

Tactile Sensations: Ericka Lopez’s “touch” exhibit at U-M’s Institute for the Humanities Gallery encourages visitors to feel her art

By Drew Saunders | Dec. 4, 2024 | [Link to original article.](#)



Ericka Lopez working in her studio. Photo courtesy of Tierra del Sol.

Amanda Krugliak remembers the first time she saw the work of artist Ericka Lopez.

“I was walking a gallery in Chinatown, in L.A., and I saw this work. It just had something undeniable about it,” said Krugliak, curator for the University of Michigan’s Institute for the Humanities Gallery, which is hosting Lopez’s touch exhibit. “There’s something incredibly powerful immediately about it. It felt like the kind of work that doesn’t have a motive. There’s no other reason for the work, but the immediate human connection, or something material we respond to. There are a lot of contemporary artists who try to achieve this, and here was this artist that just felt so natural.”

Lopez’s tactile textiles and colorful ceramics bristle with textures. She also happens to be blind. After finding out about Lopez’s story, Krugliak made inquiries about bringing the show to Ann Arbor.

The Mexican-American artist works with Tierra del Sol, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit dedicated to



Amanda Krugliak, the curator for U-M's Institute for the Humanities Gallery, feels Ericka Lopez's work in the touch exhibit. Photo by Drew Saunders.

helping differently abled people find their potential via advocacy, education, inclusive programs, and the development of employment opportunities. Tierra del Sol helps Lopez with studio space, materials, and an assistant to craft her work.

“Although each person we serve may have faced years of preconceived notions of what they were capable of, at the studios of Tierra del Sol, they are artists first and foremost,” wrote Rebecca Lienhard, CEO of the Tierra del Sol Foundation, in an email to Pulp. “Our gallery launches their work into the larger art world as contemporary artists, just as the other L.A.-based galleries do. The University of Michigan saw this firsthand and, in turn, committed to showing Ericka’s work in the same light.”

The Institute for the Humanities Gallery is in a white and glass postmodernist building at 202 South Thayer Street. Turn left as soon as you walk into the building and you’ll find the Institute’s square gallery. Lopez’s touch is dominated by a trio of concave tables hosting sculptures and fabric works hanging on the walls. And while it’s usually forbidden to touch the art at galleries, touch visitors are encouraged to feel the sculptures, just as Krugliak was able to do at Tierra del Sol.

“Using the gallery’s sacred space, visitors to Ericka’s show were encouraged to touch, smell, listen, and feel their way through her collection,” wrote Lienhard about the L.A. exhibit. “Her show allowed visitors to experience each piece as she did by gently touching the work. In turn, this allows the audience a small peek into Ericka’s creative mind, which is full of wonder, color, and sound, not one that needs to be fixed or broken.”

While Lopez works with Tierra del Sol to create her pieces, she’s in charge of the process.

“Ericka is very familiar with the studio spaces and accesses materials independently. She makes her own decisions, and may be given choices to facilitate decision-making,” said Maria Jones, Tierra’s Sunland Studio Arts program director. “For example, with the punch rug pieces we may ask what



Ericka Lopez's sculptures inside U-M Institute for the Humanities Gallery. Photo by Drew Saunders.

color story she wants to use, then we provide all the balls of yarn, or whatever material she wants, in that family. She then may squeeze, touch, smell, pull, and put the ones she is interested in to the side. In other cases, like the ceramic studio, she may not need or want to access any support at all. ... She just wants to get to work.”

Stereotypes about what people born with disabilities are capable of are not nearly as strong as they once were, but they still persist. But Lopez’s touch can be seen as a sledgehammer to old stereotypes.

“Art transcends ableism. It doesn’t need fixing to be viewed, enjoyed, appreciated, or loved, and neither does Ericka,” wrote Lienhard. “Ericka creates work from her soul. She expects her work to resonate with others’ souls as they touch and listen to her pieces. Her pieces stand strong with other contemporary art peers, not because she is blind, but because they are stunningly beautiful.”

Drew Saunders grew up in Whitmore Lake and fell in love with A2 when he started going for karate lessons downtown at Keith Haffner’s. Studying journalism at Eastern Michigan University, he began freelancing in 2013 with the Ann Arbor Observer, and then so many other publications. He obtained a Master of Science degree in the field from Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism in 2019. In addition to writing for Pulp, Saunders specializes in business and environmental journalism.

Ericka Lopez’s “touch” exhibit is at the University of Michigan’s Institute for the Humanities Gallery, 202 South Thayer Street, Ann Arbor, through December 13. The gallery is open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on weekdays. Attendance is free.