

Nicole Acosta: HOOPS— Beyond the Aesthetic Lies the Story

The study of existence emerges through images, film, and story found in the HOOPS project. This body of work expresses themes like reclamation, power, belonging, and place. All of which inspire and advance conversations around erasure, decolonization, and representation. HOOPS also considers culture, storytelling, memory, and ritual as a mode to go beyond traditional archives.
—Nicole Acosta

(right)
Nicole Acosta
Mya, 2023
Digital inkjet print
Collection of the Artist

(below)
Nicole Acosta
Lanie, 2023
Digital inkjet print
Collection of the Artist

Photography: Courtesy of the Artist



Milwaukee-based artist **Nicole Acosta** draws on the cultural history of adornment to create portraits of individuals in hoop earrings. Acosta gathers the voices of women of color as they share stories prompted by the question, “What do hoop earrings mean to you?” More than just documentation, Acosta’s images evoke the personality of the sitter and engage in a dialogue about the symbolic power of jewelry beyond aesthetic choice.

Hoop-shaped earrings have ancient historical lineage—pinpointing the earliest known usage is difficult, but there are known examples from across the world. Jewelry is often a carrier of meaning, with cultural and social dynamics providing context

for understanding. It has been worn to reinforce wealth, power, and status, among other things. Adornment also has uses for political purposes, social causes, aesthetic embellishments, familial heirlooms, or as symbols of sentiments like reflections of love and emotional connection. Hoop earrings in particular have connections to royalty and nobility—including ancient Egyptian figures such as Cleopatra and Nefertiti—and to otherworldly beliefs such as the warding off of evil spirits or notions of eternity. Over time, they have come to symbolize womanhood, pride, and empowerment. When they pass down through generations as heirloom objects, they uphold these associations while acquiring new layers of meaning.

Acosta has documented stories, images, and ideas from over 100 individuals countrywide. Her work addresses hoop earrings [hoops] on multiple levels—as agents of



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personal choice and expression and as symbols of social and cultural dynamics. Most intensely, hoops are extensions of determined voices—saying so much without saying a word. In a modern context, why would hoops be a type of adornment that Brown and Black women could embrace? Culture writers acknowledge that in some communities, getting ears pierced and wearing hoop earrings could be a rite of passage and a way to celebrate ethnicity. Mexican American women have folded them into modes of dress that signaled their community, such as those participating in political conversations in Southern California in the 1960s and 1970s or *cholas* in the working class communities in the 1980s. In the 1990s, oversized hoop earrings—alongside other elements of personal style—stepped into a broader cultural arena with the influence of fashion associated with popular music trends. Beauty and fashion writer Sha Ravine Spencer notes that artists such as Sade and Salt-N-Pepa encouraged “many to adopt this earring style as a form of beauty, power, and resistance for Black women,” while Latinx singers Selena Quintanilla-Perez and Selena Gomez connect them to femininity, sexuality, and empowerment.

Acosta takes the layered potential meanings of hoop earrings and personalizes them through her photographs and collected narratives. She creates a path of understanding and a space for recording insights that illuminate critical connections between people and through histories.

As Acosta states: “the act of adorning one’s ears with hoops is a personal choice, a statement—
deeply rooted in history, memory, and reclamation.”



In addition to centering perspectives that have not often been shared, Acosta’s project addresses social and cultural representations of women of color. Within contemporary photography, she expands the dialogue of who gets to photograph what and why while also continuing a rich, if not always acknowledged, legacy of Latinx photographers.

In 2023, *HOOPS* was developed into a stage play that includes original music by Milwaukee performer and producer B~Free. The play debuted in Milwaukee and began a run in Boston in July 2024.

Lena Vigna
Director of Exhibitions



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(left)
Nicole Acosta
Marycruz, 2023
Digital inkjet print
Collection of the Artist
Photography: Courtesy of the Artist

(above)
Nicole Acosta
Tiffany, 2023
Digital inkjet print
Collection of the Artist
Photography: Courtesy of the Artist