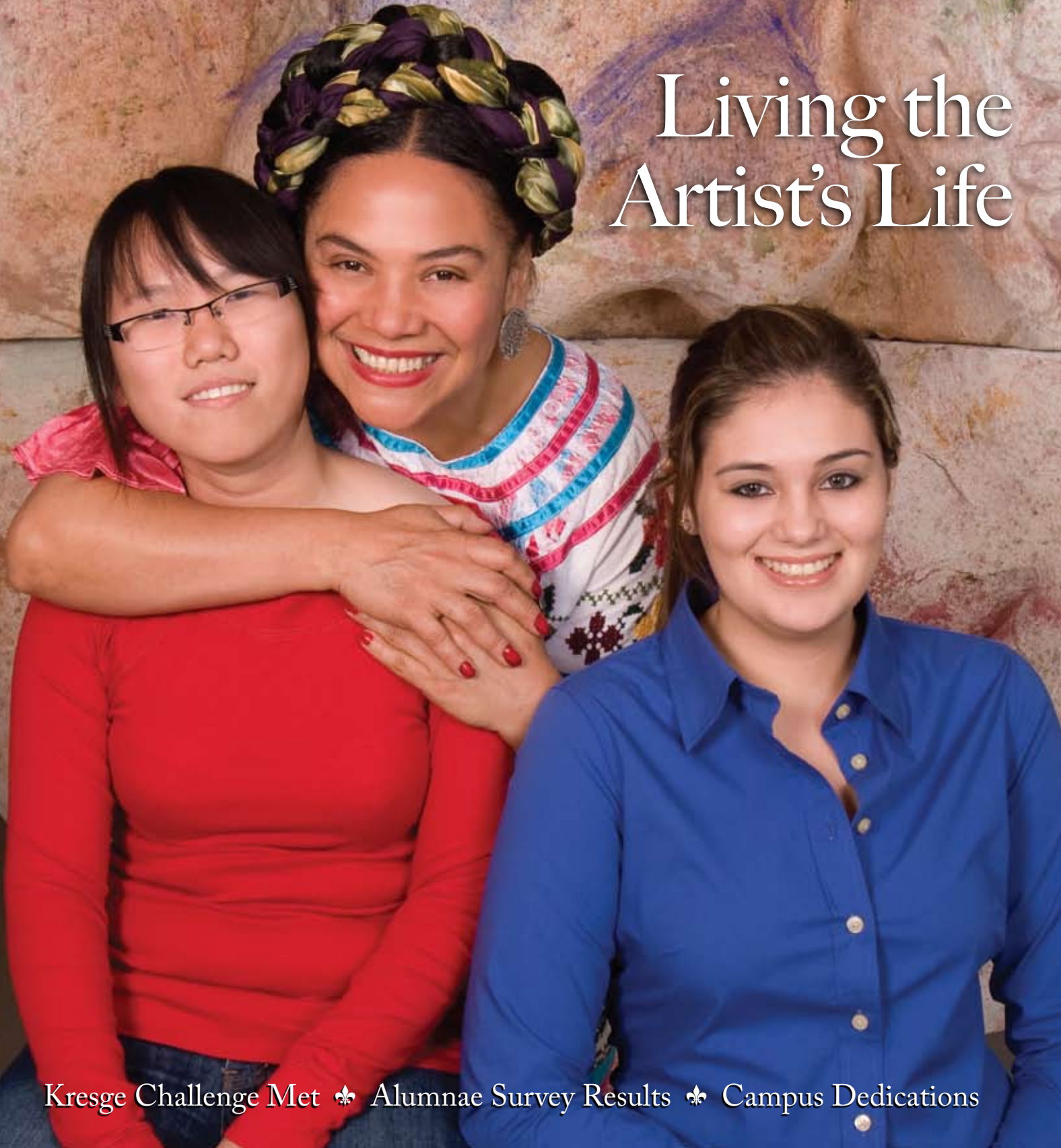


THE MOUNT

Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles ♣ *Winter/Spring 2008*

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ON THE COVER:

Students Irene Ghozalli (left) and Alicia Herrera (right) pose with artist Laura Hernandez.
Photograph by Rick Mendoza

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LIVING THE ARTIST'S LIFE

Last fall, visiting artist Laura

BY SARAH SCOPIO



Hernandez wanted to teach students about art.

In the process, she also taught them how to turn a dream into reality.



When senior Yoselina Ortiz first learned that a visiting artist would be coming to Mount St. Mary's to work with students, she was thrilled. As an art major, Ortiz had always wanted to work up close with a professional artist and saw this as the chance of a lifetime.

"This was the first time I had the opportunity to learn from someone who made her living as an artist," says Ortiz, who hopes to one day be an art therapist. "And I learned so much."

Ortiz's lesson began this past October, when well-known Mexican artist Laura Hernandez became the College's first artist-in-residence. Hernandez was invited by the Mount's Art Department to provide students with a hands-on experience creating the works for a show in the José Drudis-Biada Gallery at Chalon.

REALIZING A VISION

Jody Baral, chair of the Art Department, first encountered Hernandez's work in 1998 in her show *Omnia*, a 20,000-square-foot exhibit that opened at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, Calif., before going on to show at other galleries around the world.

"Because Laura's work primarily features women and the female experience, I thought she would be a natural fit for the school," says Baral. "I wanted students to have the chance to live and work with a professional artist. We've hosted artists before for a couple of days each but never anything like this."



Excited by the prospect of working at a women's college—and known for her sculpture work—Hernandez decided to have students help her create the large face of a woman as the focal point of the exhibit.

She also chose to use “materials that are feminine, that come from the land” by importing supplies from her homeland. The paper she selected, for example, is hand-made in the small mountain village of San Pablito. Called *El Papel Amate* (paper of the goddess), the paper is crafted one piece at a time over several weeks because it is made from the skin of a tree that has to be boiled, dyed with ashes, and then pounded with stones.

“It was very precious for me to share this with the students,” says Hernandez, who had never collaborated with a school before. “I work intuitively, so their energy inspired the project.”

BUILDING TOGETHER

During her five-week residency, Hernandez and more than 50 student assistants worked at all hours to complete the sculpture for the opening exhibition. For 25 hours of work, any student could earn one unit of credit, and the project drew students from across campus in a variety of majors. In addition to art majors, students in biology, music, and child development were eager to make time in their busy schedules to participate.

“I thought it would be a good opportunity to meet an artist and learn how she works,” says Wendy Contreras, a junior business major. “I also thought it would be a lot of fun.”

The sculpture the students helped create was constructed by preparing and applying the special *El Papel Amate* over a large frame. Like any complex task—and as in many art projects—there was much trial and error. Hernandez's first idea was to make the frame out of bamboo, and students spent hours stripping stalks with machetes and molding them into a large human form. However, bamboo found in Southern California has different properties than that in Hernandez's native state of Oaxaca and thus proved to be a poor substitute. So Hernandez turned to Plan B: carving the face out of large blocks of art foam.

It was a challenging experience, say students, but every obstacle proved to be an important lesson. “Laura taught us that the materials are a gift you must learn how to use,” says freshman art major Viviana Morales. “Understanding the materials and adapting to them is important, because the way you intend to use them isn't always how you end up using them. It can become something you never thought of before.”

During the construction phase, in fact, changes occurred every few hours. A new aspect of the face would appear in the material, or texture and colors would need to be added. As students watched the piece unfold, they gained a new appreciation for the creative process.

“Before working with Laura, I thought art was just a piece created in two to three days,” says freshman psychology major Steffenie Susanto. “But after working with her, I realized that making art requires perseverance and dedication. Maybe the overall piece looks simple, but we were actually required to do step-by-step procedures before getting a finished product.”

The last step in the process was to paint the face to bring the woman “to life.” The brilliant colors in the piece were another natural material carefully chosen by Hernandez. The colors are made from the Cochinilla, a small insect that grows in a cactus found in Mexico. When the bug is crushed, it becomes a pigment known for its vibrant shades of reds, pinks, and purples.

AWAKENED WITHIN

The final sculpture measures 12 feet tall, made from three stacked parts that can be interchanged or exhibited separately. In the Mount exhibit, it was presented with two stacked pieces (standing eight feet tall) and one separated piece. Arranged in order, the sculpture creates the entire face of a woman, from chin to forehead.

“With her eyes closed, the woman is asleep and dreaming,” says Hernandez. “She is much like the young women here at the Mount. College is a time of change for these students, so the woman is looking inside herself to reflect on the coming change and her dreams about the future.”



The entire exhibition was about such dreams. In addition to the sculpture, various paintings of Hernandez lined the gallery walls as part of her exploration of the exhibit's larger theme of "Yin." In keeping with the Chinese symbol for female energy, the art pieces captured many aspects of female life: falling in love, giving birth, and temptation toward forbidden fruit.

"It was exciting to work on something so big, and see what a difference my effort makes," says Morales. "I also learned a very important lesson: You aren't just creating art,

you are creating a counterpart of who you are. My hard work is reflected in the piece."

"I am very proud of the students," adds Hernandez. "They came to work all hours of the day and night, stopping by to help apply paper and materials to the face." One thing is for certain, the experience was certainly an eye-opening one. "Being an artist is so much harder than I ever imagined," notes junior Danielle Trammell, a double major in art and political science. "But more rewarding, too."

For Ortiz, the journey is unforgettable. "This experience was amazing," she says. "Working with Laura taught me not to be afraid to explore ideas and change your plans when something does not work out.

"But more importantly, I found out that art is something I truly love doing because I learned how to be dedicated to a project and a process," she says. "I will always keep art as a part of my life thanks to Laura Hernandez." ♣

As a thank you to the students, Hernandez is donating a portion of the proceeds from the sale of the exhibition's work to the College's art scholarship fund.