

## GLASS HOUSES: A VIEW OF AMERICAN ASSIMILATION FROM A MEXICAN-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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*Sometimes I feel challenged as an individual born in the U.S. because I do not always feel completely American. This feeling has a direct impact on the images I create because it causes me to look inward to my own cultural base. In doing so I discover reasons for my life, such as why I have to create art.*

—Glass Houses [1]

### Exploring Autobiography

My interest in developing interactive web sites began in the early spring of 1995. That was when I discovered the Internet offered artists a different kind of imaginative experience for their viewers. It also marked a critical period in my life because during the mid-1990s I realized my need to create reflections of the past, while exploring new understandings of the present with the use of technology (the Internet) and autobiography. These facts, along with my interest in combining new trends in technologies, traditional art practices and visual literacy is what fueled my artistic vision for developing *Glass Houses* (1997), a multi-layered, interactive website.

An integral aspect of *Glass Houses* involved having a strong desire to create a voice for the “modern” Chicana living in the suburbs [2]. And since I am an individual who has witnessed the challenges of oppressive environments and the spectre of racial enmity, *Glass Houses* was also created in an attempt to inspire cultural sensitivity.

To meet my expectations, I created *Glass Houses* with the idea of a virtual house. Using the structural floorplan of my own home, I designed a doormat

that serves as a metaphor to explore a variety of themes associated with daily living: fears, ritual, tradition, opportunity and desires.

The web site offers a critical examination of the “Chicana(o)” experience as it relates to living in middle-class neighborhoods in Southern California, being influenced by popular culture, and struggling over identity issues with regard to one’s self and one’s children.

*As I peer into my son’s room my heart aches believing that my children and possibly their children will also experience the pain of “otherness.” I ask myself . . . When they begin to question their own identity what will they say? Will it be . . . Hispanic, Latino, American, Mexican-American, Chicano or other?*

—Glass Houses [3]

### Breaking New Ground

As a multimedia artist and web author, I enjoy challenging the cold and impersonal environment most often associated with the computer. Is it possible to mirror the experience of reading a book in the privacy of one’s own home with a computer? My quest for answers to this question highly motivated me to investigate the relationship between public and private space in an attempt to create an intimate experience for my houseguest.

### Site Specifics

I envisioned *Glass Houses* as more than just a vehicle for bringing my own struggles for personal identity into the public domain. Ultimately, this led me to exploring a variety of issues based on contemporary themes such as race, class and acculturation.

*As we crossed the Mexican border, the border patrol would ask me my citizenship. I would reply, “American” because my parents taught me to say that. But in California, people would ask me “What are you?” I guess because they didn’t quite know how to ask “Are you American?” I would proudly reply,*

*“Mexican.” It wasn’t until I became a teenager that I claimed I was “Mexican-American.”*

—Glass Houses [4]

In a critical way, *Glass Houses* also examines the relationship between my mother’s life experience as a Mexican immigrant who settled in the United States and the impact this created on my life.

*My mother wanted me to live like an “American” with all the rights and privileges and no discrimination. Because I was fair-skinned and light-haired she thought it would be much easier for me.*

—Glass Houses [5]

In its entirety, *Glass Houses* is comprised of 32 linked screens that take approximately one hour to view. The intimate stories, photographs, art work and sound files serve as a vehicle to explore issues based on the complexities of cultural identity, gender issues, feminist concerns and the fear of becoming disenfranchised from one’s cultural roots. As the houseguest navigates through the rooms in the house, the autobiographical narrative reveals how I learned to embrace my biculturalism, the impact of my mother’s attempt to pass me off as a “white girl,” and reflections on the “Chicana(o)” suburban life experience.

At any given time the houseguest can choose how long to spend in each room. The order of viewing depends entirely on the choices one makes, and each houseguest has the privilege of repeating or skipping screens. Oftentimes my houseguests will begin their investigations by selecting the closet, where the secrets are hidden (see Fig. 1).

### Building Community

To encourage a global dialogue, I have created a message center. It is located in the kitchen, where the houseguest/viewer can leave me personal E-mail messages or they can post a public comment. Today I still find it interesting that I receive more personal E-mail

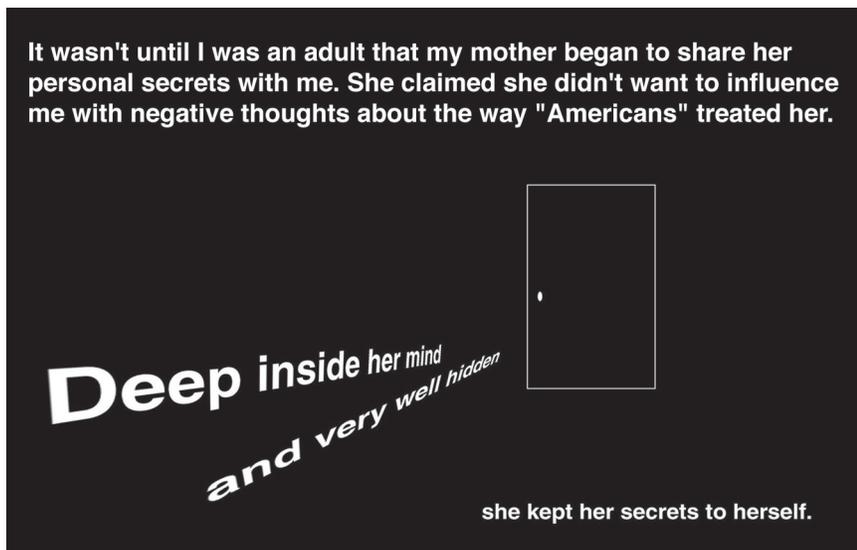


Fig. 1. Jacalyn Lopez Garcia, *Glass Houses* screen image, <secrets.html>, 1997. Using Adobe Photoshop I created this image as a means of examining the relationship between my mother's experience as a Mexican immigrant and the role this played in shaping my identity.

messages (on an average of 2–3 a month) than I do public comments.

*Thank you for sharing. As a "melting pot caucasian American" I envy your sense of heritage and desire to share it with your children, I wish I had such a treasure to share with mine. I don't know what is right or wrong, but sometimes, I think as "Americans," the end to discrimination will only occur when we are all mixed into beautiful shades of tan.*

—*Glass Houses* [6]

New houseguests are always welcome, as are return visitors. *Glass Houses* can be accessed via the California Museum of Photography at <<http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/students/glass-houses>> and at the Long Beach Museum of the Arts.

## References and Notes

1. *Glass Houses* (1997), web site created at the University of California, Riverside. Here I quote an excerpt that appears on the <jacalyn.html> screen, which can be accessed from the family room.
2. I use the term "modern" before "Chicana" to focus on the ideologies of the changing Chicana feminism of the 1990s.
3. This quote is from an excerpt that appears on the <fears.html> screen, which can be accessed from the upstairs bedroom.
4. This quote is from an excerpt that appears on the <identity.html> screen, which can be accessed from the dressing room.
5. This quote is from an excerpt that appears on the <Oppty.html> screen, which can be accessed from the front entrance.
6. This quote is taken from a personal E-mail message I received from a houseguest on 12 March 2000.

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## BEYOND TRADITION AND MODERNITY: DIGITAL SHADOW THEATER

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The first performances of Karagz (Karagheus), the traditional Turkish Shadow Theater, date back to the 16th century [1,2]. It was one of the most popular forms of entertainment until the late 1950s. Legend has it that Karagz and Hacıvat were two masons whose unending conversations were so entertaining that they slowed down the construction of a mosque, to such an extent that the Sultan decreed their execution. It was a Sufi leader who invented the shadowplay, Karagz, to console the Sultan who deeply regretted what he had done. Thus, the story also shows an example of how art functions as a consolation for loss.

The mode of representation in Karagz is in contrast with traditional narrative forms of the West. The western narrative presents itself as real and hence is illusory. Karagz, however, is non-illusory and self-reflexive in the sense that it quite often makes references to its fictitious nature, stressing the fact that what the spectators are viewing is not real but imaginary.

We designed a software program that would digitally animate Karagz characters. One of our aims was to show how traditional forms can be adapted to contemporary media; also we wanted to demonstrate how Karagz can perhaps force the new media to develop new capabilities of artistic expression.

The software, Karagz, uses hierarchical modeling [3] to animate two-dimensional characters containing body parts and joints between these parts. Once the parts are defined, they are aggregated into more complex objects. The different characters of Karagz have different body parts and joints, and therefore have different hierarchical structures. While drawing the characters during animation, the system applies the required transformations using the model parameters. For example, when a transformation is applied to the hip, the two legs connected to it are also affected; these may have other transformations applied to them as well.

Texture mapping [4] is the technique used for rendering the characters since different body parts are modeled as simple two-dimensional polygon meshes and have a predefined texture

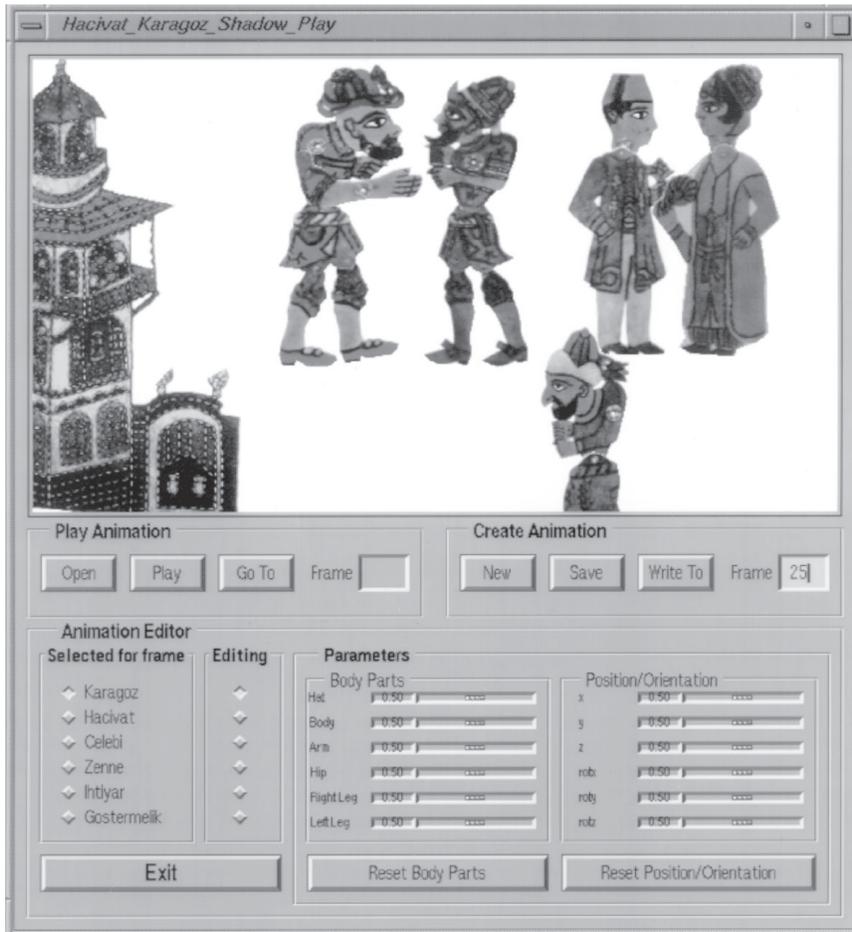
that can be mapped to these polygons as the model animates. To animate the models, the system uses keyframing based on the model parameters.

The animation system functions as an authoring tool to create keyframe animations involving these characters. This is done by editing the character parameters such as position and orientation for different keyframes. The animations can then be played back by reading the animation parameters from disk for each keyframe and interpolating between the keyframes (see Fig. 2).

Thus we attempt to revive the long-neglected tradition of Karagöz in a modern framework. Its artistic features and means of expression are not yet exhausted but are open to further explorations. We believe that our work is exemplary in that it is an instance of media technologies turning to old forms in their search for new possibilities in art production.

Sample animations of the shadow play characters can be found at <http://www.cs.bilkent.edu.tr/~gudukbay/hacivat\_karagöz.html>.

**Fig. 2.** Ugur Gudukbay et al., the animation system user interface. The parameters are adjusted by moving the sliders in the animation editor. The effect of modifying the parameters of a character is displayed.



## Acknowledgment

The characters used in the animations are scanned from the Hayali Küçükali Shadow Play Collection of the Turkish National Library and from the book *Dünlü Karagöz*, by Ugur Göktaş (Akademi Kitabevi, 1992) (in Turkish).

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## TORN TOUCH: INTERACTIVE INSTALLATION

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As the technology of cyberspace races towards the future, humanity is beginning to raise a cry for the "hand" in this virtual ecology. When we link to cyberspace, we wish for a depth and physicality of experience that cyberspace is not able to offer.

The "reach out and touch" of telephone mythology has become the banner of the World Wide Web. E-mail and the Internet provide a long distance touch with an immediacy, simultaneity and multiplicity of connection. But the behavior and feel of this linking is mediated through a flat screen. The surface of interaction is a projected world. In this monodimensionality the visual dominates over the other perceptual senses. Other sensory experiences like the electricity of touch, the memories embedded in smell and physical sensations of tension are banished.

McLuhan viewed the printing press as an invention that segmented sensory experiences, preventing synesthetic feeling in which there is a synthesis of hearing, seeing, tasting and touching. The Internet is an extension of the printing press, with the exception that the Internet is rhizomatic instead of linear. When an individual perceptual sense becomes embedded or internalized in a technology, it becomes separated from the other senses. This portion of one's self closes, as if it were locked in steel. Prior to such separation, there is complete interplay among the senses. Virtual experience "overthrows the sensorial and organic architecture of the human body by disembodiment and reformatting its sensorium in powerful, computer generated, digitized spaces" [1]. Cyberspace disengages from the physical, causing sensory experience to be reduced to a monomedium of digital coding.

In the interactive installation *Torn Touch*, exhibited in the Illinois Art Gallery in Chicago during ISEA 1997, the sense of touch connects the physical and the virtual realms of experience. The viewer is engaged with a sense of entanglement by the visceral character of cloth caught on a rusty barbed wire fence. From ancient times, the weaving of cloth has had important social and economic dimensions. I feel that the craft of spinning fiber and weaving cloth is a metaphor for the construction of social, political, and commercial Internet weavings; it continues to communicate social standing and political power. An integral component in rituals, cloth is embedded with spirituality.



**Fig. 3.** Joan Truckenbrod, *Torn Touch*, interactive installation, 1997. **Electronic Ritual: Participants engage in a ritual of pinning personal items onto the cloth and activating the virtual world. This ritual creates a connection, a link between the two realms of experience: the cyberworld of virtuality and the physical, embodied world.**

In this piece, I intended the cloth to symbolize the connection between virtuality and physicality. Fiber is a connective tissue: a woven network of threads with intersections and nodes. This installation uses cloth to mediate the dichotomy between virtuality and physicality, presence and absence.

A length of cloth is caught on the barbed wire of an old fence; the twisted fabric has a visceral character, torn on the barbs. As viewers step up to the fence, they can pin a personal item or remnant of an important event such as a lock of hair, a receipt, a photo, a key or a ticket onto the cloth. This ritual activates the sprites of the cyber-world, triggering interactive images and sound (Craig Harris's composition *Time Travel*). However, this world on the surface of the monitors is conspicuously artificial with no physicality. Caged moni-

tors portray the untouchable. Issues of touch conflict with images of the natural world on the monitors. As participants engage in the ritual of pinning personal items onto the cloth, the images of the natural world vanish, and the digital realm of experience appears (Fig. 3). The monitor expresses the digital mirror image—ephemeral, locked in a cage, unable to reach out into the physical dimensions of experience.

In front of the fence lies a footpath for the viewer to follow. Six sensors located under the footpath activate six animated sequences on three different computers located along the fence. These are sequentially activated as the viewer moves along the footpath; their presence initiates interactive images on the monitors. Thus, through this act of pinning items on the fence, physical touch connects the participant to the vir-

tual world. When the virtual world is not activated, the monitors display a natural environment of trees moving in the wind, to remind us of the contrast between the natural and the virtual worlds.

As more and more participants leave their contributions on the cloth, it becomes laden with items of personal value. As each item has meaning for the contributor, so a community narrative emerges on the cloth. The entire process reminds me of images of hunters' shirts worn by the Monde Peoples in Mali, who also gather personal items embodying their experiences of the hunt. At first, a hunter's shirt has only a few protective talismans, then the hunter gathers on it secret items that protect and empower the wearer. As the shirt becomes covered with these treasures, it becomes oblique, murky, dense, and intricate like the bush itself [2]. As the cloth in this installation becomes laden with personal statements, it becomes "oblique, murky, dense and intricate" like the Internet itself.

I intended this installation to act as a link between the real and the virtual worlds by tangibly connecting the material with the realm of cyberspace. The *Upanishads*, a Vedic metaphysical treatise focusing on people in relationship to the universe, discusses the "twilight juncture" as that ephemeral place between this world and the realm beyond, where dreams are evoked that become projections between the physical world and the spiritual/ancestral worlds. This installation creates a twilight juncture between the physical realm and the cyber-mythical world.

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