

# Jessica Alazraki: Living life's religion

By Jennifer Vignone  
December 2020

Art is a bridge between the past and the present. It creates a connection throughout the world's changes in thought, style, trends, cultures, races, geography, and philosophy. At its most successful — in that moment when an individual stands before an artwork and all of those boundaries dissolve — art achieves connection to the universal soul. In her focus on Mexican themes, Jessica Alazraki's large-scale paintings tap into this realm with her insightful and honest celebration of Latinx life.



Pink Donut on Pink, Oil on canvas, 2020. 42x52 inches, with frame

The painting, "Pink Donut on Pink" (2020), is a large-scale scene of a matriarchal woman surrounded by children, pets, and household bric-a-brac. The bright background flattens the space to remove any sense of distance. The forwardly tilted table serves as an invitation as well as a demarcation of the painted and psychological space, as the woman's intent gaze off-canvas imparts a sense of others beyond the confines of the painted plane. She is unaware of

the dog's keen interest in the pink-frosted donut and the little boy who stands tentatively waiting for attention, his twisted foot a sign of wanting to interrupt but not wanting to get into trouble. Only the cat looks directly at the viewer, hunched in a state of expectation. The colorful array of tablecloth, furniture, clothing and fixtures fill the room, depicting the Latinx interior, while at the same time showing the viewer that we have our differences and yet are so much alike.

Ms. Alazraki explains her focus on Latinx life:

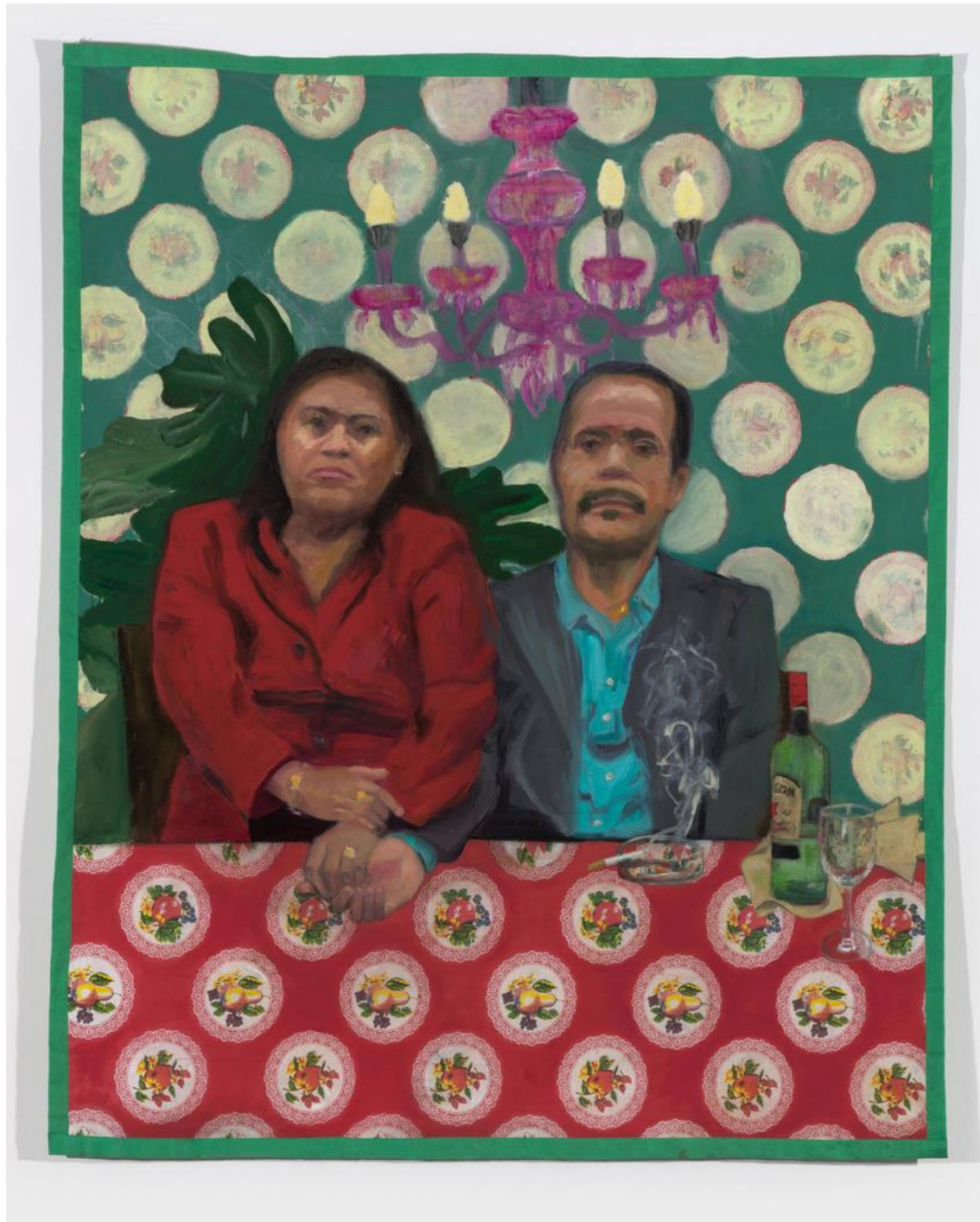
*"I want to tell stories about Latinx people because I believe they need more representation in contemporary art. We are a big minority in the US, but traditionally in figurative paintings you don't get to see that many Latinx portraits. I don't want to victimize the people or place them in an under-privileged situation. I don't want to have a confrontational tone either, but rather have a celebration of our culture and try to make the viewer more empathetic towards the people they see in my paintings. To convey this, domestic scenes are what is interesting for me now. I am often conveying from the perspective of a parent because my kids are at home and around all of the time. That is my life, and by showing narratives where kids are safe at home, I am implying that families — Latinx families — need to be together."*



Orange Tablecloth, Acrylic on a Tablecloth, 84x53 inches, 2019

In "Orange Tablecloth", the importance of Mexican homelife and family are explored from the patriarchal side as a father figure sits at a table with his daughter nestled at his side, their arms around each other. Flowers and a balloon suggest a party. The orange, yellow and red tones and pattern of the tablecloth recur in the girl's dress, flowers on the table, balloon and the pop of bright pink in the pacifier.

The repeating colors and patterns in Ms. Alazraki's work is reminiscent of Mexican tradition as well as the patterns of painters like Matisse and Mary Cassatt. She has Cassatt's sensitivity in her depiction of family scenes.



Together, Oil on a Tablecloth, 64x53 inches, 2019

“Together” takes the look at relationships a step further by painting a couple onto an actual tablecloth to tell their story. The Matisse-like patterning keeps the eye moving around the couple

who sits gazing out at the viewer who cannot help but be pulled in. The placement of the man and woman into the wall and table patterns have the solidity of a Cezanne in how they are fixed in space. They belong together, as their handholding emphasizes. This couple's relationship has a poignant maturity that is an interesting juxtaposition to Frieda Kahlo's "Frieda and Diego Rivera" of 1931. Considered to be a wedding portrait, it presents the tentative newness of the married path. As Ms. Alazraki's couple gazes out, they also appear to look inward, lost in thought about their life.

Ms. Alazraki's influences are vast and varied:

*"... sometimes I am moved by a painting, not necessarily the entire body of work of an artist. I look for images that can help me solve a specific problem with my painting in that moment and it varies a lot.*

*I love the masters like Velazquez, Rembrandt, the modern artists like Matisse, VanGogh, Cezanne and Paul Gaugin. Degas and Mary Cassatt. I love the Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco. Frida Kahlo, Maria Izquierdo. And from the contemporary, I love Alice Neel, David Hockney, Nicole Eisenman, Peter Doig and the African American specially like Kerry James Marshall, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Kehinde Wiley, Kara Walker, Amy Sherald, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Tschabalala Self, Jennifer Packer, Henry Taylor."*

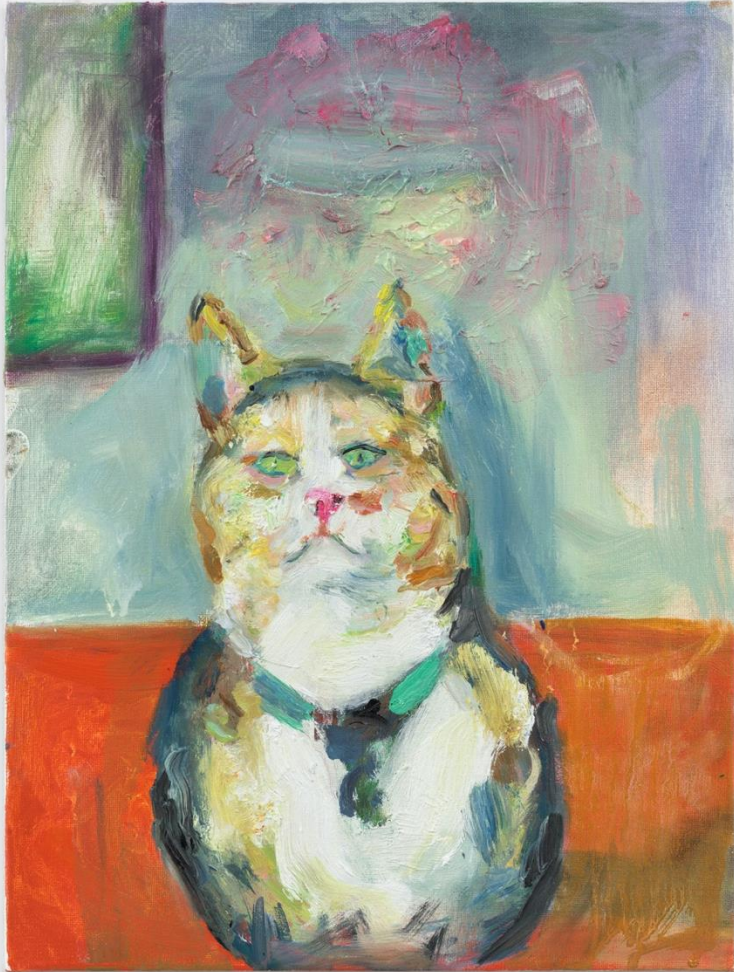
She brings this same sensitivity when painting pets. Smaller in size, they possess the intimacy of the space the animals occupy while still maintaining the impact that a pet has within the household. Their portraits celebrate their place within the family. "Orange on Texture" and "Impasto on Purple Square" present textures and colors chosen to express those specific pets. Both dogs stare out with the look of devotion that only a dog possesses, while the cat in "Cat on orange background" stares in that quintessential 'what can you do for me' way. They all, nonetheless, contemplate their world in their own animal-like way.



Orange on Texture, 16x20 inches, oil on board, 2020



Impasto in Purple Square, 12x12 inches, oil on canvas, 2020



Cat on orange background, 12x16 inches, oil on board, 2020

About how these elements come together, Ms. Alazraki observes:

*“I always include pets because I love my dog and animals in general, and it’s how I’ve always seen a domestic environment. I have a fascination for painting dogs and cats. I like to describe them with very few strokes and bring a lot of character into them. I also think a mix of people and pets makes the visual relationships and overall dynamic more interesting.*

*I use different sources for my subject references in a way that they get collaged together based on color and geometric shapes. I also like painting stories with color— my bold color choices guide my paintings, and that plays to the psychological side of the viewer. I don’t necessarily care if things make logical sense because...I have always cared for creating my own world, and if there’s something kind of weird or out of place it just makes the painting more interesting. I think this also shifts the psychology of the painting — unclarity often means that the view creates their own interpretive experience. I believe that a lot of what I include come from unconscious choices because I don’t actively assign a specific meaning to each element. Instead, I let myself go and try to listen to the*



*painting to see what it needs in terms of proportion, color, and vibe. This allows me to make less obvious choices and again lets the viewer create their own personal connection.”*

In the current time of COVID-19, the value of art and the ways it communicates is under constant evolution and evaluation. It has surfaced interesting challenges and creative means of getting one’s artwork seen in the virtual space. The ability to experience the size, color, and texture of Ms. Alazraki’s paintings are somewhat compromised. Ms. Alazraki comments:

*“ I have realized, obviously, that virtual viewing is the way we are mostly seeing visual art. The nice part about this is that it reaches more people — showing the work through an email or Instagram is easier than constantly trying to drag people to actual galleries. More people are open to viewing and buying work online, which also makes the market more accessible...On the other hand, the work can’t really be fully appreciated without the size reference, the texture, etc. and the impact of the piece is never the same in a photograph.”*

Jessica Alazraki’s ability to capture the contemplative moment of self-examination and the quiet pensiveness of mundane activities elevates those activities to be a celebration of the moments when we are not trying to do something more, better, crazier — when we are not on social media, in our digital “keeping up with the Jones” electronic melee. The large canvases are so rich with color, pattern, and people living in their own world and absorbed in their own thought that they draw the viewer in, and at the same time, make the viewer think about their place at that very moment, in front of the painting, and perhaps even in their own lives. It would be interesting to see her work expand beyond the concentration of Mexican life and incorporate a wider blend of ideas and visuals. The opportunity for depicting Latinx values as it navigates the melting pot of a place like New York could be an exciting course to follow. One looks forward to seeing her include a broader range of topics.

Jessica Alazraki has exhibited her work in the United States in over 40 group shows including Manhattan, Brooklyn, Long Island, Poughkeepsie, and Sotheby’s Auction House in New York, as well as California and Philadelphia, PA. Her museum exhibitions include the Attleboro Arts Museum in Massachusetts, the New Britain Museum of American Art, three solo shows in New York City, and more than five group exhibitions in Mexico City and Puebla, Mexico. See her work on her website at: <https://jessicalazrakiart.format.com>.