains Common Council this year - Isadora remained at square one.

"In the jargon, she 'aged out,' " said her attorney, Thomas Biow. Immigrants now have a recourse in such situations under the Child Status Protection Act. Passed in 2002 - too late for Isadora - it freezes an applicant's age earlier in the process, so that they don't lose all when they turn 21.

Isadora interrupted her final exams to leave the country and come back in on a student visa. She was allowed to work for one year after her graduation - she tried everything from tattooing to working for an insurance company - but she went through periods in which she was not authorized to work at all. In 2001, when she was volunteering her time at a local art gallery, her predicament was described in The Journal News.

Since then she has obtained a professional visa, and teaches Spanish at the New Canaan Country School. The school is sponsoring her quest for a green card.

In a self-portrait, she includes a tiny notation in the shadow of her face, thanking the school and informing the viewer: "The INS strictly prohibits the sale of this piece. As a legal immigrant, the sale of my work falls out of the limitations set by my H-1B visa."

Also embedded is a poem:

*I need art to buy my
freedom. I need art to set me free
so that I can live in freedom
drawing my blissful life away*

In describing her frustrations - and the fear she once felt over being deported - Isadora says she doesn't mean to minimize the importance of the bureaucracy at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, formerly part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The agency plays a critical role in national security, she said.

But few people seem to understand what's required to immigrate legally, she said.

"The steps, they do not make sense. And you wouldn't know this unless you lived through it," Isadora said. "There are so many steps to do the right thing. They make it easier to do the wrong thing."

In recent years Isadora started speaking about her immigration experience at the annual People of Color Conference, organized by the National Association of Independent Schools.

She often turns to metaphor in describing her situation. "It's like being in an adopted family," she said.

"The mom and all the siblings are telling you how much they love you and how you're such a part of the family, because you've been part of it now 20 years. But there's this one parent that every day is reminding you that you're not good enough, and you're always having to prove yourself over and over and over again."

She has spent hours being questioned at John F. Kennedy International Airport and waiting at agencies "where they're just upset that I'm there."

A sense of humor has helped, she said, even when her college friends woke her up in the middle of the night yelling, "Immigration!"

The vast complexity of USCIS procedures is frequently critiqued, most recently by the agency's ombudsman in his 2007 Annual Report to Congress. USCIS raised its fees July 30 as part of its plan to improve service and efficiency.

Like tens of thousands of other professionals applying for green cards, Isadora got her big break in July. A government bulletin gave her a sudden green light to advance to the final stage. She filed a key application with USCIS this week, which will give her more freedom to travel in and out of the country.

It's not clear how many more years it will take to receive a green card, but her attorney says she will finally reach that goal.

"And then the saga of Isadora may end," Biow said. "I mean it will end. It's going to end."

Isadora said she was trying to stay calm as she gathered the requisite medical exams and filing fees.

After trying to get her point across in the painstaking portraits, she is putting a new kind of artwork on her walls. Freeing her mind, she began painting abstracts. One is called "Wasabi Dream," inspired by Mexican patterns and the color of wasabi paste.

"It was just pointless. It was just pattern," she said. "That's when I understood Picasso."