The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 is a historic event that hovers somewhere between unknown, insignificant, or ignored by most Americans, unless they live in certain areas of the Southwest. Virgil Ortiz grew up hearing tales of the revolt in his home in Cochiti Pueblo, New Mexico. He was astonished that as he traveled around the United States, hardly anyone seemed to have heard of the Pueblo Revolt. Yet, when he would travel overseas, it was a part of his cultural history about which he was frequently questioned. How could such a major event about the Pueblo people disappear from the American historical consciousness yet find recognition elsewhere in the world? For over a decade, Ortiz has sought a way to tell this story in his artworks and simultaneously to make it more relevant and interesting to the next generation. The revelations, impact, and importance of this piece of Pueblo history whisper through the background of the various mediums he utilizes and jut forward into an imagined future.

The seeds for the Pueblo Revolt were sown when the Spanish began to colonize the Rio Grande region in 1598. For the next eighty years the Spanish were increasingly aggressive in their attempts to Christianize the Pueblo people and suppress or even exterminate indigenous religions. Around 1670 a period of prolonged drought began and devastated this already dry area. The resulting famine and accompanying social and economic crises further exacerbated the strained relations between the Spanish and the Pueblo people. In 1675 Spanish authorities arrested forty-seven Pueblo men, including medicine men and tribal elders, as diversionary scapegoats for the drought and put them on trial for "sorcery." The Pueblo people rebelled against these unjust accusations. After three of the men were hanged, the Puebloans converged on Santa Fe, the Spanish provincial capital, and demanded the release of the remaining prisoners. The authorities finally relented. Among those released was a man named Po'pay, from Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo.

Over the next five years Po'pay organized support among forty-six Pueblo villages to expel the Spanish. Under his plan, each pueblo would rise up, kill the Spaniards in the area, and advance en masse on Santa Fe. The date set for the uprising was August 11, 1680. Po'pay had dispatched runners carrying knotted cords to all the pueblos. Each morning the Pueblo leaders were to untie one knot. When the last knot was untied it would signal the commencement of the rebellion. On August 9, however, the Spaniards discovered the significance of the knotted cord and the impending revolt by capturing and torturing two Tesuque Pueblo runners. Po'pay then ordered the revolt to begin immediately. On August 10, the Pueblos began stealing Spanish horses, sealing off the roads leading to Santa Fe, and pillaging surrounding settlements. By August 13, all the Spanish settlements in New Mexico had been destroyed and Santa Fe was besieged. The Pueblo people surrounded the city and cut off its water supply. Finally, on August 21, the Spanish governor led his people out of the city and retreated southward along the Rio Grande River. Although the victory over the Spanish only lasted for a brief twelve years until their reconquest of the area, the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 has remained a source of native pride and cultural significance.

Oppression, perseverance, and cultural identity. These are the keys to understanding the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and its continued relevance today. The revolt was a reaction to the oppressive and restrictive actions taken by the Spanish toward the indigenous people throughout the Southwest. Po'pay, a Pueblo man, was among those persecuted for maintaining his own cultural and religious beliefs. Tortured by the Spanish and eventually released, he understood the despair and anguish of his people. His response was to organize a rebellion to free the Pueblo people and cast out the Spanish. To us, the Pueblo people, Po'pay is our hero. Tribes were on the verge of losing their cultural identity when the revolt brought everything back on track for our people.– Herman Agoyo I, (1934-2017)